

The World War II Era and Human Rights Education

Stewart Waters and William B. Russell III

International revulsion at the violation of human rights during World War II helped spark a global movement to define and protect individual human rights. Starting with the creation of war crimes tribunals after the war, this newfound awareness stimulated a concerted international effort to establish human rights for all, both in periods of war and peace. These endeavors resulted in a historic milestone when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. In the time that has elapsed since then, human rights have become an important part of political debate in many countries, and a significant number of non-governmental organizations have been established to promote and protect them. The international community has taken some unprecedented steps to deter violations of human rights, and punish perpetrators, notably through the establishment of the International Criminal Court in 2002 and its subsequent proceedings against persons accused of war crimes.

The effects of World War II on international understanding and protection of human rights have been far-reaching, yet this dimension of World War II is often neglected or marginalized in the classroom. The atrocities of the period are sometimes taught only as events that happened during the war, without an evaluation of their long-term effects on the world's conception of human rights. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with an approach to integrating the teaching of human rights and their violation into the world history curriculum through a historical analysis of events during the World War II era.

World War II was a truly global event. Even attempts to define its beginning can result in many teachable moments, because of the different historical perspectives that exist about its starting

point. These perspectives are discussed by historian Iris Chang in *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. In this important work, the author states:

Americans think of World War II as beginning on December 7, 1941, when Japanese carrier-based airplanes attacked Pearl Harbor. Europeans date it from September 1, 1939, and the blitzkrieg assault on Poland by Hitler's Luftwaffe and Panzer divisions. Africans see an even earlier beginning, the invasion of Abyssinia by Mussolini in 1935. Yet Asians must trace the war's beginning all the way back to Japan's first steps toward the military domination of East Asia—the occupation of Manchuria in 1931.¹

As Chang mentions, there is no clear date for the beginning of World War II because many countries look at the beginning of the war from an ethnocentric perspective. In an effort to address this topic from an approach that takes all sides into account, we will use the term “World War II era” in reference to all the events leading up to and surrounding the human rights violations between 1931 and 1945. The monumental violations of human rights that took place during this era brought forth a widespread movement calling for the protection of human rights all over the globe, as they offered extreme examples of how legitimate governments can foster, tolerate, and legitimize human rights violations in the name of national security. As Rhona Smith and Carolyn McIntosh write, “The Holocaust, in conjunction with the atrocities committed in Europe and Asia during the Second World War, demonstrated the clear need for a global standard of human rights.”² This global standard of human rights came in 1948, just three years after the end of the war, when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see www.un.org/Overview/rights.html).

Introducing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Introducing students to the Universal



People who lived through the Nanjing (Nanking) Massacre in 1937 mourn during a ceremony marking its anniversary at the Nanjing Massacre Museum, Jiangsu province, on December 13, 2008.

Declaration of Human Rights is something that every social studies teacher addressing human rights violations will need to do in their classrooms. A study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., for Human Rights USA in 1997 revealed “that only 8 percent of adults and 4 percent of young people are aware of and can name the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”³ This pivotal study showed that most Americans were receiving no exposure to a document that laid the foundation for developing a set of culturally universal human rights. The state of California addressed the importance of human rights education in 1987 with the rationale being:

There is no more urgent task for educators in the field of history and social science than to teach students about the importance of

human rights and to analyze with them the actual instances in which genocide—the ultimate violation of human rights—has been committed. We study the atrocities of the past not only to preserve their significance as historical events but also to help identify ways to prevent the atrocities from ever happening again.⁴

Exploring the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in social studies classrooms increases students’ global awareness because it was a document created as a group effort between multiple countries participating in the United Nations. This makes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights distinct from other documents addressing human rights with which students may be more familiar, such as

the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, British Magna Carta, or the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. While all of the aforementioned documents are important in the advancement of human rights, and indeed their influence is easily recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the concerted effort of representatives from multiple nations that produced the UDHR makes it an important document for citizens of all countries.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights marks the first time in human history that nations all over the world came together to define inalienable rights and freedoms for all people. Dr. H.E. Evatt of Australia, president of the UN General Assembly in 1948, observed that this was “the first occasion on which the organized

world community had recognized the existence of human rights and fundamental freedoms transcending the laws of sovereign states.”⁵

The Holocaust

The German Nazi government’s treatment of Jewish people is the most documented and analyzed example of human rights violations during the World War II era. Through the Holocaust, the Nazis attempted to systematically annihilate all Jewish people in Europe. The rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi party was fueled by extreme nationalism and racist hatred. At a time when Germany was in a state of turmoil and economic depression, Hitler used his extraordinary public speaking skills and anti-Semitic propaganda to convince Germans that Jews were the cause of Germany’s recent decline.

After his appointment as chancellor in 1933, Hitler implemented anti-Semitic legislation over the next several years as the start of policies that would eventually lead to the systematic killing of over six million Jewish people. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 deprived German Jews of citizenship, and later measures in the 1930s required Jews to carry special IDs, forbade them to own retail stores, and banned them from German public schools and universities. On November 9-10, 1938, the violence of Kristallnacht resulted in the destruction of synagogues, looting of Jewish shops, and the killing of about 1,000 Jews.

After the start of World War II, the persecution of Jews expanded into a policy of extermination both of Jews in Germany and of Jewish communities in the large areas of Europe that fell under Nazi German control. Nazi concentration camps, which had begun as forced labor camps for “undesirables,” became centers of mass extermination. Concentration camps, like the infamous Auschwitz (the largest of the death camps), were the scene of horrifying tragedies including human experimentation and

mass killings in gas chambers. All the resources of the German government were devoted to identifying Jewish people, rounding them up, shipping them through organized and carefully scheduled mass transportation to the camps. Those who were not immediately executed were forced into harsh labor, seven days a week, with meager food and shelter accommodations. In addition to Jews, many other groups including Poles, Gypsies, Russian prisoners of war, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, Afro-Germans, Ukrainians, Belorussians, political dissidents, and handicapped people experienced mass killings and numerous human rights violations under the Nazi regime.

The Nanking Massacre

Japan’s quick rise as a world power in the Far East during the Imperial era of the late 1800s and early 1900s is fairly well documented in textbooks. During this time, Japan industrialized and became an expansionist power in Asia whose relationships with rival nations began to deteriorate drastically. The Nanking Massacre is one of the most infamous events in Japanese history. However, this particular event is rarely, if ever, mentioned in social studies textbooks. Yali Zhao examined eight American and world history textbooks commonly used in middle and high school social studies classrooms and found that “there was no mention of any of the major war crimes committed by Japanese troops.”⁶ Since many people may not be fully aware of the Nanking atrocities, it is important for teachers to include them in their classes on World War II and human rights education.

Following the First World War, Japan’s industry and trade began to grow tremendously. Being a relatively small country with limited natural resources, Japan started to explore the possibility of expanding into China, specifically the Northern region of Manchuria, in order to exploit the vast resources. In 1931–32, Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria. In 1937, encouraged by the

appeasement policies of the League of Nations toward Italian expansionism and German violations of the Treaty of Versailles, Japan launched a new war against China and captured Nanking (also referred to as Nanjing), the Chinese capital city of that time. Beginning in December of 1937 and continuing to February of 1938, the Japanese army proceeded to loot, rape, and kill civilians in Nanking. In the span of two short months, 300,000 Chinese civilians were killed and somewhere between 20,000 and 80,000 women were raped by the Japanese army.⁷ Today, the Nanking Holocaust Memorial stands as a memory to the thousands of victims of the massacre. For more detailed information on this museum and the Nanking Massacre, readers should visit the website <http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/NanjingMassacre/NM.html>.

U.S. Disregard for Human Rights during the WWII Era

Although the Holocaust and the Nanking massacres were extraordinary atrocities committed by states that were enemies of the United States in World War II, it would be wrong to teach about the war as if the only violations of human rights were committed by foreign powers. A human rights unit focusing on World War II should also include the internment of Japanese Americans during the war, which has traditionally received little coverage in the social studies curriculum and textbooks. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, the United States took the unprecedented action of forcibly relocating any person of “Japanese ethnicity, regardless of citizenship or age, from a vast military district encompassing most of California, Oregon, Washington, and part of Arizona.”⁸ The question for most students and researchers to address with this topic is: how could a democratic government allow this to happen?

Japanese immigrants and citizens in the United States had been facing racism

TEACHING ACTIVITY

and discrimination for many years prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor and World War II. The first documented evidence of prejudice against Japanese Americans can be traced back to 1893 in San Francisco where the Board of Education forced Japanese students to attend the segregated Chinese schools. Though later rescinded, this early attempt to discriminate against Japanese Americans clearly indicates the racial intolerance of American society during the late nineteenth century. The twentieth century did not bring much improvement in attitudes towards Japanese Americans. In 1907, the Gentlemen's Agreement between the United States and Japan was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt in the hope of limiting Japanese immigration into the United States. This immigration would eventually be completely eliminated by the National Origins Act of 1924.⁹ In addition, the Alien Land Law of 1920 legally prevented Japanese immigrants from purchasing land in the states of Washington, Oregon, and California. Japan's entry into World War II only increased discrimination faced by Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals living in the United States during the early 1940s. In July of 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt placed a freeze on all Japanese assets in the United States. Also, in August 1941, Congressman John Dingell from Michigan wrote a letter to the president recommending that he imprison 10,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans who were living in Hawaii to encourage good behavior on the part of Japan.

It is easy to downplay the importance of Japanese internment when the Nazis were attempting to annihilate an entire population in Europe. While there is little comparison in the severity of crimes endured by victims of the Holocaust and Japanese internment, it is feasible to analyze similarities in human rights violations allowed by each government and society. Specifically, examining how and why the Japanese internment occurred

This activity is specifically designed to analyze the violation of human rights by the German, United States, and Japanese national governments during the World War II era. Students will have the opportunity to explore world history content while examining how issues such as racism, prejudice, discrimination, and abuse of power led to an unprecedented explosion of human rights violations. The following activity is a sample lesson that teachers could use to discuss human rights violations during the World War II era. While there are certainly many ways to teach these important topics, this activity allows students an opportunity to engage with the material.

1. Distribute copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (available online at www.udhr.org/index.htm) for the students to peruse throughout the course of this lesson. Have students share and discuss their thoughts. Which articles are the most important? Are there any unnecessary articles? What kind of foreshadowing do these articles provide into the events being explored during the World War II era?
2. After a lively discussion about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, assign each group in the class one of the following topics: the Holocaust, the Nanking Massacre, or the internment of Japanese Americans. Inform each group that they will be an international investigative committee responsible for gathering sound evidence of human rights violations and war crimes. The committee will be responsible for building a case to prosecute those responsible, and will recommend punishment and reparations for the groups involved. Remind students that legal cases require detailed information indicating exactly what happened, when it occurred, as well as identifying the perpetrators and victims. The following is a list of brief questions that could be used to guide students during their research and case development.
 - What atrocities or human rights violations occurred during this event?
 - What group or groups of people were targets?
 - What role did the national government play in allowing the violations to occur?
 - Identify the issues that contributed to the human rights violations. (racism, prejudice, abuse of power, etc...) Give evidence to support each.
 - How did citizens of each society react to these violations?
 - Which articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which was developed after these events took place) were violated by each event?
 - Who should be held accountable for these violations, and to what extent?
 - What should be done, if anything, to compensate the victims and their families?
3. After developing their cases, each group will present their findings to a panel (the other students in the class) in order to convince the United Nations to bring the perpetrators to justice. Remind students that this reflection is more than a regurgitation of facts heard during the presentation. Encourage students to think critically about how their perceptions or feelings on human rights has developed throughout the course of this project and what role that is playing in their vote. The final piece of their reflection needs to discuss how the students will conceptualize human rights in the context of their present day lives: How important are human rights issues in your lives today? What can you do to help promote the cause of human rights and social justice as the twentyfirst century unfolds?

will provide students with valuable insights into the dangers of racism, prejudice, and abuse of power during times when our national security is threatened. Paul Kennedy discusses this analysis of history in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, when he states, “You only properly understand your own country when you remove the ethnocentric spectacles, examine the history of other countries, and put your own nation within the context of global developments.”¹⁰ This lesson is particularly important following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While fear for the safety of our nation is certainly justified after attacks like 9/11 and Pearl Harbor, it is important for citizens in a democratic society not to use that fear as justification for violating the human rights of certain groups. As the events of the Japanese internment show, even people living in a democratic society can be guilty

of indifference towards human rights during times of national duress.

Conclusion

Human rights education in social studies classrooms should not be considered as an option but rather as a responsibility embraced by teachers. Addressing important human rights violations in the classroom is a key component to helping students become better citizens. By openly discussing and exploring these issues in the historical context of world history, students can more easily conceptualize and identify current human rights violations. While identifying social problems is important, teachers need to remind students that merely recognizing injustice is not enough. As the historical events of the Holocaust, Nanking Massacre, and Japanese American internment indicate, citizens must be willing to stand up for the human rights of others, or shameful

violations of human rights can take place. Mahatma Gandhi, a legendary figure in the human rights movement, once said, “All humanity is one undivided and indivisible family, and each one of us is responsible for the misdeeds of all the others. I cannot detach myself from the wickedest soul.” (UHRC Webpage, www.unitedhumanrights.org). Gandhi’s inspiring words remind us all that being a responsible person means looking out for the best interest of others and not just ourselves. 🌍

Notes

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4. State of California, *Model Curriculum for Human Rights and Genocide* (Sacramento, Calif.: California State Department of Education, 1987), 1.
5. W. Laqueur and B. Rubin, *The Human Rights Reader* (New York: Meriden, 1979), 176.
6. Y. Zhao and J. Hoge, “Countering Textbook Distortion: War Atrocities in Asia, 1937-1945,” *Social Education* 70, no. 7 (2006), 427.
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8. K. Miksch and D. Ghere, “Teaching Japanese-American Incarceration,” *The History Teacher* 37, no. 2 (2004), 211-227 at 212.
9. Miksch and Ghere, op. cit.
10. P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1988), 1.
11. United Human Rights Council, www.unitedhumanrights.org

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STEWART WATERS is assistant professor of Social Science Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He can be contacted at kswaters@utk.edu.

WILLIAM B. RUSSELL III is associate professor of Social Science Education at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. He can be contacted at Russell@ucf.edu.