



LESSON PLAN: War Crimes Trials

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students investigate the concept of justice through multiple perspectives. They examine justice through a legal lens in the postwar criminal trials of Nazi perpetrators such as Rudolf Hoess and whether the legal system can adequately provide justice to the victims of the Holocaust. Through primary sources and video testimony, students recognize the complexity and work that is required for legal mechanisms to function and perhaps achieve justice. Lastly, students ponder the effects of the postwar trials on the victims and in larger society.

1 A study of the Holocaust brings more questions than answers. Students participate in a brainstorm to explore the introspective and transformative questions the Holocaust asks, using one or more of these questions¹:

- a) How was it possible to go forward after the Holocaust?
- b) How did individuals cope with the past while seeking new beginnings in light of the Holocaust?
- c) How did nations and society at large come to terms with their respective roles in the Holocaust?

2 Students create a concept map with their ideas of justice on chart paper. Their work is posted on the classroom wall for the entirety of this unit. Students consider these leading questions to inspire critical thinking:

- a) What is justice, including who is justice for: the dead, the survivors, society?
- b) What is required to achieve justice, including punishment?
- c) Can justice ever be meted out for the crimes of the Holocaust?
- d) Is there a statute of limitations for when justice can be served? Should trials of perpetrators of the Holocaust be continuing today?

3 Students review the *War Crimes Trials* handout and answer the questions that follow. [Optional: This can be assigned for homework beforehand or students read and discuss the questions in small groups.]

4 Students watch the testimony of **Edith Coliver (bio)** and discuss the following questions:

- a) Her father directed her to “Go to do justice, be just.” What does this mean? Why is it necessary for those seeking justice to do so in a just manner?
- b) How does Edith’s small contributions to the Nuremberg Trials as an interpreter impart justice on the Nazi perpetrators? What does Edith’s contributions teach you about justice?
- c) Do you think justice was achieved by the deaths of Hitler, Goebbels, and other Nazis who committed suicide rather than face trials?

¹ Teachers should emphasize that some survivors never managed to recover from the trauma. Most managed to build a new life while carrying the scars with them. These are the people we contemplate here.

- 5** The **Rudolf Hoess** handout is distributed and students read it together as a whole group. Students discuss some or all of the following questions, citing textual evidence to support their answers²:
- In the handout there are two different sources. What are they? How are the two sources different? Might those differences influence what Hoess says in each? If so, how?
 - What was Hoess’s role in the “Final Solution”?
 - How did Hoess describe the process of gassing at Auschwitz? Based on his choice of words, how would you characterize his tone as he described this process? What does this suggest about his attitude toward his crimes?
 - What was Hoess’s explanation for why he went through with the murders, despite admitting to feeling sympathy for the victims?
 - Does Hoess express any moral reservations about the murder of the Jews? Why does he say that he thinks they were wrong? What does that say about his beliefs?
 - In your opinion, what was the objective of the postwar criminal trials? After reading Hoess’s testimony, do you think these aims were achieved? Explain your response.

- 6** Students consider the perspective of the victims and whether justice can ever truly be delivered. Students read **Draft of a Reparations Agreement** by Dan Pagis. In pairs or small groups, students discuss the following questions:
- Describe the tone of the poem. How does this poem convey the emotions of the victims who sought justice for the crimes perpetrated against them?
 - The poem reads, “look, you will have your lives back, sit in the living room, read the evening paper. Here you are. Nothing is too late.” Consider: Is this too late? Is this true? Can the payment of reparations allow victims to return to normal lives? What does not go back to normal for survivors?
 - How does Pagis utilize references to the body to convey the inability of survivors to return to what life was like before the Holocaust? Use textual evidence to support your answer.
 - List the images present in the poem. Juxtapose those images with the title: “Draft of a Reparations Agreement.” Analyze the relationship between these two entities. Can justice for the Holocaust ever truly be achieved?

- 7** Students are reminded of the Definition of Genocide that was codified in 1948 by the United Nations in response to the Holocaust. Students learn that several international laws, courts, and legal precedents have been established since the Nuremberg Trials. Next, Students view the testimony of **Belle Zeck Clip 140 (bio)** and discuss the following³:
- What are some of the emotions you notice from the testimony of Belle Zeck? Why do you think she feels so strongly about the need to persecute genocidaires regardless of how long it takes?
 - Do you agree with her view? Should we continue to persecute Nazi perpetrators and other perpetrators of genocide decades after the events?
 - Why is the rule of law and its use in persecuting perpetrators important?
 - Since the Holocaust, there have been many other genocides. Have these international laws done any good in preventing genocide?

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 90 - 120 MINUTES

² Teachers should emphasize that **Rudolf Hoess**, the Commandant of Auschwitz, admits clearly the process of gassing and murder at the camp.

³ Provide students with the Genocide handout from Lesson 1 of **Echoes & Reflections for the United Nations Definition of Genocide**.