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Learning from the Past: How to Extend the Lessons of the Holocaust to our own Communities

Objective: This unit of instruction is intended for secondary students, and is to come at the end of a discussion on World War II and the Holocaust. The unit will help the learner make connections between their own communities where they live and the events of 1933-1945, and see how modern Germany has attempted to reconcile their past actions with a bright future.

Resources needed: Computer lab, art materials, textbooks as needed.

Websites used in this unit:

Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds Nuremberg

http://www.museen.nuernberg.de/english/english/reichsparteitag_e/index_reichsparteitag_e.html

Nuremberg Culture: Documentation Centre

<http://www.kubiss.de/kulturreferat/reichsparteitagsgelaende/englisch/dokuzentrum.htm>

Memorial and Museum Sachsenhausen <http://www.stiftung-bg.de/gums/en/index.htm>

Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe <http://www.holocaust-mahnmal.de/en>

Background: One of the questions we deal with as we teach students history is how to deal with the events of the past. We often celebrate heroes and denigrate villains, but just as often, the past is whitewashed, with an attempt to cover up or forget some of the worst events in human history. As I visited Germany in summer 2008, I was impressed at the various efforts I saw to educate Germans and others about the events of the Holocaust. For what is obviously a painful, difficult subject to address, the German government and people have gone out of their way to build memorials, museums, and preserve historic sites so that future generations can learn from the German's past, and prevent future genocides from happening. This unit of instruction asks students to analyze the ways that Germany has done this, and then to find an event in their own local history that needs "enlightenment through education" in order to see historic justice done.

Sequence of events: Have students visit the websites above in the order listed above. The websites are all in English, and include virtual tours of places I visited during my stay in Germany. The first two websites give a good look at how the National Socialist Party came to power in Germany, and the tools they used to subjugate their people and attack various minority groups. The third website is for the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, showing what happened at some of the concentration camps—the reality of the Holocaust. The fourth website is the official site of one of the newest German Holocaust memorials, in the center of Berlin. It considers both the artistry and the message of how to memorialize a tragic event, and looks at alternate visions of what the memorial could have been.

After looking at how the Germans are treating Holocaust education through their museums and memorials, help the students select a local (community, state or regional) event that has been overlooked—either one without a memorial or museum, or one whose memorial has been neglected or is relatively unknown or misunderstood. My local example for the state of Utah would be the "Mountain

Meadows Massacre.” This is a controversial, divisive, and painful topic in this area, but it’s also a significant historic topic that teachers tend to shy away from. Mormon settlers in Southern Utah killed 120 Arkansans on their way to California. There are two small monuments and memorials on the site today, and although volumes have been written about it, there’s no museum, interpretive signage, or guide there to inform visitors about what they’re seeing. Comparing this admittedly smaller event to the Holocaust may be a stretch, but it shares much of the same paranoia, fear and tragic outcomes. Not teaching about the event only ensures that it will be misunderstood and forgotten over time. Other local events might include issues regarding slavery, Native American removal, religious or racial intolerance, or Japanese-American Internment.

Help students find websites, books or other information about the local event, vetting out the best ones for their needs. Students need to find the facts of the events, and then decide how to interpret the events for modern audiences. Working alone or with a team, the students need to design a memorial, museum, website or exhibit that will help their peers understand the events of the past, and how they can prevent these events from being forgotten.

Some questions for students to consider as they look at the German Holocaust education and as they plan their own educational displays:

- What is the background of the tragic event—why did “things get that far”?
- Could the tragic event have been prevented?
- What were the consequences of the tragic event?
- Were there any heroes in the face of tragedy?
- How has the event been treated locally since the tragedy?
- Should the site of a tragic event be preserved as a memorial, or should it be changed into an entirely different venue?
- If no artifacts remain from a tragic event, what are ways to help people understand the reality of the events that occurred?
- Are there any consequences if this particular event is forgotten by history?

As the students work to create their own exhibits, they’ll come to appreciate both the work that the German people have undertaken to confront their past, and that the perpetrators of these horrific events were still human. If they’re human, and not “monsters,” we can find ways to understand them, and prevent future atrocities from occurring. By choosing to confront the past of our own communities, we’ll understand our own lives, and be stronger for it.