



LIBERATION

“We are free, but how will we live our lives without our families?”

—ANTON MASON, *JEWISH SURVIVOR*

PREPARING TO TEACH THIS UNIT

Below is information to keep in mind when teaching the content in this unit. This material is intended to help teachers consider the complexities of teaching about survivors and liberators and to deliver accurate and sensitive instruction.

- 1** On May 8, 1945, Nazi Germany’s unconditional surrender became official, and Europe was liberated from Nazi rule. The offensives that ultimately defeated the German forces began on the Eastern Front in March 1944 and on the Western Front with D-Day in June 1944; these offensives lasted about one year. As the war was nearing its end, Europe was in complete chaos. Many cities, towns, and villages had been destroyed completely or in part. Multitudes had fled in the face of the fighting, including when possible, those persecuted by the Germans and their partners.
- 2** At the end of World War II, Allied troops moving across Europe encountered forced labor camps, concentration camps, extermination camps, and mass graves. Most knew little or nothing about these camps until they came upon them. While liberation of the camps was not the primary objective of the Allies, troops did free prisoners, provided food and medical care when possible, and collected evidence for war crimes trials.
- 3** Upon liberation, Allied troops began to understand that the Nazis had committed atrocities against civilians on an unimaginable scale and that these atrocities were very different from deaths caused by conventional warfare. A new category of crime had to be recognized to describe the intentional attempt to destroy a people. The United Nations would recognize the term “genocide” in 1948 and declare it an international crime. In 1945, soldiers were the very first witnesses to the unprecedented case of genocide that would become known as the “Holocaust.” Liberator testimonies and eyewitness accounts were critically important in making the world aware of what had happened and defending against attempts at denial and distortion. Their encounters with survivors give us an essential and human perspective on the difference between military war and genocide.
- 4** The Allies did not anticipate the enormity of the human challenge that liberation would pose. Essentially the Soviet forces liberated camp inmates and after some initial aid, left them on their own. Over time, the Western Allies set up agencies and a system of displaced persons’ camps (DP camps) in which liberated prisoners and the multitudes of displaced people—those who had lost their homes and become refugees—were given shelter and were helped. Due to extreme illness and deprivation, ongoing antisemitic violence, barriers to immigration and repatriation, and other factors, more than 250,000 Jewish displaced persons lived in camps and other facilities from 1945-1952.

5 The personal condition of most Holocaust survivors was appalling after all they had endured. Individuals were in need of physical and emotional rehabilitation. It was only after they became stronger that they began to confront the loss of their families and former lives, and began thinking about how to build new lives. This entailed many decisions about where to go and what to do. A primary concern was to find surviving family members. On their own or with the help of organizations like the Red Cross and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), they embarked on their searches. Along with the occupation authorities, these organizations also sought to aid them on a daily basis and to ensure their physical well-being. A common tendency among survivors was that many married and soon thereafter had children. The remnants of European Jewry—hundreds of thousands of broken men and women who had been uprooted from their homes and their former lives—began the long and difficult process of rehabilitating themselves and rebuilding their lives. The period following liberation is often referred to as “Return to Life” or “Returning to Life.”

ABOUT THIS UNIT

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this unit is to provide students with an understanding of the immense physical and emotional challenges faced by survivors during the period of liberation. The lessons explore these realities and the incredible will to live of the Jewish people as they embraced a “return to life.” The unit also examines the role of the liberators following the defeat of the Nazis at the end of World War II.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why was liberation not simply a “happy ending to a sad story”?
- What did it mean for Jewish survivors to “return to life” after the Holocaust?
- How was liberation an ongoing process for the survivors rather than a short-term event?
- In the aftermath of liberation, how did the world community come to understand and define genocide?

OBJECTIVES

Students will

- Describe the complex emotional ramifications of liberation for Jews.
- Describe the responses Allied soldiers had to liberating concentration camps, and the ways in which they acted as witnesses to genocide.
- Identify the difficulties and immediate needs of survivors after liberation.
- Investigate the purpose of displaced persons’ camps and what life was like for people living in these camps.
- Explore how antisemitism in Europe after WWII impeded the efforts of Jewish people to rebuild their lives.
- Discuss the perspectives of U.S. liberators who fought for freedom abroad and experienced discrimination at home.
- Interpret visual history testimony and other primary source materials to deepen their understanding of the experiences of survivors and liberators.