

Exploring Diaries from Warsaw's *Great Aktion*

From July 22 until September 12, 1942, German SS and police units, assisted by auxiliaries, carried out mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka killing center. During this period, the Germans deported about 265,000 Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka; they killed approximately 35,000 Jews inside the ghetto during the operation.

This exercise asks students to evaluate diaries which detail the deportations from multiple Jewish perspectives covering a variety of ages, genders, varying levels of authority in the ghetto structure, and the voices of several people who did not survive the *Aktion*. It utilizes primary sources and allows students to consider source material and the perspective of people writing, not decades later following their survival, but living and experiencing the event in the moment.

Lesson Plan:

Run copies of each of the following for your students:

- Abraham Lewin extract from *Art from the Ashes* by Lawrence Langer (pages 161-163)
- *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow* edited by Raul Hilberg (pages 378-385)
- Janina Bauman excerpt from *Voices and Views* by Deborah Dwork (324-326)
- *The Diary of Mary Berg* edited by Susan Pentlin (pages 156-167)
- *Scroll of Agony* by Chaim Kaplan (pages 375-385)

Instructions for Classroom Exercise:

1. Assign the following readings as homework. Students should take notes over the following:
 - Background
 - ◆ gender/age/prewar role in community/citizenship
 - ◆ Education
 - ◆ Role in ghetto
 - Details given of *Great Aktion*
 - ◆ What did this person know about what was happening? What did he/she personally SEE?
 - ◆ What rumors does this person mention?
 - ◆ What does this person expect and/or what is he/she prepared for?
 - ◆ How was this person affected personally by what was happening?
 - ◆ Does he/she mention specific people/landmarks/etc?
 - ◆ What happens to the diarist and his/her family?
 - Corroboration
 - ◆ Does this diarist confirm or refute any details given by another diarist? Be specific.
2. In class, divide students into groups of 5, asking each group to re-read and discuss one diarist in detail.
3. Lead a large group discussion utilizing the teacher answer KEY, making note of details of each diarist on board, as groups report out on their diarist
4. Note of points of correlation in the stories and the importance of testimonial corroboration in historical research.

Special Notes for Teachers:

1. Extension activity — viewing the video *The Warsaw Ghetto* (specifically time code 26:54-30:30), available in the MCHE Resource Center. Some graphic images are present, so please preview.
2. Teachers are encouraged to help their students consider the value and limitations of diaries as sources and the importance of testimonial corroboration in historical research.