The Holocaust: assessing responsibility and conscience

Lesson Plan

By Paul Wieser and Syd Golston

Introduction

Students will internalize the pressures of society and the struggles of conscience that operated during the Holocaust and in contemporary situations.

Subjects

History, social studies, civics

Estimated Time

One class period (50 minutes)

Grade Level

9-12

Materials

- Assessing and Defining Responsibility
- Perpetrators (Amon Goeth)
- Collaborators (Citizens of Kovno, Lithuania)
- Bystanders (Regina Prudnikova)
- Resisters (The White Rose)
- Rescuers (Irena Gut Opdyke)
- List of Resistors

Objectives

Students will:

1. Evaluate in small groups the actions of 30 hypothetical citizens in Nazi Germany (handout: Assessing and Defining Responsibility).
2. In jigsaw groups of five, read and evaluate the actions of five representative categories of citizens.
   - Perpetrators (Amon Goeth)
   - Collaborators (Citizens of Kovno, Lithuania)
   - Bystanders (Regina Prudnikova)
3. Apply the observations they have developed to current situations and people.

Warm Up

Assessing Responsibility

1. Print out the Assessing Responsibility handout for each member of the class, along with sets of the five handouts for the number of groups.
2. Divide the class into five effective learning groups.
3. Read the Background information to the class, and review the objectives of the lesson. (5 minutes)
4. Tell students to assign culpability ratings as a group, arguing for why a person should be assigned greater or lesser responsibility. (15-20 minutes)

Background

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals.

As Nazi tyranny spread across Europe, the Germans and their collaborators persecuted and murdered millions of other people. Between two and three million Soviet prisoners of war were murdered or died of starvation, disease, neglect, or maltreatment. From the earliest years of the Nazi regime, German authorities persecuted homosexuals and others whose behavior did not match prescribed social norms. German police officials targeted thousands of political opponents (including Communists, Socialists, and trade unionists) and religious dissidents (such as Jehovah’s Witnesses). Many of these individuals died as a result of incarceration and maltreatment. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Encyclopedia of the Holocaust)
Main Activity

The Five Roles of the Holocaust

1. Remind the students that Nazi actions caused all people to choose among the five following courses of action. They could be Perpetrators, Collaborators, Bystanders (the largest group of all), Resisters, or Rescuers.
2. Each student will read one exemplar. (5 minutes)
3. Students will report out what they have read to their group (5 minutes).
4. In a full class discussion, students will address the questions posed in the handouts.

Homework

Resistors

Inform students that during the Holocaust there were many stories of those who bravely fought against the Nazi. Their assignment is to choose one person from their List of Resistors and research their background more deeply. They should present their findings on one page and include a photograph of the resistor with the text.

Extension Activities

Show the YouTube film of a replication of Stanley Milgram’s famed experiment on the power of authority. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcvSNg0HZwk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcvSNg0HZwk)

Assign Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*, for any students who wish to do in depth study of these phenomena.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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