

Instructional Syllabus (Fall 2026)
HIST 272: War and Holocaust in Europe
Colgate University

Time and Place: TR 9:55 – 11:10 AM (111 Alumni)
Instructor: Xan Karn
Office Hours: T 1:30 – 3:00 PM; W 9:30 – 11:00 AM; or by appt.
Office Location: 327 Alumni
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I. Description and Objectives

This course examines the causes, conduct, and consequences of World War Two. We will analyze German politics and European diplomacy in the years leading up to the war, Hitler's rise to power and the creation of a racial state in Germany, the policies of aggression and expansion which precipitated the war, and the major campaigns conducted by the combatants. While many Americans see WWII as the last "good war" or as a morality tale that legitimates American power and influence in the decades following the conflict, it is important to understand that different groups experienced the war differently. For this reason, memories of the conflict are often bitterly contested. The same events/episodes may have vastly different meanings when viewed from different perspectives. A major component of this course, therefore, is to uncover and analyze the national narratives that have been attached to the war in the decades since it ended.

Throughout the semester, special consideration will be given to the study of the Holocaust. This is a topic that conjures difficult, but also important questions about morality, individual and group psychology, the limits of representation, and historical comparability. While no other event in history is exactly like the Holocaust, we will strive to see and make connections to other historical episodes to decipher which aspects of the Holocaust are unique.

The course employs a variety of methodologies and resources to bring the past to light. Using memoirs, films, artworks, as well as both primary and secondary sources, we will examine the economic, social, cultural, and political developments that paved the way to a cataclysmic war from 1939-45. In doing so, we will try to account for the experiences of ordinary people, at home and on the battle front, in neutral and warring states, in hiding, and in the concentration and extermination camps. While there are critical distinctions to be made among the actors (e.g., perpetrator, victim, and bystander), we will also encounter episodes where these categories appear to break down.

While most of the events we cover in this course unfolded on European soil, WWII was a global conflict with consequences that reached far beyond Europe. We will deal with desert combat in Africa, warfare in the Pacific theater, and the impact and legacies of Japanese aggression in Asia. The Holocaust will also be examined in a global context. To an important extent, the Holocaust has changed the way we think about international politics and diplomacy, the way we conceive of modernity, and the legal and moral frameworks required for responsible global citizenship. It has spawned new political commitments and a new discourse of universal human rights, and it has come to be seen as a pivotal event, not only for Jews, but for the entire world.

II. Expectations and Evaluations

The format of this course combines lecture and discussion. Students are expected to contribute energetically and thoughtfully at each class meeting. To develop and deepen our conversations, it is essential that students complete their assigned readings according to the schedule below and have these materials at hand during our class meetings.

Your grade for the course will be based on the following: two exams, two essays, and class participation.

EXAMS

There are two in-class exams, a midterm on October 8 and a final on December 14. Both exams will consist of identification questions as well as short answer and short essay questions. Students must take both exams to pass the course. The exams are not cumulative.

ESSAYS

Students will write two essays. The first will be a short (~5 pps.) interpretive essay, which is due in class on September 24. The second will be a longer project (~10 pps.) requiring independent research, which is due on November 19. Prompts and guidelines for both essays will be circulated in class and via Moodle well ahead of these deadlines. For the research paper, students can choose their topics (in consultation with the instructor). A research proposal with a working bibliography must be submitted for review no later than October 1.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

All students are expected to abide by the Class Absence Guidelines published in the Colgate University Catalogue. Regular attendance at scheduled class sessions is an important part of your course participation grade. In general, deadline extensions and make-up assignments will not be granted, except in the case of illness or where religious observance or a sudden emergency present an unavoidable conflict. If you know already that your attendance at a scheduled session is impossible, owing to an unavoidable conflict, please communicate this to the instructor as soon as possible.

Learning rarely occurs without students' active and engaged participation. While there will certainly be lectures throughout the semester, I will be keen to get your thoughts on assigned readings, and I like to pose questions throughout each session related to the topic at hand. I am, therefore, counting on your high-caliber input and participation. In general, I value quality over quantity, but at the same time, I do hope to have regular contributions from each member of the class. Participation can improve your course grade, or it can pull your grade down more than you might like. It can also do neither. For quiet and shy students, this is your chance to develop an important new skill

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who require an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss specific needs. If you have not already done so, please also contact Evelyn Lester (elester@colgate.edu), who directs the Office of Student Disability Services (101A Lathrop Hall), so that reasonable and appropriate accommodations can be clearly defined.

LAPTOPS AND ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Laptops and tablets may be used in class to support our learning objectives with instructor approval. If these devices lead to inattention or create a distraction for others, you will be asked to leave them at home. The instructor will, at times, ask students to power down or put away electronic devices to allow for conversation and group work free from distraction. Phones should be silenced and kept out of view.

ACADEMIC HONOR CODE AND AI POLICY

The instructor will vigorously enforce all aspects of Colgate's Academic Honor Code. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will be punished in accordance with the Honor Code.

Students in HIST 272 are not permitted take assistance from generative AI tools for any phase of their research, writing, or class/exam preparation. While there are exciting things happening in the realm of AI, current AI tools do not support the learning goals for this course. Just as you probably wouldn't want me to offload the grading and evaluation of your work to an AI bot, I have no interest in assessing the output of a writing and thinking simulator.

ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

Grades for your exams and assignments will be based on the following scale: A: 90-100%; B: 80-89%; C: 70-79%; D: 60-69%; F: 0-59%. A plus/minus (+/-) system will be used to differentiate student progress further. Your grade for the course will be based on the formula below:

Essay 1 (Sept. 24)	15%
Research Proposal (Oct. 1)	5%
Midterm (Oct. 8)	15%
Essay 2 (Nov. 19)	30%
Final (Dec. 14)	25%
Participation	10%
TOTAL	100%

III. Reading and Required Texts

The texts listed below comprise one part of the required reading for this course. These titles are available for purchase at the Colgate bookstore and elsewhere. Additional readings will be made available via Moodle.

Required texts:

BROWNING, Christopher. *Ordinary Men*. Harper. ISBN: 978-0060995065.

HAFFNER, Sebastian. *Defying Hitler*. Picador. ISBN: 978-0312421137.

KAPLAN, Marion. *Between Dignity and Despair*. Oxford UP. ISBN: 978-0195130928.

LEVI, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. Touchstone. ISBN: 978-0684826806.

IV. Course Outline and Reading Schedule (Tentative)

Week 1 Introduction

Aug. 27 Welcome Back

Aug. 28 Memories and Myths

Reading: Wheatcroft, “The Myth of the Good War”

Week 2 Between Two Fires

Sept. 1 WWI and its Legacies

Reading: Haffner, *Defying Hitler*, pps. 3-71

Sept. 3 The Weimar Republic

Reading: Haffner, *Defying Hitler*, pps. 72-146

Week 3 The Third Reich

Sept. 8 The Nazi Revolution

Reading: Haffner, *Defying Hitler*, pps. 147-226

Sept. 10 The Policy of Appeasement

Reading: Haffner, *Defying Hitler*, pps. 227-296

Week 4 *Incipit*, 1939-40

Sept. 15 Lightning Strikes

Reading: Keegan, “The Triumph of Blitzkrieg”

Sept. 17 Fall of France

Reading: Bloch, “A Frenchman Examines His Conscience”

Week 5 Stalemate?

Sept. 22 Battle of Britain

Reading: G. Field, “Nights Underground”

Sept. 24 **ESSAY 1 DUE**

Week 6 Europe Under Nazi Occupation

Sept. 29 Occupation, Collaboration, Resistance

Reading: Keegan, "Occupation and Repression"

Oct. 1 Operation Barbarossa

Reading: Romer, "The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies"

RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE

Week 7 The Tide Turns

Oct. 6 America Enters the War

Reading: Engel, "Isolation and Intervention" (Documents)

Oct. 8 **MIDTERM EXAM**

Week 8 The Racial State

Oct. 13 FALL BREAK

Oct. 15 Nazi Racial Laws

Reading: Whitman, "Hitler's American Model"

Week 9 Deterioration of Jewish Life

Oct. 20 A Crescendo of Violence

Reading: Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, pps. 17-73

Oct. 22 The Noose Tightens

Reading: Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, pps. 145-172

Week 10 The "Final Solution"

Oct. 27 Deportation and Selection

Reading: Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, pps. 9-100

Oct. 29 The Drowned and the Saved

Reading: Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, pps. 101-187

Week 11 The Perpetrators

Nov. 3 No Class

Reading: Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pps. 1-96

Nov. 5 The Goldhagen Debate

Reading: Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pps. 97-223

Week 12 The Grand Alliance

Nov. 10 War in the West

Reading: J. Friedrich, *The Fire* (Excerpt)

Nov. 12 War in the East

Reading: Bell, “The Battle of Stalingrad”

Week 13 The Price of Victory, 1944-45

Nov. 17 The Pacific Theater

Reading: C. Weingartner, “Trophies of War”

Nov. 19 D-Day and the Battle of Normandy

ESSAY 2 DUE

THANKSGIVING BREAK (Nov. 21-29)

Week 14 End Stages

Dec. 1 Getting to V-E Day

Reading: Keegan, “The Siege of Berlin”

Dec. 3 Japanese Surrender

Reading: Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy”

Week 15 Aftermath

Dec. 8 Retribution and Reprisals

Reading: R. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane* (Excerpt)

Dec. 10 Final Assessments?

Reading: T. Judt, “The Legacy of the War”

Finals

Dec. 14

FINAL EXAM (9:00 – 11:00)