

Lesson Plan: The Declaration – An Extraordinary Offer

Overview

Using a unique primary document, this lesson highlights the difficult choices made by Jehovah's Witnesses, a small group of people who adhered to their beliefs despite brutal efforts to make them conform to Nazi ideology.

Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze why Jehovah's Witnesses refused to conform to Nazi ideology.
- Students will identify Nazi pressure tactics through examination of a primary source document.
- Students will compare and contrast choices and consequences of conforming to or rejecting Nazi demands.

Student Handouts (At the end of the lesson.)

Clash of Ideas

Declaration

Declaration Analysis

Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/9-10/>

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>

Grade level

Grades 9-12 and Above

Activity Length

1-2 Class Periods

PROCEDURE

1. Introduction

Prepare students by reading the following background information:

Jehovah's Witnesses, a small Christian community of 35,000 in Germany and occupied lands, refused to conform to the Nazi ideology of hate. They suffered severely for their belief in nonviolence and their utter rejection of racism. Among the first to be sent to early concentration camps in 1933, they became eyewitnesses of Nazi genocide.

The lengthy confinement of Witness prisoners is all the more remarkable because, unlike other camp inmates, the SS were willing to set them free if they signed a carefully drafted document, a "Declaration" renouncing their faith and fully endorsing Nazi ideology. The SS kept this prospect for freedom in front of Witnesses while subjecting them to the brutal, deadly treatment of daily camp life. Relatively few signed.

2. Clash of Ideas

Distribute the *Clash of Ideas* chart.

Explain to students that the chart highlights three areas in which Jehovah's Witnesses and the Nazis were diametrically opposed. As a class discussion, students will compare and contrast the ideology of the Witnesses with that of the Nazis using this chart.

3. Declaration

Distribute the *Declaration*.

Now that students have identified the three main areas of ideological conflict, show the *Declaration* that was offered to the Witnesses to sign in exchange for their freedom. Read each of the five points.

The students will write a letter to a Nazi official or to a family member. Explain why they did or did not sign the *Declaration*, and as a result how they will or will not be returning home.

4. Declaration Analysis

Distribute the *Declaration Analysis*.

Divide the class into five groups.

Assign each group one point on the *Declaration*.

Ask each group to analyze what their assigned point was designed by the Nazis to achieve.

Then compare and contrast their assigned *Declaration* point with one of the statements A through L on the *Declaration Analysis*.

(Adapt the number of statements discussed to your specific classes.)

Discuss the findings of each group in a class discussion using some or all of the questions below:

- What conclusions did you draw as to whether the Witnesses were hostile to the state?
- What conclusions did you draw as to why the Nazis considered the Witnesses hostile to the state?
- How would signing this *Declaration* affect the Witnesses?
- What would it achieve for the Nazis? Why do you think most Witnesses refused to sign the *Declaration*?
- Would your conclusions change anything in the letter you wrote now that you have analyzed the *Declaration*?
- How would your choices affect you, your family, your friends?

Optional Activity

[The Buchenwald Series](#), online exhibition of watercolors by Witness survivor Johannes Steyer and commentary at The Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota website. Johannes Steyer painted 27 aquarelles that contrast ten years of Nazi terror with individual religious determination and hope. In aquarelle #22 he vividly depicts being given the chance to sign the Declaration and walk out of Buchenwald Concentration Camp. The accompanying History of Jehovah's Witnesses gives further details about the Declaration in Section 4, "Wartime Persecution and a Way Out."

Glossary of Terms

Bibelforscher: German term for Bible Students.

Bible Student: Name for Jehovah's Witnesses before 1931. The Witnesses preferred to use their new designation after 1931, but the term "Bible Student" continued in common usage among some non-Witnesses for a time.

Conscientious objector: One who refuses to serve in the armed forces or bear arms on the grounds of moral or religious principles.

Erklärung: German word for "declaration."

Jehovah's Witnesses: Members of a Christian religious group, characterized by witnessing, or spreading Bible education by word of mouth and printed literature. Formerly known as International Bible Students (German: Bibelforscher.)

Neutrality: The position of those who do not take sides with or give support to either of two or more contending parties. From the standpoint of Jehovah's Witnesses, political neutrality means keeping separate from all political participation such as voting, running for office, saluting national emblems, taking an oath of allegiance to a head of state, sharing in patriotic ceremonies, or joining the armed forces.

Resistance: In reference to the Nazi period, a variety of defiant acts, ranging from armed revolt to spiritual or ideological defiance. It could include continuing religious or cultural practices, disobeying orders, aiding or hiding fugitives, smuggling, or simply maintaining the will to live.

Readings

[*Crucible of Terror: A Story of Survival Through the Nazi Storm*](#), by Max Liebster. (New Orleans: Grammaton Press, 2003)

[*Facing the Lion: Memoirs of a Young Girl in Nazi Europe*](#) abridged edition by Simone Arnold Liebster. (New Orleans: Grammaton Press, 2004) [Study guide](#).

Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses During the Nazi-Regime 1933-1945 by Hans Hesse. (Bremen, Germany: Edition Temmen, 2001)

Videos and DVDs

Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault 28-minute Classroom Edition DVD with Study Guide. (Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Society, 1996) [Study guide](#). Also available through the Facing History Lending Library.

Purple Triangles: The True Story of a German Family. (Starlock Pictures, 1991) Story of the Kusserow family. Also available through the Facing History Lending Library.

Web

[Jehovah's Witnesses](#) (web version), from the booklet series *Victims of the Nazi Era 1933-1945*, by United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Also available as a free [pdf download](#).

[The Buchenwald Series](#), online exhibition of watercolors by Witness survivor Johannes Steyer and commentary at The Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota website. Johannes Steyer painted 27 aquarelles that contrast ten years of Nazi terror with individual religious determination and hope. In aquarelle #22 he vividly depicts being given the chance to sign the Declaration and walk out of Buchenwald Concentration Camp. The accompanying History of Jehovah's Witnesses gives further details about the Declaration in Section 4, "Wartime Persecution and a Way Out."

[Arnold-Liebster Foundation](#) - Extensive educational resources regarding the Nazi persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Contributor

Arnold-Liebster Foundation at www.alst.org

CLASH OF IDEAS

NAZI IDEAS

RACIST

(Racial purity of Aryans and racial superiority of Germans, all others are inferior)

ULTRA-NATIONALIST

(Goal was to extend German power and influence. National anthem: "Germany, Germany Over All the World")

OBEDIENCE TO THE FÜHRER

(Loyalty and absolute obedience to Hitler as Führer, or Leader, and to the Nazi government)

JEHOVAH'S WITNESS BELIEFS

FAMILY OF HUMANITY

(Opposed to racism in any form, all humans are equal)

INTERNATIONAL

(Borders are man made and no measure of superiority or inferiority)

POLITICAL NEUTRALITY

(Loyalty and absolute obedience to God and to government by God, hence neutral as to human politics and governments)

Translation of *Erklärung*

Concentration camp.....

Department II
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Declaration

I, the

born on..... in.....

herewith make the following declaration:

1. I have come to know that the International Bible Students Association is proclaiming erroneous teachings and under the cloak of religion follows hostile purposes against the State.
2. I therefore left the organization entirely and made myself absolutely free from the teachings of this sect.
3. I herewith give assurance that I will never again take any part in the activity of the International Bible Students Association. Any persons approaching me with the teaching of the Bible Students, or who in any manner reveal their connections with them, I will denounce immediately. All literature from the Bible Students that should be sent to my address I will at once deliver to the nearest police station.
4. I will in the future esteem the laws of the State, especially in the event of war will I, with weapon in hand, defend the fatherland, and join in every way the community of the people.
5. I have been informed that I will at once be taken again into protective custody if I should act against the declaration given today.

....., Dated

Signature

KL/47/4.43 5000

Declaration Analysis

- A. Witness belief in political neutrality (loyalty to government by God), family of humanity (all humans are equal), and international scope (borders are manmade) could not be considered hostile to the Nazi state.
- B. Nationalistic Nazi ideology promoted the state as the highest authority. State law superseded religious convictions.
- C. Leaving the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses that adhered to the belief of an international family of humanity would splinter their cohesive worldwide brotherhood.
- D. Leaving the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses at the urging of the Nazi regime would essentially exalt Hitler as the highest authority and would promote the marginalization of the Witnesses.
- E. The preaching activity of the Witnesses was directed to all, irrespective of their race, national origin or disability. The opportunity to become a Jehovah's Witness was open to anyone that wished to.
- F. More was involved than their own lives. To denounce their fellow believers to the Nazi authorities would violate their belief in a family of humanity and make fellow Witnesses objects of Nazi persecution including, but not limited to, imprisonment, torture and death.
- G. Turning the Witnesses' Bible literature over to the police would restrict their activity to extend their peaceful message to all in the community.
- H. The Witnesses realized that signing the Declaration would not terminate Nazi pressure. Signing would open the way for increased tactics to achieve total conformity.
- I. Nazi Laws promoted racism, nationalism and total obedience to the Führer, all of which were in opposition to the ideology of Jehovah's Witnesses.
- J. The Witnesses were politically neutral and would not go to war in support of any human government. Their belief in the family of humanity extended to the global community. Witnesses could not kill their brothers and sisters to promote any nationalistic, racial or tribal cause.
- K. If the Witnesses signed the Declaration, they would give their allegiance to the Führer instead of God, which included acceptance of the laws of the Nazi regime with its national and racial superiority ideology.
- L. If the Witnesses signed the Declaration under false pretenses and later secretly reneged, it would violate their beliefs and their integrity, thus all of their moral convictions including but not limited to honesty.