



LESSON PLAN: Liberation of the Nazi Camps

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students examine the eyewitness accounts of liberators and explore their critical role in making the world aware of Nazi atrocities. They analyze a letter written by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, in which he bears witness to the brutality. Students also view visual history testimony of Black and Japanese American liberators, and reflect on their experiences in the context of the segregation and racism they faced at home.

PART 1: WHAT SHOCKING REALITIES DID THE LIBERATION OF NAZI CAMPS REVEAL TO THE WORLD?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

1

The handout *Liberator Reflections* is projected or distributed. As a class or in pairs, students read the quotes and discuss the following questions¹:

- What do the quotes tell you about the soldiers' awareness of what had happened to the Jewish people?
- Are you surprised that the soldiers had not been told about the concentration and death camps? Why?

2

Students watch the Video Toolbox, *Liberators and Survivors: The First Moments*, up to 5:15. After viewing, they journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:

- The video notes that soldiers “stumbled onto camps, often accidentally.” Why do you think they were unaware of the existence of concentration and extermination camps?

¹ About Liberation: As the Allies retook control of lands that had been occupied by the Germans, they came across many Nazi camps. In some instances, the Nazis had tried to destroy all evidence of the camps in order to conceal from the world what had happened there. In other cases, only the buildings remained as the Nazis had sent the prisoners elsewhere, often on death marches.

However, in many camps, the Allied soldiers found hundreds or even thousands of emaciated survivors living in horrific conditions, many of whom were dying of malnourishment and disease.

The liberation of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps began in Eastern Europe when Soviet troops reached Majdanek in July 1944. Soon they found many other camp sites, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, which they liberated on January 27, 1945. This day has been chosen to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The British and American troops who were approaching from the west did not reach the concentration camps of Germany until the spring of 1945. What they found shocked and surprised them. They encountered tens of thousands on the verge of death, as well as piles upon piles of corpses. Although unprepared, the Allied liberators tried to help the survivors; however, many still died in the weeks after liberation.

- How were the atrocities encountered by liberators different from the destruction caused by conventional warfare that they had experienced?
- What new category of crime was eventually recognized to reflect what had happened to the Jewish people? How was this term different from any prior term to describe crimes of war?
- What is the importance of the liberators' firsthand, eyewitness accounts of Nazi mass atrocities?
- What was your reaction to Leon Bass's account of seeing the clothing of little children, but never seeing a child? What other elements of the liberators' testimonies most affected you? Why?
- What do you think it meant to Harry Mogan – a Jewish refugee from Nazi persecution himself – to be a part of the liberation of Jewish survivors? What different emotions do you think he might have experienced?

3 The following handout is distributed: **Letter from Eisenhower to Marshall, April 15, 1945**. Individually or in pairs, students analyze the excerpt, annotating it in response to the question, “What was the importance of liberators as eyewitnesses?” One or more of the “Think about It” questions are assigned for students to respond to via discussion or writing. The class then gathers to consider these questions and share insights gained from the reading².

PART 2: WHAT WERE THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK AND JAPANESE LIBERATORS?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

4 Students watch testimony clips of Black and Japanese American liberators and consider their experiences in the context of the discrimination they faced at home and in the armed forces: **Paul Parks (bio)**, **Leon Bass (bio)**, and **Katsugo Miho (bio)**. As they watch the clips, students take notes on the **Testimony Reflections** handout³.

5 After viewing the testimony clips, students journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions⁴:

EXPERIENCES OF LIBERATION

- Leon describes an interaction with an emaciated survivor as follows: “He looked up at me, and he said nothing, nor did I.” Why do you think the two men were silent in this moment?
- What do you think was going through the mind of the survivor who “hit the ground and prayed” when he learned that Paul Parks was American? What might have been going through Paul’s mind in that moment?

² The Video Toolbox (from 5:15-7:00) contains an overview of Eisenhower’s experiences at Ohrdruf and the impact of his letters and testimony. The video (15:26 overall) offers a variety of other liberator and survivor perspectives that can help students to deepen their understanding of the period of liberation.

³ It is often beneficial for students to watch each clip twice, completing the Testimony Reflections handout during the second viewing.

⁴ By considering the viewpoints of Black and Japanese American liberators, students can appreciate how their experiences of racism at home and in the U.S. military informed their feelings about liberation. The perspectives of these liberators were complex. They were angry and resentful about fighting for freedom abroad while being denied basic freedoms at home. At the same time, they were able to empathize with Holocaust victims and feel the importance of defending justice in unique ways. As students delve into the complexities of liberators' feelings, they should avoid making direct comparisons between racism in the U.S. -- such as Jim Crow segregation and Japanese internment camps -- and the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazis. These systems of oppression were markedly different and there is no value in measuring one against the other.

- What was your reaction to Katsugo Miho’s memory of the individual who died at the moment of liberation?
- What other images or descriptions most stand out from these liberators’ accounts? Why do they stay with you?

EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION

- How did Leon feel initially about fighting in WWII? What inner conflict did he experience?
- How do you think the anger Leon carried with him throughout his years as a soldier affected him?
- What was Katsugo’s reaction to being called a “Jap”? Why didn’t he blame the white soldiers for using such slurs?
- How did the Japanese American soldiers stand up against bigotry at the PX (military store)? How did this impact the feeling in their unit?

EXPERIENCES OF CONNECTION AND TRANSFORMATION

- How do you interpret Paul’s comment, “I guess I’m fighting for the right to fight when I get back home”?
- How did Leon’s anger transform as a result of his time at Buchenwald? How did the experience change him?
- What connection did Paul, Leon, and Katsugo feel with the survivors that may have been different from what most white liberators were feeling?

6

As a summative task, students imagine they are one of the politicians or journalists sent to witness the liberated camps at the urging of Eisenhower. They create a list of 3-5 observations that they would include in a report or article for the American public. The list should contain not just physical conditions, but also key understandings about what took place.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 60 MINUTES