New Course: The Holocaust and American Life

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For History Professor Susan Glenn, it is not uncommon to encounter students who think of the Holocaust as a European event, bearing little relation to the history of the United States. Seeking to challenge this perspective, Glenn designed a course that focused on how events in Europe affected and were affected by developments in U.S. history.

In HSTAA337, "The Holocaust and American Life," which she taught for the first time this winter, Glenn focused first on the period from 1933 to 1945, to show students how Americans depicted and understood the persecution of European Jews in the pre-war, wartime, and immediate post-war period. She then proceeded to explore the impact of the Holocaust on American society in the decades after 1945, revealing to students how the lens of the Holocaust has been has been used to examine a broad spectrum of social and political issues ranging from America's treatment of its own minority groups to controversial aspects of U.S. foreign policy.

"The impact of the Holocaust in the United States has been extremely wide-ranging," notes Professor Glenn. "It has been invoked in debates about the moral responsibility of individuals and nations, the nature of evil, and concepts of race and racism. And it has also been a subject of controversy in the U.S., regarding the preservation and ownership of Holocaust ‘memory.’" To explore the many ways that such debates have been articulated in American society, Professor Glenn guided her students through a range of different primary sources, including journalism, law, petitions, literary works, social-science research, diaries, poetry, films and more.

Now, with the quarter wrapping up, Glenn had a chance to reflect on what her students had taken away from this course. One goal, she says, "was to give students a greater sense of the global dimensions of U.S. history," while another was to reveal "the many paradoxes and contradictions" in that history. "I think we got there," says Glenn, who looks forward to offering the course again next winter.
Department of History
University of Washington
318 Smith Box 353560
Seattle, WA 98195-3560

Phone: (206) 543-5790
Fax: (206) 543-9451
histmain@uw.edu

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