

ASSESSING RESPONSIBILITY AND CONSCIENCE

Purpose

It's often hard to grasp how the horrors of the Holocaust could have happened, and also hard to decide who was responsible for those atrocities. This activity is meant to help you think about where responsibilities lie when these types of events occur. While it's shocking to think that this type of behavior would ever be repeated, there are still atrocities being committed in the world today. As thoughtful citizens of the world, you might one day have to decide who should be held responsible for acts or events such as these. This activity is meant to help you think through how responsibility should be assigned.

Process

Start by getting into groups as assigned by your teacher and taking out the Assessing and Defining Responsibility Statements worksheet. Each statement on the worksheet is hypothetical, but aligns to the experiences of different citizens in Nazi Germany. After reading the statements, your group needs to determine just how responsible each person was for what happened between 1933 and 1945. You may disagree on how much responsibility each person should have, but you have to come to a group consensus on each of the points. Once you're done, be prepared to share with your class the top three items you disagreed on and why.

One way to think about people who are involved in these types of events is to assess their responsibility by categorizing them in particular ways. One method of doing this is by using the following five categories:

1. Perpetrators
2. Collaborators
3. Bystanders
4. Resisters
5. Rescuers

Discuss each of these terms in small groups, and decide what each one means. Next, read the following paragraph about the Armenian Genocide, which you learned about in an earlier lesson. After you finish reading, identify a person or group that fits with each of the roles listed above for this genocide. Be prepared to discuss your ideas as a class so you can make sure you understand what each one means.

The Ottoman government issued orders to forcibly relocate Armenian communities from border areas and military fronts during World War I. The Armenian soldiers had their weapons taken away and were sent to labor camps. Following orders from government and military officials, Ottoman soldiers took these Armenians to remote locations and shot them. Some Turkish officials in Istanbul attempted to warn their Armenian friends of the danger of remaining in the Ottoman Empire. One official quietly told his friend, "A new storm is about to break upon the Armenians so I hope that you will save yourself." (Suny, 246) Some fled to Europe and the Americas with the help of friends, who offered safe places to stay and safe passage out of the country. As the violence ramped up, Ottoman soldiers forced whole families to march away from their homes leaving everything behind. Their houses and possessions were later sold to the highest bidder. Many Turks who had lived in the same communities with Armenians for generations were upset with this but were too fearful to do anything about it. Some Armenians rebelled against the slaughtering of their people by taking up arms to fight back. In Europe and America, organizations were formed to provide aid to the Armenians. Some ambassadors in Istanbul tried to convince the Turkish (Ottoman) officials to stop the violence. But nothing seemed to work. The American ambassador to Istanbul, Henry Morgenthau Sr., described the events as "a campaign of race extermination."

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Then, discuss the following questions as a class about each of the categories.

1. How do you think perpetrators were able to rise to such high levels of power during this time period?
2. Most of the guards in concentration camps did not start out as overly aggressive or mean. Why did they help collaborate to commit such atrocities?
3. Why did so many people stand by and allow these atrocities to happen?
4. What are the characteristics of a person who is willing to take a risk and resist?
5. What inspires rescuers to risk their lives and those of their families to help other people?

Once you've had a chance to discuss these roles as a class, go back and look at your original answers and see if you would revise any of your assigned responsibility levels based on the additional thought you've given. Be sure to share your reasoning with the class if you decided to make any changes.

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Name:

Date:

Directions: Imagine that you are a judge who has to determine who is responsible for the crimes committed during the Holocaust. For each statement, using a scale from 1 to 4, assess the responsibility level of each of the people.

Key: 1 – Not responsible 2 – Minimally responsible 3 – Responsible 4 – Very responsible

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| 1.____ One of Hitler's direct subordinates, such as Heinrich Himmler or Joseph Goebbels. | 16.____ A person who served as a concentration camp guard. |
| 2.____ A German who voluntarily joined Hitler's special elite, the SS. | 17.____ A person who pulled the lever to allow the gas into the chambers. |
| 3.____ A German who financially supported Hitler's rise to power and continued to support him in the news media. | 18.____ An engineer on the trains that went to the concentration camps. |
| 4.____ A judge who carried out Hitler's decrees for sterilization of the "mentally incompetent" and the internment of "traitors." | 19.____ A diplomat for the Nazi government. |
| 5.____ A German doctor who conducted experiments including the sterilization of Jews and those deemed "mentally incompetent." | 20.____ The American government, which limited emigration of Jews to the US in the 1930s. |
| 6.____ A worker in a plant making Zyklon B gas (the gas used in gas chambers). | 21.____ A person who claimed he doesn't like to get involved in politics and thus went about his business as quietly as he could in the Hitler regime. |
| 7.____ An industrialist who made enormous profits by producing Zyklon B gas. | 22.____ A soldier who carried out orders to rouse Jews from their homes for "evacuation and resettlement." |
| 8.____ The Pope who made no public statement against the Nazi policy. | 23.____ A German couple who took up residence in a home left empty by Jews deported to a concentration camp. |
| 9.____ A manufacturer who used concentration camp inmates as slave labor in his plants. | 24.____ The gentiles (non-Jews) who took over a store abandoned by Jews who had been taken away by Nazis. |
| 10.____ An American industrialist who helped arm Hitler in the 1930s. | 25.____ A German who refused all pleas to participate in hiding and smuggling of Jews. |
| 11.____ A person who voluntarily joined the Nazi party in the 1930s. | 26.____ A policeman who helped round up escaping Jews. |
| 12.____ A person who publicly agreed to take the Civil Servant Loyalty Oath (swearing eternal allegiance to Adolf Hitler) in 1934. | 27.____ A teacher who taught Nazi propaganda. |
| 13.____ A person who regularly and enthusiastically attended Hitler rallies. | 28.____ Children who joined the Hitler Youth. |
| 14.____ A person who complied with the law excluding Jews from economic and social life. | 29.____ Parents who sent or allowed their children to attend Hitler Youth meetings. |
| 15.____ A person who always respectfully gave the "Heil Hitler" salute. | 30.____ A Protestant clergyman who gave the Nazis lists of members of his congregation who were "non-Aryan." |