

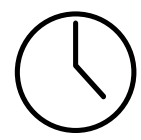
Who is Responsible?

Summary: Students reflect on who they think is responsible when innocent children and others are killed or wounded in war. The students give their opinion as to who is most responsible in their view and discuss this, as well as what they think is appropriate punishment for such actions.



Main age group

15-18



Time needed

2 x 45-minute periods



Materials needed

Computers or devices for student research.



Objectives

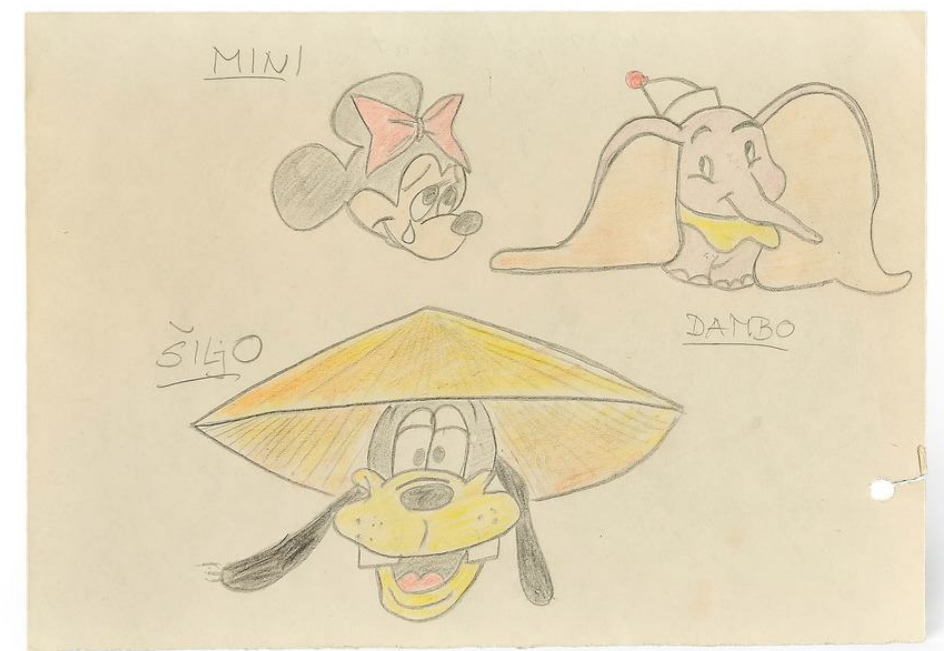
- For students to understand that justice can be interpreted in different ways.
- Promote critical thinking about war crimes, punishment and justice.

Resources

My Sister's Drawings of Disney Heroes

My sister Aida Mehmedagić made these drawings when the war first started. We lived near the municipal hospital, and our neighborhood was a frequent target of shellings. It was dangerous to go outside, so we spent most of our time in either the house or the basement. She always had a book in her hands, or some colors. She loved to draw and was quite talented at it, too. It wasn't rare for a real masterpiece to emerge by the light of an oil lamp! Sometimes she wrote letters to her friends, but they were more a diary of sorts than anything else.

Shortly after she wrote these letters and shortly after her seventeenth birthday, on a relatively peaceful night, someone knocked on our door. We were home alone: dad was playing chess with our neighbor upstairs, and mom was on duty at work. It was one of my sister's friends. They had gotten into a fight just the day before, and she wanted them to make up. My sister stood in the wide doorway, and I went to the kitchen in hopes that I would join them soon. Suddenly there was a loud explosion, the whole house shook, and everything was covered in dust. I heard shouting and my dad's voice. I sat down, I couldn't move from the shock. Shortly after, my dad came into the room, lost out of his mind, and just grabbed a blanket. I never saw my Aida again.



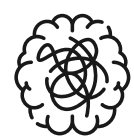
Selma (F), b. 1981, Bosnia and Herzegovina

CATEGORIES



Themes

Seeking justice



Emotions and feelings

Loss, grief, fear, anxiety, despair



Types of objects

Diaries, art



Methodologies

Brainstorm, discussion/debate, active listening

Short background

Civilians account for nearly 90 per cent of war-time casualties, according to the United Nations¹. In fact, the UN pointed out that 2022 held the highest number of grave violations ever verified by the United Nations, with government armed and security forces the main perpetrators of the killing and wounding of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. Nevertheless, at all times it is forbidden to direct attacks against civilians. Attacking civilians intentionally while aware of their civilian status is a war crime. Most often these crimes go unpunished.

Another question is who to hold accountable for these crimes. Who is truly responsible, how can they be brought to justice and how can the perpetrators best be dealt with. It is only recently that the international community has made it possible for individuals to be held accountable for these crimes. The Nuremberg Trials in 1945-1946 were followed by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). In July 2002 the International Criminal Court was established in The Hague.

Prep work by the teacher/educator

The teacher/educator should become somewhat familiarized with the war that took place on the soil of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990's and also the functioning of the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia).

¹ United Nations, "Ninety Per Cent of War-Time Casualties Are Civilians, Speakers Stress, Pressing Security Council to Fulfil Responsibility, Protect Innocent People in Conflicts" May 2022, at: <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14904.doc.htm> (Accessed: September 8, 2023)

Activities

— classroom period 1 —

In this activity, students reflect on guilt and punishment associated with actions that can be considered war crimes. All of the examples used in the activity are based on true cases.

Step 1

The students read the the personal story from the War Childhood Museum's Collection (available in Annex 2 for printing).

Step 2

The teacher/educator leads a brainstorm. First, the teacher/educator asks the students 'what thoughts come to mind when you read this story' and then 'what feelings come to mind when you read this story'. In this manner students distinguish between thoughts and feelings. The results of the brainstorm are captured on a whiteboard or a piece of flipchart paper.

Step 3

The teacher/educator summarizes and debriefs. If any of the responses relate to punishment of perpetrators, the teacher/educator asks for some further clarification, then explains the next activity will focus on this aspect.

Step 4

The students fill in a Questionnaire (see Annex 1).

Instructions for the activity students will engage in:

The teacher/educator gives the students a form with the statements below and asks the following question: 'How guilty are the following people, in your view, when innocent people are targeted and killed in a war' and what kind of punishment, if any, do you think they deserve?

The students fill out this form anonymously.

Step 5

The teacher/educator collects the completed forms and reads them between classes or sessions.

— classroom period 2 —

Step 6

The teacher/educator selects appr. 2-3 statements that represent a diversity of responses on the form.

The teacher/educator has the students stand up and then reads the selected statement. He/she asks them to stand on an imaginary line, reflecting their response to the chosen statement from the form.

The two ends of the imaginary line are represented by the scores '0' and '10'. At the far end of the line are all those with a '10'. At the other end are those with a '0'. The others stand somewhere between these extremes. Students can be reminded that there is no right or wrong opinion and that everybody has the right to his or her opinion – disagreement is okay, but it is important to respect the right of each person to express his/her opinion.

It might take a bit of discussion to find one's spot on the line. Note that students might not stand exactly where they originally indicated on the form, depending on for instance social desirability and peer pressure.

Alternatively, the students can be asked to once more write down where they stand on this particular statement (on a sheet of paper or index card) and then take their spot on the opinion line without speaking. They show the teacher/educator what is on their paper/index card to allow a visual of where everybody 'stands' on this statement. Committing oneself in writing first and then holding up one's score prevents participants from 'escaping' and standing next to friends.

Note: In this particular debate method, unlike traditional debate, the participants usually do not confront each other directly.

Step 7

The teacher/educator asks 2-3 volunteers on either of the extremes (so closest to a '0' score and closest to a '10' score) to express why they are standing where they are standing.

Step 8

The previous steps gets repeated 2-3 times for 2-3 other statements.

Step 9

The teacher/educator summarizes the key arguments used by the students and initiates a concluding class discussion about war crimes, responsibility and punishment.

Step 10

Wrap up and debrief.

Follow up possibilities

Teachers/Educators can delve deeper into the history of the Nuremberg trials and how they compare to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) as well as the International Criminal Court (ICC). For instance, students can look at the types of crimes that have been prosecuted at these tribunals and what kinds of punishments have been given. Also, students can look at how these tribunals compare, for instance, to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa after Apartheid.

Annex 1: Questionnaire

Please indicate on a scale from 0 to 10 how guilty you think this person is legally (so in a court of law) of murder as a crime against humanity. A ‘0’ implies not at all guilty, while a ‘10’ implies guilty to the fullest degree. Place an –X– in the spot closest to your own opinion.

Also, please indicate what kind of punishment (if any at all), in your view, this person should get. Try to be as precise as possible and explain in about 30 – 50 words.

1 A teacher tells her students that all people belonging to a certain ethnicity or race are inferior, a threat to society and need to be ‘eliminated’. These students later kill innocent people.



Punishment (if any):

2 A high ranking international military officer, part of a peacekeeping force, though far away, does not intervene, knowing that innocent people might be killed if he and his forces do nothing. He is very concerned his own soldiers might be killed if they intervene.



Punishment (if any):

3 A general who does not kill anybody himself gives instruction to his officers to ‘kill them all’.



Punishment (if any):

4 A low ranking military officer does not harbor any particular hatred towards others, but is aware that innocent people are about to be killed. He has the opportunity to help a few people escape death but does nothing since he is not sure he can really help, does not feel responsible and has not been given any order to intervene. The innocent men he is guarding are taken away and executed. He argues he was only following orders to assist with the operation but did not kill anyone.



Punishment (if any):

5 A journalist depicts a certain ethnicity or race as monsters in his articles. He fabricates articles that accuse these innocent people of injecting drugs into women in order to make them incapable of conceiving male children, thus reducing the birth rate among his own community. His writing inspires soldiers to view the people they murder as less than human.



Punishment (if any):

F A political leader who equates a certain ethnicity or race with a disease or illness mentions they are genetically inferior and states that any ethnic cleansing carried out against people belonging to this ethnicity or race during a war is a necessary step and a "natural phenomenon."



Punishment (if any):

G A religious leader who appears in front of TV cameras with a skull in one hand and a machine-gun in the other. He claims the country’s military leaders, who are later indicted for genocide, are heroes and need to be supported.



Punishment (if any):

H A conscript who is told to shoot innocent men by his officers and does this, after being threatened by his superior officers. He is told he will be ‘next in line’ if he refuses.



Punishment (if any):

I A soldier who does not kill women but rapes them to prove his ethnic group is superior.

012345678910

Punishment (if any):

J The soldiers who bury murdered innocent men in mass graves without complaint, though they did not kill anybody themselves.

012345678910

Punishment (if any):

K A doctor who refuses to help an injured civilian because he argues that helping this person will waste valuable resources needed for one’s troops and because the injured person might recover and harm ‘his side’.

012345678910

Punishment (if any):

Annex 2

My Sister's Drawings of Disney Heroes

My sister Aida Mehmedagić made these drawings when the war first started. We lived near the municipal hospital, and our neighborhood was a frequent target of shellings. It was dangerous to go outside, so we spent most of our time in either the house or the basement. She always had a book in her hands, or some colors. She loved to draw and was quite talented at it, too. It wasn't rare for a real masterpiece to emerge by the light of an oil lamp! Sometimes she wrote letters to her friends, but they were more a diary of sorts than anything else.

Shortly after she wrote these letters and shortly after her seventeenth birthday, on a relatively peaceful night, someone knocked on our door. We were home alone: dad was playing chess with our neighbor upstairs, and mom was on duty at work. It was one of my sister's friends. They had gotten into a fight just the day before, and she wanted them to make up. My sister stood in the wide doorway, and I went to the kitchen in hopes that I would join them soon. Suddenly there was a loud explosion, the whole house shook, and everything was covered in dust. I heard shouting and my dad's voice. I sat down, I couldn't move from the shock. Shortly after, my dad came into the room, lost out of his mind, and just grabbed a blanket. I never saw my Aida again.

Selma (F), b. 1981, Bosnia and Herzegovina

