



COMPLICITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

“Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without questions.”

– PRIMO LEVI, AUTHOR AND 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 nuances of teaching about some of the moral complexities of the Holocaust when considering collaboration and complicity, as well as assessing responsibility on individual, group, and government levels, in addition to delivering accurate and sensitive instruction.

- 1** It is suggested that this unit be taught after students have acquired considerable knowledge of the Holocaust including the horrific nature of the ghettos and camps so they can begin to assess the choices made by individuals, nations, and governments.
- 2** Consider opportunities to complicate students' thinking on responsibility and the Holocaust. Invite complexity, especially on topics related to complicity, action, and inaction as conscious choices which impacted history. Teachers and students should welcome analysis of circumstances, agency, and action as they navigate the roles and responsibilities of individuals, groups, and governments.
- 3** Examining the topic of responsibility and guilt for the Holocaust is an important, yet difficult, task. Allow opportunities to examine the roles of both individuals and nations in the perpetration of the Holocaust. This requires a nuanced study of decisions, actions, and consequences for the complex roles played by each individual and group, including perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, and liberators. Students should be encouraged to examine the complex boundaries of responsibility and the cost to a society that does not act. The study of the Holocaust raises many topics that may lead students to question, analyze, and redefine their own beliefs and values.
- 4** By 1942, reports were widely available about the unfolding genocide of the Jews. It is important to note, however, how inconceivable the Holocaust was as it was occurring. Many people and nations did not believe these reports were true or they believed they were exaggerated. While questions abound regarding whether the democratic nations should have or could have done more sooner to help the victims of the Holocaust, these questions in no way take away from the fact that the soldiers of the Allied countries in great numbers gave their lives to liberate Europe.

ABOUT THIS UNIT

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this unit is to provide an opportunity for students to examine the complex issues of responsibility and guilt on a personal level as well as on a national level within the context of the Nazi occupation of Europe. With a firm understanding of what happened during the Holocaust, students will now be tasked to examine, analyze, and evaluate the actions and responsibilities of some of the actors in the genocide of the Jews. Students will also explore and consider the responsibility of the democratic nations to provide safe haven for refugees attempting to escape Nazi persecution.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- To what degree were individuals, groups, and nations complicit in the Holocaust?
- What factors influence an individual's choices to act, including as a collaborator or bystander?
- How does learning about choices made during the Holocaust teach us about human behavior and about how individual choices affect the world around us?
- What responsibility do nations have to help those from another nation facing imminent danger?
- How did the American government obstruct Jews and others wishing to immigrate to the US at this time?

OBJECTIVES

Students will

- Define bystander and understand the fluidity of roles in the Holocaust: bystanders at times became rescuers but also became collaborators, beneficiaries, and perpetrators, depending on their circumstances, decisions, and actions.
- Define collaborator and collaboration within the context of the Holocaust.
- Describe the actions and choices of those who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.
- Recognize, examine, and analyze the agency and actions of individual perpetrators within the Nazi system.
- Examine larger groups, including corporations, to determine the responsibility of society at large for the Holocaust.
- Evaluate the actions taken or not taken by nations, including the United States, and understand their effect on what ultimately happened to the Jews of Europe.