

Teaching Warsaw's *Great Aktion* using Literature Excerpts

From 22 July until 12 September 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 perspectives: Jews of various ages, genders, and levels of authority in the ghetto structure. Some diarists did not survive the *Aktion*. This lesson utilizes primary sources and allows students to consider the perspective of people writing—not decades later following their survival—but living and experiencing events in the moment.

Preparation:

Divide your students as evenly as possible into five groups. (Or four if you assign excerpts A and C to the same students.) Assign each group one of the following readings, taking the reading skills of the students into consideration. Provide class time for reading and taking notes on the excerpts, using the provided **Warsaw Aktion Notesheet**.* (May be assigned as homework.)

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

The texts noted above are available in the MCHE Library. Contact us if you need help obtaining these excerpts.

Process—Step One:

After students have finished reading and taking notes on their assigned diary excerpts, allow them time to assemble in homogeneous groups to discuss their common excerpts. Ask them to compare notes about the background and diary details of their subject, filling in any information they missed.

Background

- gender
- age
- citizenship
- education
- prewar role in community
- role in the ghetto

Details of the *Great Aktion*

- What does this individual know about what is happening? What do they personally see and hear?
- What rumors do they mention?
- What specific people or landmarks does this person mention?
- What does this person expect will happen and/or what are they prepared for?
- Where does this person corroborate another diarist?
- What happens to the diarist and their family?

Corroboration – This question is not on the notesheet!

- Does this diarist confirm or refute any details given by another diarist? Be specific.

continued

Process—Step Two:

Resort the students into heterogeneous groups of 4 or 5 containing one member representing each diarist. Each group member should share the key background information and details about their diarist while other members complete their notesheets.

OR

Process—Step Two:

1. Lead the whole class through the process of completing the notesheet as groups report on their diarist. Teachers should model this process on a document projector, white board, or smart board using the *Warsaw Aktion Notesheet KEY* as a guide. Note points of correlation in the stories and the importance of testimonial corroboration in historical research. 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.

***Note:**

The **Warsaw Aktion Notesheet** is intended for hand-written student notes. A print copy of this notesheet must be made for each student. The **Warsaw Aktion Notesheet_Digital** is intended for electronic notetaking. A digital copy of this notesheet must be made available for students to use on computers or tablets.

Additional Resources for Teachers:

Yad Vashem video: German Jewish deportees arriving at the Warsaw Ghetto (1:40 minutes)

<https://youtu.be/Il7LB4O8O4U?si=FqTYIyS5StzGg0N4>

Between September 1939 and July 1942, 150,000 Jews from Germany and western Poland were sent to the Warsaw Ghetto. This archival film clip shows the arrival of some of those deportees. The German Jews were some of the first to be deported to Treblinka in July 1942.

USHMM video: The Warsaw Ghetto (2:37 minutes)

https://youtu.be/SCSe1hehBIY?si=llKEF7g-_ovQZTbS

This narrated video provides students with important background information about the Warsaw Ghetto.

USHMM: Media Essay—Warsaw – Historical Film Footage

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/warsaw-films>

This webpage contains nine short documentary film clips (:50 to 2:18 minutes) documenting various aspects of life for Jews in Warsaw between 1939 and 1942.

View the video *The Warsaw Ghetto* (specifically time code 26:54-30:30), available in the MCHE Resource Center. This video contains some graphic images; please preview and consider the appropriateness of this video for your students.