

Handout 4

Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility

Student Worksheet

Task 1

Write down examples of the questions you might ask, or pieces of information you might need, before holding someone responsible for wrongdoing. Try to provide at least three examples. (Note: It might help to think about a time when you were held responsible for something and why that was.)

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Task 2

Read the biography of Ellen Kerry Davis and then watch a short video where Ellen describes some of her experiences of being a Jewish child in Germany, in the 1930s (**Clip One**).

Biography of Ellen Kerry Davis.

Ellen Kerry Davis was born on 1 September 1929 in the town of Hoof in Kassel, Germany. She grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family and her father worked in the family’s business (a Jewish butcher). The family were barred from this business and from earning a living by the anti-Jewish laws of the Nazi government during the pre-war period. Ellen’s home was seized by the Nazis and the family was forced to live in one room in the town’s synagogue. In 1937, when Ellen was eight, a group of Nazi youths burnt down the synagogue at night and attacked the family with bricks. They were rescued and hidden by a local non-Jewish family. Ellen’s father was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp but subsequently escaped and joined the Pioneer Corps and later lived in Australia. On 30 June 1939, Ellen boarded the Kindertransport to the United Kingdom and was adopted by an elderly, childless couple in Swansea. In December 1941, Ellen’s mother and six siblings (the eldest was aged 11, the youngest two) were deported to Riga and were shot and killed on arrival by the Nazis (and/or their collaborators).

Then, working in pairs/groups, answer the following questions:

In her video testimony, Ellen describes the behaviour of her friends towards her after Hitler came to power. What do you think about this? What possible explanations might there be for such a change in behaviour?



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Task 2 continued

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In her video testimony, Ellen describes a conversation between her father and a family friend.

(a) What motives does the family friend have to explain his behaviour towards Ellen’s family?

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(b) In your view, is the family friend a bystander, or a perpetrator of the Holocaust – or neither? Explain your answer.

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What impact do you think the behaviour of their friends and neighbours had on Ellen and her family?

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Task 3

Now working in pairs, read **Handout 1**, which explains some key issues relating to the course of the Holocaust during World War 2.

One of you should read the first extract ‘Einsatzgruppen: An Overview’ and look at **Map 1**. The other should read the second extract ‘Final Solution: An Overview’ and look at **Map 2**. Then discuss together what you have learned from your reading.

Next, read the following brief **summary of the history of the ghetto in Riga, Latvia**.¹

During World War 2, the Nazis and other German occupation authorities concentrated Jewish populations in ghettos. Living conditions were miserable. Ghettos were often enclosed districts that isolated Jewish communities. The vast majority of ghetto inhabitants died from disease, starvation, shooting or deportation to killing centres.

In mid-August 1941, the Germans ordered the establishment of a ghetto in the south-eastern area of the city of Riga; this ghetto was sealed in October 1941, imprisoning some 30,000 Jews. In late November and early December of 1941, the Germans announced that they intended to settle the majority of ghetto inhabitants ‘further east’. On 30 November and 8-9 December, at least 25,000 Jews from the Riga ghetto were shot by German SS and police units and their Latvian auxiliaries in the nearby Rumbula Forest.

Now watch **Clip Two** of the video testimony from Ellen Kerry Davis.

Then, working in pairs, answer the following questions:

What do the maps in **Handout 1** tell you about the geography of the Holocaust?

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¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Holocaust Encyclopaedia: Riga* <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/riga>> [accessed 13 June 2022].



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Task 3 continued

What possible pressures and motivations may have affected local collaborators to persecute and murder innocent civilians?

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Find Germany and Riga on one of the maps in **Handout 1**.

(a) What types of non-military personnel (and what nationalities) are likely to have been involved in the deportation of Ellen’s mother and siblings?

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(b) Consider all the workers that participated in the movement of millions of people across Europe as part of the ‘Final Solution’. How should the actions of these individuals be evaluated and judged today?

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Do the sources in **Tasks 2** and **3** suggest that the Holocaust was a single, spontaneous event? If not, why not and what questions might this raise about the responsibility of those involved or those who witnessed events?

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Task 4

Now working in pairs, read **Handout 2**, which provides a brief introduction to the post-war trials of some of the perpetrators of Nazi crimes. One of you should read section A: **An Overview of Post War Trials**. The other should read section B: **Extracts from Subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings: The Einsatzgruppen Case (Case #9) – The United States of America v. Otto Ohlendorf et al.**

Then discuss together what you have learned from your reading. Working in your pairs/groups, answer the questions below.

Are there any circumstances where it is permissible or necessary for a person to disobey either an order from an authority figure or the law of a country?

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The judges at Nuremberg rejected the ‘following orders’ defence. From the case extracts in **Handout 2**, what evidence or arguments were relied on, in part, to reject this defence?

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Aside from punishing the perpetrators guilty of horrific crimes during the Holocaust, what might have been the purpose or impact of the post-war trials?

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Task 5

Write a newspaper article reporting on the outcome of the trial of Otto Ohlendorf. Try to include your reflections on the theme of responsibility, including, for example:

- Whether you think the trial outcome represented justice for those murdered by the *Einsatzgruppe D*.
- The individual and collective moral responsibility of others involved in Holocaust crimes.
- How societies and individuals can stand up for minorities and protect fundamental human rights.

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