

# Teachers' Notes

## Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility



### TOPIC

Wartime Persecution and Murder

Who is Responsible for the Holocaust?

### AGE GROUP

Years 7-11 (ages 12-16)

Progression Steps 4 and 5

### LENGTH

1 hour

### AREAS OF LEARNING AND EXPERIENCE

Health and Well-being

Humanities

Languages, Literacy and Communication

### DESCRIPTION

This activity provides an opportunity for students to consider the complex issue of responsibility in the context of the Nazi occupation of Europe during World War 2. Students will examine the video testimony of Ellen Kerry Davis, a Kindertransport refugee, as well as maps and other resources relating to key historical events (in particular, the mass shootings perpetrated by the *Einsatzgruppen*) and consider how the actions of ordinary people shaped the events of the Holocaust.

By exploring examples of active perpetration, collaboration, and complicity, the activity challenges the myth that a relatively small number of fanatical Nazis were solely responsible for the Holocaust. For example, an analysis of maps allows students to understand the complicity of non-German people across Europe in countries allied to or occupied by Nazi Germany. The activity also encourages students to consider the historical context and potential dilemmas that individuals faced during the Holocaust, allowing a more complex understanding of the circumstances, which led to the genocide of Europe's Jews.

Finally, students will be introduced to the Nuremberg trials following World War 2, allowing them to reflect on the 'following orders' defence and the scope for individual agency in defending human rights and democratic values during wartime – and in contemporary society.

For this activity to be properly understood, it should be taught after students have first studied the history of the evolution of the Holocaust through **Activity 5: The Legal Effect: How Laws can Persecute or Protect** and **Activity 6: Prejudice and Propaganda**.\*



\*A full list of activities can be found at the end of this document.

# Teachers' Notes

## Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility

### LEARNING AIMS

As a result of completing this activity, students will:

- Reflect on the concept of responsibility.
- Understand that responsibility for the Holocaust extended far wider than simply 'Hitler and the Nazis' and consider some of the roles of perpetrators and collaborators throughout Europe (in particular, local police and the *Einsatzgruppen*).
- Consider some of the ways that ordinary people became complicit in mass murder and explore a range of possible motivations for complicity in the genocide.
- Have an introduction to the Nuremberg Trials and consider the responsibility of soldiers and police officers who perpetrated the killings, recognising that there is no evidence of severe reprisals against those who refused to participate.
- Reflect on the human impact of the Holocaust and learn about the connection to Wales through the video testimony of a Kindertransport refugee.
- Reflect on the individual's responsibility as a citizen in the modern world.

### EQUIPMENT NEEDED

Whiteboard/markers, projector, computer to listen to testimony.

### Consider

Inform students that they are going to consider and discuss the idea of 'responsibility' in the context of the Nazi occupation of Europe during World War 2.

On the board, draw a mind map and ask the class for words that automatically come to mind when thinking about the general concept of responsibility. You may want to ask the students questions such as:

- What does 'being responsible' for something mean? For example, being accountable or blamed for something or taking responsibility for something.
- Is there anything for which you are responsible in your life? What is this?
- Are there different types of responsibility (e.g., criminal, moral, civil, employment, family etc)?
- Is responsibility based on your actions? Or can it also be based on inaction?



# Teachers' Notes

## Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility

### Consider continued

On the **student worksheet**, ask the students to write down examples of the questions they might ask, or pieces of information they might need, before holding someone responsible for wrongdoing. Encourage students to provide at least three examples (**Task 1**). You could provide examples of wrongdoing to help the students with this exercise, e.g., theft or assault. Students could also think of a time when they were held responsible for something.

The aim here is to encourage students to think generally about the context and motives that can influence a person's decision-making. Students might refer to a broad range of factors that could drive a particular decision, for example, the wrongdoer's intention, age, background, provocation, self-defence, family pressure, or economic situation and whether they were actively, indirectly, or passively involved in the wrongdoing. This exercise is not meant to condone wrongdoing. Rather, it is designed to help provide a more nuanced understanding of responsibility, consider the context of decisions, and move away from simplistic stereotypes.

### Collect

Ask the students to read the **biography of Ellen Kerry Davis** and watch a **short video**, where Ellen describes some of her experiences of being a Jewish child in Hoof in Kassel, Germany, in the 1930s (**Clip One**).

Then, working in groups/pairs, ask the students to answer the questions on the **student worksheet (Task 2)**.

Encourage the students to consider the varying motives that might have influenced the children's behaviour towards Ellen – such as longstanding antisemitism, peer pressure, and conforming to Nazi racist social and cultural norms. Pressures to defer to authority and family, or fear may have also influenced behaviour. However, factors such as fear and intimidation by Nazi officials should not be overstated. The story of the policeman and friend of Ellen's family is an example of how, for many Germans, their livelihoods and the well-being of their families were simply a much higher priority than showing solidarity for Jewish people. The testimony reveals the mixed, human motives at play in Germany in the 1930s, which arguably complicate any definitive categorisation of 'perpetrator' and 'bystander' in this example. In any event, Nazi policies, combined with the responses of ordinary Germans culminated in the near-total isolation of Jews from German society by late 1938, inciting hatred and violence against Jews or cultivating indifference to it.

# Teachers' Notes

## Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility

### Collect continued

Next, ask students to work in pairs to read and discuss **Handout 1**, which explains some key issues relating to the course of the Holocaust during World War 2. Students should then watch **Clip Two** of the video testimony from Ellen Kerry Davis and read the summary on the worksheet relating to the ghetto in Riga, Latvia.

Then, working in pairs, ask the students to answer the questions on the student worksheet (**Task 3**).

From the sources in Task 3, encourage students to consider:

- The range of behaviours and actions necessary to carry out the Holocaust was varied and extensive. Such an unprecedented genocide did not simply just happen on its own but it required the active involvement of hundreds of thousands of people in Germany and across Axis-controlled Europe.
- Seemingly 'innocent' actions, professional duties, and other seemingly inconspicuous acts had consequences even if the participants were 'just doing their job' or 'simply minding their own business'.
- These included civil servants/workers who maintained the files of identification documents that registered a person's Jewish 'race' and those who processed property seized from Jews, including homes and belongings left behind following their 'resettlement' into occupied territories. It also included railway or other transportation employees, and managers or participants in roundups and deportations.
- The Holocaust was a series of events – a process over a long period of time – rather than a spontaneous or inevitable event. Jews were dehumanised, deprived of rights, became subject to violence and were socially and physically isolated from the rest of the population. Many people were passive or indifferent to this process, long before the mass killings of the 'Final Solution'.
- Often, very human motives (e.g., fear, peer pressure, or greed) led people to act as they did. These motives may have been mixed, with conflicting emotions or priorities over time, reluctant choices, wedded to self-denial and deception. To this end, it is important not to oversimplify the different roles of perpetrator, bystander, or collaborator or to use caricatures of 'good' and 'evil' as this will not provide a sufficient explanation for the Holocaust.
- While the lines between roles such as 'perpetrator' and 'bystander' were often blurred, individuals had a responsibility for their own actions, decisions, and omissions. We can assume that the course of the Holocaust would have been profoundly different if more ordinary people had challenged the prevailing forces at the time and respected the fundamental equality of all human beings.



# Teachers' Notes

## Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility

### Collect continued

Next, ask students to work in pairs to read and discuss **Handout 2**, which provides a brief introduction to the post-war trials of some of the perpetrators of Nazi crimes.

Then, working in pairs, ask the students to answer the questions on the student worksheet (**Task 4**).

From the sources in Task 4, encourage students to consider:

- The judges at Nuremberg rejected the ‘following orders’ defence. They said that when an individual follows an order that is illegal under international law, he is responsible for that choice, except under certain circumstances, for example, if a person obeyed an illegal order to avoid physical harm, torture, or death.
- Historians agree that the Nazis did not force individuals to kill civilians. For example, the case report extracts in **Handout 2** provide evidence that members of the *Einsatzgruppen* had not been threatened with physical harm if they did not murder their victims. Those who refused to participate were given other assignments or transferred.
- Of course, the aim of the trials was to provide some form of justice to its victims. However, most of the individuals who carried out the devastating atrocities of the Holocaust were never brought to justice.
- The Allied governments also intended to use the trials to educate German civilians about the true extent of Nazi atrocities and convince German citizens of their collective responsibility for their government’s crimes. This last objective was crucial to the Allied plan to discredit Nazism and ‘denazify’ Germany.
- The trials also provided irrefutable documentation of Nazi crimes. During the trials, Allied prosecutors submitted thousands of German documents proving that the Nazi regime had carried out the systematic persecution and destruction of the Jewish people. This evidence (including photographs, film and eyewitness testimonies) remains as a lasting refutation of those who attempt to deny the Holocaust.
- The trials of the perpetrators of Nazi crimes set legal precedents and helped develop the principles of international law – most notably that individuals can be held criminally responsible not only for committing war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide but also for assisting and facilitating the commission of such crimes. This in turn aimed to protect the peace and security of all humanity.

# Teachers' Notes

## Activity 9: Rethinking Responsibility

### Construct

Ask the students to write a newspaper article reporting on the outcome of the trial of Otto Ohlendorf (**Task 5**). Encourage the students to include their reflections on:

- Whether this outcome represented justice for those murdered by the *Einsatzgruppe D*.
- The individual and collective moral responsibility of others involved (directly or indirectly) in Holocaust crimes – including passive or indifferent witnesses.
- How societies and individuals can strengthen the willingness to stand up for others and protect fundamental human rights (e.g., by engaging in democratic processes and institutions).

### Communicate

Ask students to read an article written by another student. Then ask them to discuss the themes identified in the articles they have read and whether these are the same as or different from those in their own article.

### Appendices

1. Handout 1: Issues relating to the course of the Holocaust during World War 2.
2. Handout 2: Post war trials.
3. Handout 3: Video transcriptions.
4. Handout 4: Student Worksheet.

### List of Activities

- Activity 1: Kindertransport and Child Refugees in Wales: Part 1 - Driving Forces.  
Activity 2: Kindertransport and Child Refugees in Wales: Part 2 - The Journey.  
Activity 3: Kindertransport and Child Refugees in Wales: Part 3 - Arrival in Wales.  
Activity 4: Jewish Life in Pre-War Europe – Identity, Diversity and Commonality.  
Activity 5: The Legal Effect: How Laws can Persecute or Protect.  
Activity 6: Prejudice and Propaganda.  
Activity 7: Britain and the Legacy of Loss - Part 1.  
Activity 8: Britain and the Legacy of Loss - Part 2.  
Activity 9: Re-thinking Responsibility.  
Activity 10: Resistance and Remembrance.





# Teachers' Notes

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### Cover Image

Einsatzgruppen massacres in eastern Europe, June 1941-November 1942. Image: [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#).



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