

**History 45 –Environmental History of the Holocaust**  
**Dr. Marianne Robins**  
**Spring 2025**

Course T-Th 10:00-11:50, Adams 219  
 Contact 805-565-6197, [robins@westmont.edu](mailto:robins@westmont.edu)  
 Office Hours Tuesday 3:30-5:00 and Wednesday 1:30-3:00, Deane Hall 203,

### **Course Description**

Catalog: A study of the Holocaust (1933-1945) that pays particular attention to the environmental factors as they impacted the manner in which the Holocaust was perpetrated, the experience of the victims, and relationships between the victims and their neighbors as well as perpetrators. The class also examines the ways in which Nazis conceived of the Holocaust as an ecological project, and how it did fit into their understanding of nature. Finally, it considers the relationship between commemoration practices and the environment.

### **Outcomes**

In this class, you will learn how to be better **historians**:

- You are invited to be **historians of the Holocaust**.
  - To familiarize yourself with the time-period and the **main components** of this historical process (see “the Holocaust is not an event”), we will spend the first few weeks of the semester discussing a short introductory survey of the Holocaust (David Engel, *The Holocaust, the Third Reich, and the Jews*). This text also provides a helpful introduction to some **major debates** among historians on the subject. The rest of the class will broaden the definition and scope of our study. We will consider a wider range of victims and a broader set of locations for the Holocaust.
  - The study of the Holocaust raises deep questions about human agency, moral decisions, the role of science in society, and the place of suffering in human life. It makes the past deeply relevant for the present, and challenges us as Christians to make sense of what seems to be beyond our comprehension. It is demanding as it requires more love and patience than we sometimes feel like we can give. Please feel free to come to me and discuss in class the difficult emotional and theological questions that arise as we all study the Holocaust.
  
- You are invited to be **environmental historians** of the Holocaust.
  - At first glance, the Holocaust is a human catastrophe that seems little related to concerns about nature. In recent years however, historians have found that including nature in the study of the Holocaust -and collaborating with scholars in

the natural and social sciences- have deepened their understanding of the Holocaust. In this class we will consider the many ways in which nature functioned **materially** and **imaginatively** during the Holocaust.

- “Environmental history’s concern for the materiality of the natural environment offers us a tool for a better histories of the Holocaust. By paying attention to the physical, biological, ecological nature of dirt, water, air, trees, and animals (including humans) we uncover new questions and new answers about the past” (Cole and Stroud). We will consider how the environment has affected the **ways the Holocaust was perpetrated, the victims’ experiences** of the Holocaust in particular landscapes, be they ghettos, forest, camps, or rivers. We will pay attention to the ways in which geography and the environment constituted both constraints and opportunities to victims -a single landscape could provide both a site of genocide and a shelter for victims.
- Nature also played a critical ideological and imaginative role in the Holocaust, as it is deeply grounded in Nazi **understandings of nature** shared by many Western scientists in the early 1900’s. These particular views of nature have had strong implications for race, land, and eugenic policies. In considering German and North American discourses on race and the environment, we will need to account for the paradox between their apparent concerns for nature and their actual treatment of both human beings and the natural world. How is it that some prominent environmentalists in the United States also stood for the most radical racist and eugenic policies and ideologies? How did their particular understanding of nature -as a set of resources such as land, or as a world ruled by competition- generate war, exclusion and violence? How did this ideology translate on the ground as competition for territory and resources increased during the war?
- You are invited to be **critical readers of historical texts**. by the end of the semester, you should be able to read primary and secondary historical sources critically:
  - For primary sources, place them in their context and explain how this context shapes your interpretation of the text;
  - For secondary sources, identify main arguments, place them in debates among historians, and critically analyze them by pointing out their strengths and weaknesses.
  - Students will be able to analyze historical sources with appropriate attention to their various contexts.

## Readings

- Engel, David. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. New York: Longman, 2000.

- Lower, Wendy. *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Mariner Books, 2021.
- Cole, Time. *Holocaust Landscapes*. Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016 (Ebook)
- Reader: Primary and secondary sources

Course Outcome	Departmental Outcome	General Education Outcome	Assignments and Assessment
Historical Skills: Primary and Secondary Sources	Students will be able to read primary sources historically and use them effectively	Students will be able to analyze historical sources with appropriate attention to their various contexts	Readings ( <i>journals</i> ), Discussions, Exams, Films and primary source analyses

## Assignments

### 1. In class short oral or written tests (10%)

We will spend a lot of time in the first half of the semester discussing how to analyze primary and secondary sources. We'll talk about the kinds of questions that we need to ask of and answer from these sources. For each class session, there will be something to read and prepare, and you must **keep a journal with your notes on each source**. The journal needs to be typed (unless your handwriting is superb), and submitted on Canvas by the beginning of class. I will randomly collect journals at the beginning of class. **Late work won't be accepted**. It is vital that you tell me *ahead of time* if you have to miss class for any reason. Your notes do not need to be highly-polished, but they do need to be **thorough** (addressing the sorts of questions that we will be asking of sources in class) and **thoughtful**. Most of your entries should be several pages long.

### 2. Class Attendance and Participation (15%)

Firstly, you need to come to class. I do expect you to be there. If you have to miss class for any reason, it is both important and polite to let me know ahead of time. If you miss 6 classes or more, you will be dropped from the roster.

Secondly, I want to hear from you this semester, and your classmates need to hear from you too. If you're of a quieter disposition, remember that most of our discussions will relate to the readings, so you can come to class prepared to ask a question. I reserve the right to call on people.

### 3. Exams (50%)

There will be four exams based on the lectures, the discussions and the readings. The first exam will account for 5% of your grade, the others for 15% of your grade.

### 4. Film and Source Analyses (25%)

You will need to present 3 times during the semester on assigned sources. One presentation will be done by a group of 4 students.

**All work in this class must be completed to get a passing grade (you cannot “skip” notes, attendance and participation, leading discussion, or exams).**

## Some Important Policies

I expect courteous and respectful behavior from all students. This includes participating in class discussion and in small group work, listening carefully to your peers, considering carefully their ideas and responding honestly and graciously, and refraining from interrupting. One further element of respectful behavior relates to the issue of plagiarism.

To plagiarize is to present someone else's work—his or her words, line of thought, or organizational structure—as your own. This occurs when sources are not cited properly, or when permission is not obtained from the original author to use his or her work. Another person's "work" can take many forms: printed or electronic copies of computer programs, musical compositions, drawings, paintings, oral presentations, papers, essays, articles or chapters, statistical data, tables or figures, etc. In short, if any information that can be considered the intellectual property of another is used without acknowledging the original source properly, this is plagiarism. Please familiarize yourself with the entire Westmont College Plagiarism Policy. This document defines different levels of plagiarism and the penalties for each. It also contains very helpful information on strategies for avoiding plagiarism. It cannot be overemphasized that plagiarism is an insidious and disruptive form of academic dishonesty. It violates relationships with known classmates and professors, and it violates the legal rights of people you may never meet.

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
<b>Holocaust Survey</b>			
Jan 7 <b>Week 1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	WC chapter 26	
Jan 9	<b>Jews and Antisemitism</b>	Engel, 1-25 Reader: <i>Holocaust and Nature, Preface</i> Children literature (primary)	Journal
Jan 14 <b>Week 2</b>	<b>Twisted Roads</b>	Engel, 25-49 Reader : Bellos (primary)	Journal Source analysis presentations (sign up)
Jan 16	<b>From Racism to Genocide</b>	Engel, 49-80 Reader : Mauss (primary)	Journal Source analysis presentations (sign up)
<b>The Holocaust as Ecological Project</b>			
Jan 23 <b>Week 3</b>	<b>Science: Eugenics</b>	Documentary -PBS <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsg5lwYRw9A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsg5lwYRw9A</a> Reader : Posters (primary) <b>Test 1</b>	Journal
Jan 28 <b>Week 4</b>	<b>Eugenics The Disabled</b>	Reader: Friedländer (secondary) T4 (primary)	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Jan 30	<b>Science Sinti and Romas</b>	Reader (primary and secondary)	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Feb 4 <b>Week 5</b>	Nazi nature and landscape (1)	Conservation and Genocide Reader (primary and secondary)	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Feb 6	Nazi nature and landscape (1)	Lebensraum Reader (primary and secondary)	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Feb 11 <b>Week 6</b>	<b>Germanization</b> Humans as invasive species	Reader (primary and secondary)	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)

Feb 13	Colonialism - Afro-Germans Green colonialism	Reader (primary and secondary)	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Feb 20 <b>Week 7</b>	Nazi Nature and Landscape (3): Zone of interest	Watch film <b>Exam 1</b>	<b>Film presentation 1</b>
<b>Holocaust Landscapes</b>			
Feb 25 <b>Week 8</b>	<b>Holocaust Landscapes</b>	Cole, 1-20 Engel 5 Reader: Perechodnik, "War"	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Feb 27	<b>Ghetto</b>	Cole, 20-43 Reader: Perechodnik, "Aktion"	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
Mar 4 <b>Week 9</b>	<b>Ghetto</b>	Reader Perechodnik, "After the Aktion" Primary source: Warsaw Uprising photographs	<b>Film presentation 2 -A film unfinished (selected viewers)</b>
Mar 6	<b>Forest</b> The Ravine 1	The Ravine, chapters 1-3 Reader: Primary: Commissar order	Journal Source analysis presentation (sign up)
<b>Spring Break</b>			
Mar 18 <b>Week 10</b>	<b>Forest</b> The Ravine 2	Reader: Primary: Eliach The Ravine, chapters 4-6	Journal Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Mar 20	<b>Forest</b> The Ravine 3	Cole 45-67 The Ravine, chapters 7-8	Journal
Mar 25 <b>Week 11</b>	<b>Forest</b>	Resistance <b>Exam 2</b>	<b>Film Presentation 3 - Defiance</b>
Mar 27	<b>Camp</b>	Cole 69-80 Reader: Primary sources	Journal Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Apr 1 <b>Week 12</b>	<b>Camp</b>	Cole 80-98 Reader: Primary sources	Journal

			Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Apr 3	<b>Waste</b>	Reader: Primary and secondary sources	Journal Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Apr 8 <b>Week 13</b>	<b>River: Hungary as case study</b>	Cole, 151-172 (background)	<b>Film Presentation 4 -The Last Days</b>
Apr 10	<b>Attic, Cellar</b>	Cole, 127-150 Perechodnik, Warsaw	Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Apr 15 <b>Week 14</b>	<b>Liberation and Waste</b>	Reader: Primary and secondary sources	Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Apr 17	<b>Memory and landscapes</b>	Reader: Primary and secondary sources	Primary source analysis presentation (sign up)
Apr 22 <b>Week 15</b>	<b>Memory and landscapes &amp; Contemporary Implication</b>	Reader: Secondary sources	
Apr 24	<b>Contemporary implications</b>	Reader: Secondary sources	
<b>Final exam</b>			

## Readings

### Week 1:

- Primary source analysis
  - Introduce distinction between primary and secondary source
  - In-class exercise about primary source analysis based on a photograph of women perpetrators
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Engel, 1-25
  - Environmental history: Pollefeyt, Didier, ed, *Holocaust and Nature*," Zürich : Lit, 2013, introduction
  - Poisonous mushrooms USHMM
    - <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/pages-from-the-antisemitic-childrens-book-the-poisonous-mushroom/collection/everyday-encounters-with-fascism>

- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/page-from-the-poisonous-mushroom>
- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/cover-of-a-german-antisemitic-childrens-book>

## Week 2

- Primary source analysis
  - Bellos, David (trans.), *The Journal of Helene Berr* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2008), 18-23, 66-71, 154-159, 164-167, 228-233, 236-239, 256-264.
  - Reading and analysis of Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Pantheon Books, 1981-1991
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Engel, 25-49 & 49-80

## Week 3

- Primary source analysis
  - Eugenics posters USHMM
    - <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/eugenics-poster>
    - <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/nazi-eugenics-poster>  
[https://books.google.com/books?hl=fr&lr=&id=g15rfXUA2i8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA62&dq=US+race+eugenics+history&ots=hvqas\\_2ofA&sig=9hX8\\_aX6yjeHnxOy-WITUEdyJt8#v=onepage&q=US%20race%20eugenics%20history&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=fr&lr=&id=g15rfXUA2i8C&oi=fnd&pg=PA62&dq=US+race+eugenics+history&ots=hvqas_2ofA&sig=9hX8_aX6yjeHnxOy-WITUEdyJt8#v=onepage&q=US%20race%20eugenics%20history&f=false)
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Turda, Marius, "Race, Science and Eugenics in the Twentieth Century" in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, Oxford UP, 2010, 62-75
  - Proctor, Robert, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*, Harvard University Press, 1988, 177-192, 251-155 & 268-273
  - Documentary -PBS
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsg5lwYRw9A>
    -

## Week 4

- Primary source analysis
  - "Himmler's Guidelines for the Resettlement of the Gypsies" from *Witness to the Holocaust*, edited by Michael Berenbaum (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 105.
  - Rosenberg, Otto, *A Gypsy in Auschwitz* (London: London House, 1999), 20-21.
  - T4 form
  - <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/euthanasia-program>
  - Combatting homosexuality as a political task
  - [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1558](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1558)



- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Friedlander, Henry, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 1-21.
  - Milton, Sybil, "Gypsies and the Holocaust," in Mitchell, Joseph R. and Helen Buss Mitchell (eds.), *The Holocaust: Readings & Interpretations* (McGraw Hill, 2001), 218-225.
  - Lusane, Clarence, *Hitler's Black Victims: The Historical Experience of European Blacks during the Nazi Era*, Taylor and Francis, 2022, p. 123-132.

### Week 5

- Primary source analysis
  - Environmental Nazi Laws -in Dominick, Raymond H., "The Nazis and the Nature Conservationists", *The Historian*, 9:4, 1987, 508-538
  - Movie excerpt: Ewiger Wald
  - Sax, Boria. *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust*, New York, Continuum, 2000.
- Secondary sources and historiography: how Green were the Nazis?
  - Brüggemeier, Franz-Josef, Mark Cioc, and Thomas Zeller, *How Green were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005, chapter 2 (Forests)
  - Dominick, Raymond H., "The Nazis and the Nature Conservationists", *The Historian*, 9:4, 1987, 508-538
  - Lekan, Thomas, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885-1945*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2004. "From Heimat to Lebensraum"

### Week 6

- Primary source analysis
  - Hans J. Massaquoi, *Destined to Witness: Growing up Black in Nazi Germany* (New York: W. Morrow, 1999), p.
  - Law for the prevention of offsprings with hereditary diseases.  
[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1521](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1521)
  - Hereditary Farm Law  
[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1550](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1550)
  - Labor Mobilization Program  
[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1555](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1555)
  - Memorandum on the treatment of foreign laborers  
[https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1556](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1556)

- Secondary sources and historiography: Is the Holocaust a Colonial Genocide?
  - Blackbourn, David. *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany*, New York, Morton, 2006, 9-19 & 250-309
  - In conversation with Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007, 21-37 and parts of chapters 6 or 8.
  - Zimmerer
  - Excerpts from Spiro, Jonathan Peter, *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, University Press of New England, 2009 -Chapter 14 deals with the specific connections between the Third Reich and Grant's racism

### **Week 7**

- Primary source analysis
  - Movie analysis: *Zone of Interest*
- Secondary sources and historiography -draw on all prior readings

### **Week 8**

- Primary source analysis
  - Calel Perchodnik, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*, New York, Routledge, 1996, 1-24 (excerpts)
  - Calel Perchodnik, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*, New York, Routledge, 1996, 26-51 (excerpts)
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Cole, Time. *Holocaust Landscapes*. Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016

### **Week 9**

- Primary source analysis
  - "Call for resistance in the Vilna Ghetto, January 1942," in Hochstadt, Steve (ed.), *Sources of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 186-187.
  - Calel Perchodnik, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*, New York, Routledge, 1996, 52-101 (excerpts)
  - Commissar Order
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Lower, Wendy. *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Mariner Books, 2021.

### **Week 10**

- Primary source analysis

- Eliach, Yaffa, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 3-4, 53-55.
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Lower, Wendy. *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Mariner Books, 2021. Chapters 1-3

### **Week 11**

- Primary source analysis
  - Levy-Hass, Hanna, *Diary of Bergen-Belsen* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 38-41, 100-105.
  - Borowski, Tadeusz, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959) 143-151.
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Lower, Wendy. *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Mariner Books, 2021. Chapters 4-6

### **Week 12**

- Primary source analysis
  - Primary sources from: Netz, Reviel, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*, Wesleyan University Press, 2009, 194-227.
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Berg, Anne, *Empire of Rags and Bones: Waste and War in Nazi Germany*, Oxford, Oxford university Press, 2024, 148-158, 162-183
  - Tim Cole, 80-98

### **Week 13**

- Primary source analysis
  - Calel Perchodnik, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*, New York, Routledge, 1996, 134-194 (excerpts)
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Tim Cole

### **Week 14**

- Primary source analysis
  - Seprum, Jorge, *What a Beautiful Sunday!*, Alan Sheridan, trans., San Diego, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1980, 1-10 & 17-24, 36-37
  - Hitler's Scorched Earth Decree
  - [https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1590](https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1590)
- Secondary sources and historiography
  - Berg, Anne, *Empire of Rags and Bones: Waste and War in Nazi Germany*, Oxford, Oxford university Press, 2024, conclusion

- Rapson, Jessica, *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice*. New and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2015. Introduction and conclusion

**Week 15**

- Secondary sources and historiography
  - <https://slowfactory.earth/readings/green-colonialism-in-palestine/>
  - <https://forward.com/fast-forward/480758/jnf-planting-tree-israel-politics-controversy/>
  - John Roth: What have we learned from the Holocaust?
  - Doris Bergen on “the power of one”