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DOCUMENT-BASED ACTIVITIES ON THE HOLOCAUST: TEACHER INTRODUCTION

Description:

This unit covers the Holocaust from 1939 to 1945. Lessons 1 and 5 (on the Wannsee Conference and the Nuremberg trials, respectively) look at some of the legal issues related to the Holocaust. The other three lessons (on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, life in concentration camps, and liberators/righteous gentiles) focus more on the human toll. Each lesson is designed to last one or two days.

Unit objectives:

Knowledge: students will

- understand the horrible conditions Jews faced during the Holocaust
- speculate on the motivations of those people who risked their lives to save Jews
- locate and explain examples of bravery during the Holocaust
- analyze how people could be so calculating and impersonal in dealing with human life
- assess how Nazi leaders were dealt with after the war ended

Skills:

- analyze, evaluate, and interpret primary source documents
- communicate effectively the results of their analysis in discussion and written argument
- use relevant and adequate evidence to draw conclusions

Prior Knowledge Required:

Students should have some understanding of Hitler's rise to power, the gradual restrictions placed on Jews in Germany during the 1930s, Nazi ideology and the conditions that allowed it to flourish during the 1930s, and the major events of World War II.

Lesson Format:

Each lesson consists of two parts: a teacher's page and a student handout or worksheet. The teacher's page contains an overview, objectives, materials (including Web addresses), directions, discussion questions, and an extension activity. Each student handout contains an introduction, directions, Web addresses, and questions to be answered about the source. The culminating activity asks students to tie together the various themes explored in the unit, using evidence from primary sources to support their argument.

Assessment:

As students respond to questions, teachers will be able to assess their understanding of the material the students are using. Teachers may wish to grade the final essay either with a rubric or with normal letter grades. Suggested rubrics are included in the Appendix.

Additional Sources:

The Appendix contains answer keys, an annotated list of Web sites on the Holocaust, rubrics, and supplementary materials available from www.socialstudies.com.

OVERVIEW: THE HOLOCAUST, 1939–1945

After World War I, Germany struggled under the harsh conditions of the Versailles Treaty. In addition to the dismantling of German war industries, Germany had to pay heavy reparations to the Allies. The country had also been ravaged by years of war. As a result, Germany didn't enjoy the same prosperity other countries were experiencing during the boom decade of the 1920s. Unemployment rose to sky-high levels, the economy was suffering, and hyperinflation caused the German Mark to become nearly worthless.

After the war, Germany became a democracy led by a government that came to be known as the Weimar Republic. By the time worldwide depression hit in the 1930s, many Germans had become disillusioned with the Weimar leaders, viewing them as ineffective and unwilling to stand up to other countries in order to mitigate the burden the Versailles Treaty had placed on Germany. Meanwhile, the Nazi Party (formed soon after the war) grew tremendously in the years 1928–1932. The Nazis promised to restore German pride, to create thousands of new jobs, and to help Germany recover what many of its citizens believed was its rightful place as a world leader. In addition, the Nazi themes of anti-semitism and a “master race” struck a chord with many Germans, who unfairly blamed the Jews for the country's economic ills.

In 1932 the Nazi Party won more than a third of the seats in the Reichstag (the German parliament), and in 1933, a coalition of politicians (many of whom hoped to benefit from the growing popular support for the Nazis) made Hitler chancellor of Germany. Later that year, a mysterious fire (which many believe was set by the Nazis) burned the Reichstag to the ground. Hitler went to the German people and asked for special powers to deal with this so-called “emergency.” These powers were granted, and Hitler quickly transformed the country into a dictatorship. Hitler's goal of creating a “Master Race” now had the full machinery of the German government behind it. The Gestapo (the Nazi secret police) began to intern not just Jews, but also other non-Aryans as well as anyone who opposed the Nazis. The Jewish people, who had been a vibrant part of German society, saw their rights and freedoms gradually restricted. The

Nuremberg Laws of 1935 deprived German Jews of legal citizenship and effectively established a legal basis for discrimination against them. Then in November of 1938, after a Nazi diplomat had been assassinated in France by a Polish Jew, the Nazis incited mob violence against German Jews. Kristallnacht, or “the night of breaking glass,” saw hundreds of Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues destroyed; in addition, tens of thousands of Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Afterwards, the Nazi government passed a series of even more restrictive anti-semitic laws that effectively began to remove Jews from the German society and economy.

Germany’s early successes in World War II emboldened the Nazis to step up their plans to eliminate the Jews. In 1942, ranking Nazi officials met in Berlin in what has come to be known as the Wannsee Conference. The conference laid out the logistics for the “final solution”: the mass murder of millions of Jews throughout Europe. Part of the plan involved taking Jews not already in concentration camps and rounding them up into “ghettoes” within cities, holding them there until the Nazis were ready to deport them east to the death camps. The largest of these enclaves was the Warsaw Ghetto in Nazi-occupied Poland. Nearly half a million Jews lived there in squalid conditions, and many died of starvation and disease. In the summer of 1942, the Nazis began the “liquidation” of the Ghetto with a two-month spurt in which they deported over half the Ghetto’s population to the Treblinka death camp. Eventually, word of what was happening to the deportees reached those who still remained in the Ghetto. Young men organized in order to fight the deportations, and, using smuggled weapons, began armed resistance against the Nazis in January, 1943, initially meeting with a measure of success. However, on April 19th, 1943, German troops entered the ghetto in order to deport all remaining residents. Against all odds, the rebels held out for nearly a month, but the uprising was ultimately put down four weeks later on May 16th.

Photographs, films, and first-person recollections offer horrific evidence of the living conditions in the death camps. Those who managed to avoid being killed were forced to endure extreme filth, deprivation, starvation, and disease. As Allied troops began to liberate the camps they were shocked at the pitiable state in which they found most of the prisoners. Evidence from the death camps proved exceedingly important in

the postwar Nuremberg trials, in which many high-ranking German leaders were charged with war crimes and “crimes against humanity” for their actions during the war. The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg eventually handed down verdicts of “guilty” against many of the defendants—several of whom were sentenced to death.

The repercussions of the Holocaust continue to this day, from recent cases of genocide, to neo-Nazis who try to claim the Holocaust never took place, to themes explored in contemporary fiction, film, television, and art. The Holocaust also remains a strong presence in the public consciousness because of the efforts of dedicated individuals and organizations to keep the Holocaust from fading from memory, so that this horrible episode in history will not repeat itself. Many survivors, who still bear the emotional and physical scars of the ordeals they suffered during the Holocaust, eventually found the courage to come forward and tell their stories. It is their hope and lifelong goal that the events of the Holocaust shall never occur again.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Teacher Page

Overview:

The 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the most famous instance of Jewish resistance to the Nazis. It was remarkable not only for the courage of those who resisted, but also because of the fact that the rebels—in spite of being undernourished, outnumbered, and outgunned—managed to hold off the German army for nearly a month. This lesson uses a photograph, an excerpt from an official report to London on the revolt, and a famous letter written by Mordecai Anielewicz, the leader of the resistance.

Objectives:

Students will:

- understand what life was like in the Warsaw Ghetto
- speculate why the resisters held out in the face of overwhelming odds
- assess the significance of the uprising, both at the time it took place, and historically

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

- <http://motlc.wiesenthal.org/exhibits/dignitydefiance/13.html>
This site contains Mordecai Anielewicz's letter.
- <http://remember.org/courage/photo2.html>
This site contains a photo of a man lying dead in a street in the Warsaw Ghetto, and also links to additional information.
- http://www.yad-vashem.org.il/about_holocaust/documents/part2/doc146.html
This site has an excerpt from an official report to London on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Strategies:

Begin by giving a dictionary definition of the word “ghetto,” then discuss with students how the word “ghetto” is most often used today. Have students describe how they perceive the conditions would be in a ghetto today.

Wrap-Up:

Discuss the following questions:

1. Even though the rebels were all ultimately killed or captured, how might the uprising still be considered a success?
2. Ask the class to name some modern day “ghettoes,” then have them give their opinions on whether ghettoes are a temporary phenomenon, or an inevitable part of life.

Extension Activity:

Students should speculate about how they would respond if they were in an environment similar to that of the Warsaw Ghetto. What would they do? How would they react to oppressive conditions? How would they try to survive? Would they revolt?

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Student Worksheet

Introduction:

Part of the “final solution” involved confining Jews to ghettos until the Nazis were ready to deport them to concentration camps. The Warsaw Ghetto comprised the old Jewish section of the Polish capital; by mid-1942, over 500,000 people lived there in crowded, dirty conditions. At this point, the Nazis began deporting thousands of Jews every day to the Treblinka death camp. Eventually, word of what was happening to the deportees reached those who still remained in the Ghetto. A group of young men led by 23-year-old Mordecai Anielewicz organized in order to fight the deportations, and, using smuggled weapons, began armed resistance against the Nazis in January, 1943, initially meeting with a measure of success. However, on April 19th, 1943, German troops entered the ghetto in order to deport all remaining residents. Against all odds, the rebels held out for nearly a month, but the uprising was ultimately put down four weeks later on May 16th.

Directions:

View the photo at <http://remember.org/courage/photo2.html> (Feel free to click on "Excerpts from Chapter 6" for additional information.)

Answer the following questions:

1. Looking at the picture and the caption, describe your perceptions of living conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto.
2. Why do you think people ignored the dead man in the street? What does this suggest had happened to those inside the Ghetto?
3. Give examples of a similar situation in today's world where people seemingly ignore horrifying events.

Mordecai Anielewicz's Last Letter

Go to <http://motlc.wiesenthal.org/exhibits/dignitydefiance/13.html> and answer the following questions:

4. Why does the author feel that “great things are happening, that what we have undertaken is of tremendous significance”?

5. At one point Anielewicz says, “It is impossible to describe the conditions under which the Jews of the ghetto are living today. Only a few will survive. All others will perish sooner or later. Their fate is sealed.” Why did the rebels continue to fight if they knew that most of them were almost certainly going to die?

6. Explain the meaning of the following quotation: “Do you remember, short-range weapons are of no use to us. We use such weapons only rarely. What we need urgently: grenades, rifles, machine-guns and explosives.”

7. Do you feel the author died a martyr? Explain.

Extract from a Report by the “Delegatura” to London on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt

Go to http://www.yad-vashem.org.il/about_holocaust/documents/part2/doc146.html and answer the following questions:

8. In the last document, Anielewicz claimed that “our losses of people were very small.” In this document, the author states, “It is quite clear that in this battle the Jewish side is also suffering heavy losses.” What would account for the difference of opinion? How could you verify which account is more factual?

9. How do you think the events of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising affected German morale? How do you think these events affected Jewish morale?