

ASSESSING RESPONSIBILITY AND CONSCIENCE

Purpose

It's often hard to grasp how the horrors of the Holocaust could have happened. Deciding who was responsible for those atrocities is also complex. This activity is meant to help you think about where responsibilities lie when events occur. While it's shocking to think that this type of behavior might ever be repeated, there are still atrocities being committed in the world today. As thoughtful citizens of the world, you might one day have to decide who should be held responsible for acts or events such as these. This activity is meant to help you think through how responsibility should be assigned.

Process

1. Read the statements below. Each statement is hypothetical but aligns to the experiences of different citizens in Nazi Germany. Imagine that you are a judge who must determine who is responsible for the crimes committed during the Holocaust. For each statement, using a scale from 1 to 4, assess each person's or group of people's responsibility level.

Key: 1—Not responsible 2—Minimally responsible 3—Responsible 4—Very responsible

1		One of Hitler's direct subordinates, such as Heinrich Himmler or Joseph Goebbels.
2		A German who voluntarily joined the SS (Hitler's elite paramilitary organization).
3		A German who financially supported Hitler's rise to power and continued to support him in the news media.
4		A judge who carried out Hitler's decrees for sterilization of the "mentally incompetent" and the internment of "traitors."
5		A German doctor who conducted experiments including the sterilization of Jews and those deemed "mentally incompetent."
6		A worker in a plant making Zyklon B gas (the gas used in gas chambers).
7		An industrialist who made enormous profits by producing Zyklon B gas.
8		The Pope (Pius XII), who made no public statement against the Nazi policy.
9		A manufacturer who used concentration-camp inmates as slave labor in his plants.
10		An American industrialist who helped arm Hitler in the 1930s.

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11	A person who voluntarily joined the Nazi party in the 1930s.
12	A person who publicly agreed to take the Civil Servant Loyalty Oath (swearing eternal allegiance to Adolf Hitler) in 1934.
13	A person who regularly and enthusiastically attended Hitler's rallies.
14	A person who complied with the law excluding Jews from economic and social life.
15	A person who always respectfully gave the "Heil Hitler" salute.
16	A person who served as a concentration-camp guard.
17	A person who pulled the lever to allow the gas into the chambers.
18	An engineer on the trains that went to the concentration camps.
19	A diplomat for the Nazi government.
20	The American government, which limited immigration of Jews to the US in the 1930s.
21	A person who claimed they didn't like to get involved in politics, and thus went about their business as quietly as they could in Nazi Germany.
22	A soldier who carried out orders to rouse Jews from their homes for "evacuation and resettlement."
23	A German couple who took up residence in a home left empty by Jews deported to a concentration camp.
24	The gentiles (non-Jews) who took over a store abandoned by Jews who had been taken away by Nazis.
25	A German who refused all pleas to participate in hiding and smuggling of Jews.
26	A policeman who helped round up escaping Jews.
27	A teacher who taught Nazi propaganda.
28	Children who joined the Hitler Youth.
29	Parents who sent or allowed their children to attend Hitler Youth meetings.
30	A Protestant clergyman who gave the Nazis lists of members of his congregation who were "non-Aryan."

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2. One way to think about people who are involved in these types of events is to assess their responsibility by categorizing them in particular ways. One method of doing this is by using the five categories listed in the chart below. Decide what each term means and write a definition.

Category of responsibility	Definition
Perpetrators	
Collaborators	
Bystanders	
Resisters	
Rescuers	

3. Next, read the following paragraph about the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923). As you read, look for the different roles you just defined.

“The Ottoman government issued orders to forcibly relocate Armenian communities from border areas and military fronts during World War I. The Armenian soldiers had their weapons taken away and were sent to labor camps. Following orders from government and military officials, Ottoman soldiers took these Armenians to

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remote locations and shot them. Some Turkish officials in Istanbul attempted to warn their Armenian friends of the danger of remaining in the Ottoman Empire. One official quietly told his friend, 'A new storm is about to break upon the Armenians so I hope that you will save yourself.' (Suny, 246) Some fled to Europe and the Americas with the help of friends, who offered safe places to stay and safe passage out of the country. As the violence ramped up, Ottoman soldiers forced whole families to march away from their homes, leaving everything behind. Their houses and possessions were later sold to the highest bidder. Many Turks who had lived in the same communities with Armenians for generations were upset with this but were too fearful to do anything about it. Some Armenians rebelled against the slaughtering of their people by taking up arms to fight back. In Europe and America, organizations were formed to provide aid to the Armenians. Some ambassadors in Istanbul tried to convince the Turkish [Ottoman] officials to stop the violence. But nothing seemed to work. The American ambassador to Istanbul, Henry Morgenthau Sr., described the events as 'a campaign of race extermination.'"

4. Identify a person or group from the paragraph you just read that fits with each of the roles for this genocide. Be prepared to discuss your ideas as a class so you can make sure you understand what each one means.

Category of responsibility	Person or group who fit this role in the Armenian Genocide
Perpetrators	
Collaborators	
Bystanders	
Resisters	
Rescuers	

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5. How do you think perpetrators were able to rise to such high levels of power during this time period?

6. Most of the guards in concentration camps began the job as regular people. Why do you think they helped collaborate to commit such atrocities?

7. Why do you think so many people stood by and allowed these atrocities to happen?

8. What are the characteristics of a person who is willing to take a risk and resist?

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9. What do you think inspires rescuers to risk their lives and those of their families to help other people?

10. Once you've had a chance to answer these questions, and perhaps discuss these roles as a class, go back and look at your original answers and see if you would revise any of your assigned responsibility levels based on the additional thought you've given. Did you revise any? If so, why?