

# LESSON: Understanding Nazi Symbols

**GRADE LEVEL:** Adaptable for grades 7–12

**SUBJECT:** Multidisciplinary

**TIME REQUIRED:** Approximately 60–75 minutes (extensions available)

**This is a *foundational* lesson that introduces key concepts and information to students.**

## RATIONALE

By focusing on the history and meaning of the swastika, the lesson provides a model for teachers to use when examining the origins of symbols, terms, and ideology from Nazi Germany and Holocaust-era fascist movements that students are seeing in contemporary American culture, promoting critical historical thinking and analysis.

This lesson model can be utilized to encourage critical analysis of other symbols included in this [Glossary](#) highlighting the origins of neo-nazi and white supremacist terms and symbols.

**NOTE:** This lesson is not intended as a crisis response to antisemitic acts on campuses but rather an approach to understanding the historical significance of Nazi symbols seen today.

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why are symbols powerful and why do people use them?
- Why is the history of a symbol important?
- How can we examine modern-day symbols from a critical and informed viewpoint?

### EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

**At the end of this lesson, students understand:**

- What makes a symbol appealing and effective
- How the meaning of a symbol can change over time
- How historical context informs the meaning of a symbol
- How flags, labels, and symbols contribute to the rise of an ideology
- How the swastika is connected to Nazi ideology

### TEACHER PREPARATION

- Computers with internet access for seven groups OR
- Print articles for students
- [Student interactive sheet](#)
- Read [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) articles *Nazi Rule*, *Nuremberg Race Laws*, *Nazi Terror Begins*, *Victims of the Nazi Era*, *Nazi Propaganda*, *Nazi Racism*, *History of the Swastika*

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## MODIFICATIONS

[Word Cloud generator](#), [Padlet](#), Google Slides, or non-technology dependent means to visually record student responses are suggested, however, the lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications for recording student responses.

## LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

- Key definitions displayed on a [word wall](#)
- Offer audio version or [text-to-speech](#) options for research articles
- Articles are available in 12 languages, including Spanish

## PART ONE: SYMBOLS

### DEFINING SYMBOLS

1. Display the crying while laughing emoji, or *ask* students to draw/share their favorite emojis.

#### ASK THE STUDENTS

- What does the emoji mean?
- How do you know this? Does it always mean the same thing? What are the possible multiple meanings?
- What makes an emoji appealing and effective?
- What impacts how you interpret emojis?
- Do emojis have the same meaning in different contexts? Does your spoken language matter? Are the meanings of emojis universal?
- A [word cloud](#) or padlet can be used to show responses.

2. Summarize:
  - We all use symbols
  - They are all around us
  - Different people can interpret the same symbol in different ways

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3. Define emojis and symbols:
  - **Emojis** are a small digital *symbol* used to express an idea, emotion, etc.

Symbols have a variety of meanings:

SUMMARY OF FAITH/DOCTRINE	Star of David = Jewish faith
STANDS FOR OR SUGGESTS SOMETHING ELSE	 = WiFi
A VISIBLE SIGN OF SOMETHING INVISIBLE	lion = courage
OBJECT WITH CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE	bald eagle = America; patriotism

4. Discuss the different definitions of symbols. Which definition would cover the American flag? The peace sign? A commercial logo? Ask students to name four symbols and analyze what type of symbol it is by placing it on the chart on their [student interactive sheet](#).

## USING SYMBOLS

5. Why do people use symbols? What makes symbols appealing? Effective? Why are symbols so powerful?
6. Summarize:
  - Symbols help people understand their world and convey information
  - Symbols represent ideologies: a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy
  - Symbols can also represent what people *believe*
7. After considering how symbols are used, analyze how symbols can represent beliefs. What are beliefs? How are they different from facts and opinions? Share these definitions:
  - A **fact** is verifiable. We can determine whether it is true by researching the evidence.
  - An **opinion** is a judgment based on facts, an honest attempt to draw a reasonable conclusion from factual evidence.
  - Unlike an opinion, a **belief** is a conviction based on cultural or personal faith, morality, or values.
8. How do symbols represent facts, opinions, or beliefs? What are some of the beliefs represented in the symbols already discussed? Record answers.

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9. How do symbols represent membership in a particular group? Are there groups represented? Do you belong to groups with symbols?

## PART TWO: HISTORY OF THE SWASTIKA

1. Show [video clip](#) of Nazi defeat and swastika being destroyed. Who destroyed the swastika in the clip? Why? Have you seen swastikas before?
2. History of the swastika: teacher presents [key facts](#)
  - The swastika was long used as a symbol of well-being in ancient societies, including those in India, China, Africa, America, and Europe.
  - Adolf Hitler designed the Nazi flag in 1920. He combined the swastika with the three colors of the German Imperial flag (red, black, and white).
  - As a symbol, it became associated with the idea of a racially “pure” state. By the time the Nazis gained control of Germany, the connotations of the swastika had forever changed.
  - Nazi symbols, including the swastika flag, are banned in a number of countries today, including Germany.
3. Working in groups ([jigsaw activity](#)), students read USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia articles on [The Holocaust: A Learning Site for Students](#) and answer questions below. Students can also generate their own questions.
  - Group one: [Nazi Rule](#)
  - Group two: [The Nuremberg Race Laws](#)
  - Group three: [Nazi Terror Begins](#)
  - Group four: [Prisoners of the Camps](#)
  - Group five: [Nazi Propaganda](#)
  - Group six: [Nazi Racism](#)
  - Group seven: [History of the Swastika](#)

### Questions

- The swastika was the official symbol of Nazi Germany, representative of Nazi ideas. What were some Nazi ideas about government, society, and law?
- What rights did Nazi officials revoke during the Third Reich?
- How is the swastika connected to Nazi ideas and beliefs? Can it be separated from Nazi ideas? Explain answers with evidence from the articles.
- How does learning this historical context change how you view swastikas?

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4. After time to read and record, students report back to the class. This can be interactive using padlet or google classroom, or chart paper/markers.
5. Discuss with the class: The swastika was the official symbol of Nazi Germany, representative of Nazi ideas. What did Nazi Germany stand for? Refer back to the chart with the definition of symbols to frame this list that defines the swastika. Consider:
  - How does it stand for something else?
  - How is the swastika a summary of a doctrine?
  - What is it a visible sign of?
  - In light of its history, what is its cultural significance?
6. Play audio clip: [Helen Goldkind](#)

## Transcript for Helen Goldkind clip

Interviewer: You were talking about what sights or sounds or smells trigger your memories of the war and when you see a chimney that brings back memories. Anything else?

Helen: You know, it just depends, it just depends. A swastika. You know, when I see a swastika I feel I'm in danger. Its—it sounds crazy to other people because other people are not affected at all by a swastika. That swastika cannot hurt you. But what [it] represents to me is something else.

*Interview with Helen Goldkind, February 21, 2001*

7. Discuss as a class
  - How does seeing a swastika today impact Helen Goldkind, a Holocaust survivor?
  - Given this quotation from a Holocaust survivor, what are the possible consequences of displaying this symbol today? How might displaying this symbol impact people who view it?
8. Discuss the following. [Chalk Talk](#) is one option.
  - Why are symbols so powerful and why do people use them?
  - How has the meaning of the swastika changed?

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## CONCLUSION

### ASSESSMENT

In addition to the concluding writing assignment to construct an argument to support answers to the essential questions, student interactive sheets, group work, and class participation can be evaluated for understanding.

### EXTENSIONS

Students examine newspaper articles from the 1940s and today to explore how different communities have reacted to the display of swastikas:

- [newspapers.com/clip/36419612/the\\_swastika/](http://newspapers.com/clip/36419612/the_swastika/)
- [newspapers.com/clip/36418535/indians\\_denounce\\_swastika\\_10/](http://newspapers.com/clip/36418535/indians_denounce_swastika_10/)
- [newspapers.com/clip/36417593/indians\\_denounce\\_swastika/](http://newspapers.com/clip/36417593/indians_denounce_swastika/)
- [newspapers.com/clip/36417770/indians\\_denounce\\_swastika\\_3/](http://newspapers.com/clip/36417770/indians_denounce_swastika_3/)
- [newspapers.com/clip/36417960/indians\\_denounce\\_swastika](http://newspapers.com/clip/36417960/indians_denounce_swastika)

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Summary](#) of Helen Goldkind audio clip
- [Helen Goldkind biography](#)
- [Frank Meenik podcast](#)
- [USHMM Teaching about Propaganda](#) (includes analysis tools)
- [Origins of Neo-Nazi White Supremacist Terms and Symbols](#)
- [Fred Taucher Testimony](#)
- [On Being episode](#): The unlikely friendship that blossomed between Derek Black, the former white-power heir apparent, and Matthew Stevenson, an Orthodox Jew, after Stevenson invited Black to Shabbat dinner.