

## **Teacher Guidance for 'Should Auschwitz have been bombed?' Rob Kanter**

*Please use this guidance in conjunction with the Workshop Outline Template.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This lesson is designed to introduce students to a seminal debate in Holocaust studies. My aim is to encourage students to consider the issues surrounding the bombing of Auschwitz as they would have been perceived in 1944, rather than by layering on aspects of historical hindsight which could not have been foreseen at the time. The activities developed will encourage students to understand the complexity of the circumstances facing the Allies in 1944 as well as the moral considerations which were evident at the time.

Some historians, including Michael Berenbaum and David Cesarani, have criticised the fact that Auschwitz was not bombed as a moral failing of the allies: A bombing attempt would have demonstrated the Allies moral contempt for the Nazis barbaric actions. Other historians, including Peter Hayes and William Rubinstein have placed the bombing issue within the wider chasm of Allied war dilemmas and priorities in 1944, as well as assessing the technical difficulties which made the pinpoint bombing of Auschwitz fraught with challenges. Both of these interpretations will be explored during the lesson.

### **STUDENT ACTIVITY ONE- STARTER (SLIDE TWO)**

The starter activity is designed for students, in pairs, to recall their knowledge of the Holocaust from year nine. It is likely that students will recall key words including 'Hitler', 'Jews', 'gas chambers' and 'Anne Frank' although knowledge will vary from cohort to cohort. It is worth pointing out that the majority of concentration/death camps were located in German occupied Poland and that the Holocaust had a whole European dimension as Jews and other from as far afield as France, Netherlands (Where the Frank family lived and were discovered) and Greece were caught up in the maelstrom. Some students may emphasise the other groups who were persecuted including the disabled, 'Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), Black Europeans etc. Some students may struggle to identify other concentration/death camps and it may be worth pointing out other examples including Treblinka and Sobibor in Poland as well as Bergen Belsen and Buchenwald in Germany.

### **STUDENT ACTIVITY TWO (SLIDES THREE TO TEN)**

This section will be teacher led and will provide students with revision from year nine and specific context to the Auschwitz bombing debate. Students could provide a mini timeline as the content is reviewed. Students will need 2-3 minutes to discuss slide 6. The racial chart reveals a lot about Nazi racial thinking. A person was defined as Jewish if they had three or more Jewish grandparents. A person with one or two Jewish grandparents was defined as 'Mischling' (Mixed) and were not persecuted to the same extent. Nazi definitions of Jewishness were different to those employed by Jewish law. In normative Jewish tradition

the child of a Jewish mother is considered to be Jewish even if the father is not Jewish. According to Liberal Jewish traditions, the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother could be considered Jewish if the child was raised as a Jew. You may wish to encourage students on their responses to be defined according to such rigid racial lines.

In slide 9 students may be struck by the number of concentration/death and transit camps in Europe during the Holocaust. Most of the camps in Western Europe eg Drancy in Paris were holding points before most of the Jews were deported to other concentration/death camps in Poland. This involved the use of an advanced rail network which facilitated deportations to Eastern Europe.

### **STUDENT ACTIVITY THREE (SLIDES 12-13)**

In pairs, students should first, using two colours, go through the printed version of slide 12 and decide whether each argument is in favour or against the bombing of Auschwitz in 1944. It is hoped that this process will encourage students to understand the moral and practical complexity of the debate. Was it acceptable to kill prisoners in order to accomplish the greater good of destroying gas chambers? Was liberating Europe from Nazi control more important than targeting one camp? Students will then summarise three key arguments, in pairs, from each perspective.

### **STUDENT ACTIVITY FOUR (SLIDES 14-15)**

This source interpretations analysis is more complex. Rubinstein views the failure to bomb Auschwitz as justified due to the allied number one priority being to liberate Europe from Nazi control, whereas Berenbaum cites the moral issue as being more important than simply achieving military objectives. Hayes takes a middle position between the two; he agrees with Rubinstein to the extent that bombing Auschwitz might not have saved many lives, but he acknowledges Berenbaum's position that the allies did not regard the persecution of Jews as a priority and that this was a moral failing. Historians may reach differing based upon their readings of evidence and understanding of wider context.

In Q3 students should choose the historian based on the evidence they have looked at. If they believe more could and should have been done, they may support Berenbaum. It is important to emphasise that there is no wrong or right answer here and that historians have debated this for many years! You may wish to ask students to raise hands to indicate which interpretation they most agreed with and encourage some internal debate.

### **REVIEW ACTIVITY (SLIDE 16)**

Students should now be encouraged to consider why this debate is still relevant in 2021. What examples of persecution have they seen or currently hear about which need intervention. A contemporary example may be the experiences of Uighurs in China and whether Britain should send an Olympic team to the Winter Olympics in 2022. The 'Bystander Effect' is hinted at in the image. Do students have sympathy with the fact that it is sometimes easier to 'walk past' or not think about mistreatment of others when our own lives are often filled with challenges. The post it display board should highlight students patterns of thought and should spark any final ideas for discussion.