

CHAPTER 9

# Do Our Choices **Matter?**

## The Fragility of Democracy

**Facing History and Ourselves**

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## DO OUR CHOICES MATTER?

The Fragility of Democracy

### Facing History and Ourselves

<b>C3 Disciplinary Focus</b> World History, Civics	<b>C3 Inquiry Focus</b> Developing questions and using sources to construct explanations	<b>Content Topic</b> The Holocaust and human behavior
<p><b>C3 Focus Indicators</b></p> <p><b>D1:</b> Explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge. (D1.4.9-12)</p> <p><b>D2:</b> Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences. (D2.Civ.13.9-12)</p> <p><b>D2:</b> Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past. (D2.His.14.9-12)</p> <p><b>D3:</b> Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views. (D3.1.9-12)</p> <p><b>D4:</b> Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses. (D4.1.9-12)</p> <p><b>D4:</b> Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification and complex causal reasoning. (D4.7.9-12)</p>		
<b>Grade Level</b> 9–12	<b>Resources</b> Resources cited in the chapter; Facing History and Ourselves website.	<b>Time Required</b> 3 days—within a larger unit of study

# Introduction and Connections to the C3 Framework

Come take this giant leap with me  
Into the other world...the other place  
And trace the eclipse of humanity.  
Where children burned while mankind stood by,  
And the universe has yet to learn why  
...Has yet to learn why.

—Sonia Weitz, from her poem, “For Yom Ha’Shoah”

In seeking to understand the “why” Sonia Weitz identifies, *Facing History and Ourselves* invites teachers to guide students through a journey along the C3 Inquiry Arc.

This journey consists of a series of lessons about choices in the past and present. By exploring questions about the choices which individuals, groups, and nations confronted through the history of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, students reflect upon a few key themes:

- Our choices matter.
- History is not inevitable. Democracies are dynamic institutions that change according to the decisions of the individuals and groups of institutions within them.

We use readings from our primary resource book, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*, to create a complex, multi-layered study of history. These documents facilitate students’ development of historical thinking skills and civic engagement — questioning, analysis, evaluating evidence, and taking informed action — by providing them with rich and diverse primary and secondary historical texts. Students are encouraged to go beyond monolithic explanations of historical events, and ask deep, probing questions to understand how a particular set of circumstances came about. Readings from multiple perspectives, which students are asked to evaluate and analyze, help them to see that individuals’ beliefs and actions are often influenced, although not determined, by what is happening around them. They identify multiple causes for events and understand the power needed to resist or change events in their own lives. Linking past and present, they learn to put themselves in others’ shoes, which helps them think deeply about the choices and decisions made by individuals, groups, and nations. Reading accounts of ordinary citizens can offer perspectives to reflect upon their own practice of civic life.

A typical *Facing History* unit, which engages students in the critical examination of history, spans approximately four to six weeks and is guided by a compelling question. Within this larger inquiry arc, there may be many smaller segments of inquiry. Each layer of inquiry pushes students to go deeper into the history and deeper into their own thinking.

# Inquiry Arc

Facing History units are often called journeys, and they begin with a compelling question. For this unit, the teacher introduces the compelling question, *Do our choices matter?* This frames the initial trajectory of the overall inquiry arc. By setting this framing, the teacher also provides space for students to journal and brainstorm their own questions around choices and consequences. The additional questions that arise through this process will enhance and help guide the class through the Facing History journey.

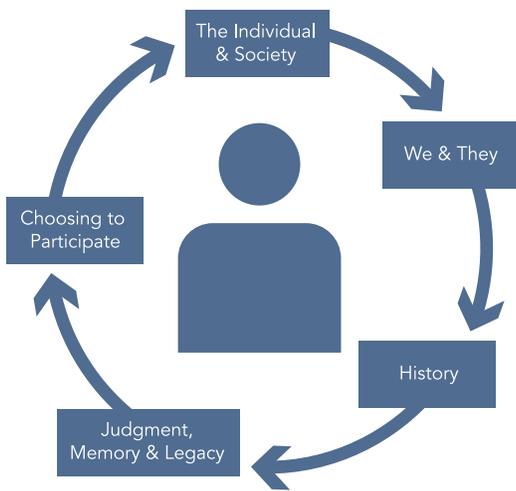
The scope and sequence of a Facing History unit (see Figure 1) presents many opportunities for students to develop questions as they grapple with a set of episodes in history and their meaning for today.

This chapter presents one inquiry within the larger arc. The full unit will have many such layers of inquiry. Each smaller inquiry stands on its own and develops a culture of questioning which is critical to student development of civic engagement.

The smaller inquiry presented here takes the overall question of “Do our choices matter?” and guides students to focus on the choices made by German citizens during the 1920s and 1930s in Germany. Students ask what choices ordinary Germans made regarding a religious minority increasingly marginalized in their society and why (Dimension 1). They then build a historical context for this question by synthesizing and activating prior learning from the unit and expanding their understanding of the context in which choices were made (Dimension 2). With this background, students then explore primary sources from the time period to discern multiple perspectives — a range of answers to the question of what choices ordinary Germans made and why (Dimension 3). Finally, students consider the consequences of the choices made at that time, and the implications for choices we may confront in our own day. This builds students’ sense of civic agency

as they recognize the impact that decisions they make can have within their own peer groups and their wider communities (Dimension 4).

FIGURE 1



## Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

For the purposes of this chapter, we will examine a “mini-inquiry” within a unit on the collapse of democracy in post-World War I Germany in the years leading to the Holocaust. To give context, this inquiry will come after students have studied the significance of the Treaty of Versailles and the societal conditions in Weimar Germany, which allowed the Nazi Party to gain followers and eventually achieve a majority of the seats in the Reichstag. Students will also, in a Facing History class, have already considered the complexity

of identity and the way our identity—and the way in which the identity of others is defined—influences our choices. The compelling question for this mini-inquiry is, “What choices were available to ordinary German citizens in the 1920s and 1930s, and how did the range of choices narrow as the Nazis gained power?”

In a Facing History classroom, students are encouraged to journal regularly as this is one strategy for encouraging students to ponder compelling questions, develop supporting questions, and strengthen the habit of questioning that will push them to engage more deeply with the material. In this way, students are invited to exercise their capacities for moral reasoning and help direct the course of questioning in a classroom. For suggested prompts and uses of a journal, see <http://www.facinghistory.org/journals-facing-history-class>.

By considering the events of the 1920s in Germany and the election of the Nazi party, students naturally turn to the question of the choices made by individuals in Germany and the pressures imposed by the Nazi Party as it consolidated power. Student journaling and discussion turns to questions such as:

- Did everybody turn against the Jews?
- How did individuals justify the violence they saw around them?
- Why did people accept the Nazi dismantling of democracy that took place in the 1930s?
- What conditions need to be present in a society for neighbor to turn against neighbor?

These student-generated questions and the mini-inquiry focus contribute to making the compelling question of “Do our choices matter?” even more complex and nuanced. In this way, students can see and begin to “explain how supporting questions contribute to an inquiry and how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge.” (D1.4.9-12) Questions that arise can help students not only think deeply about the choices that exist in the history, but also make connections between the case study and their own roles as civic agents in society today.

## **Dimension 2: Connections to Disciplinary Tools and Concepts**

It is important within Dimension 2 to ground students in the historical time period. In the two exercises below, students (1) analyze a painting to synthesize the material previously studied and build contextual knowledge for the place and time period in which German citizens were confronting and making the choices that were open to them as the Nazi Party was becoming established in Germany, and (2) create a human timeline to recognize the small steps that took place over time to dismantle German democracy. Through both of these exercises, they build the essential background knowledge that will become the foundation for students to “analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.” (D2.His.14.9-12)



*Der Agitator* by  
George Grosz  
© ESTATE OF GEORGE  
GROSZ/LICENSED BY  
VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

This painting from George Grosz (1928) can be used to help students synthesize what they have learned about the instability and threats to democracy that characterized the Weimar Republic. Through close viewing of the painting and connection to the history they have previously studied, students will articulate key elements of the German society at the time the Nazi Party came to power.

Students can be guided through a close media analysis of this image.

1. What are the concrete objects you see in this painting? (Shapes, colors, objects—refraining at the beginning from making any assumptions or interpretations.)
2. What questions does this painting raise for you? (This is an important step to reinforce the importance of questioning in our learning.)
3. What additional information can we bring to bear to understand this painting? (This is an opportunity to specifically bring in details from previous

mini-inquiries within the unit. There is an entire online module on the Weimar Republic, which is helpful for students to explore and would be the basis for additional information students are synthesizing in the analysis of this painting. It can be accessed at <https://www.facinghistory.org/weimar>)

4. Given this additional information, what might the artist's message be? (And what in the painting supports that interpretation?)

Once the Nazi Party entered the Reichstag in 1932, Hitler and the Nazi leadership acted quickly to dismantle democracy, rebuild Germany, and destroy enemies. They did this through cultural and social steps as much as political and military. It is important for students to see these small steps. One way to do this is through a Human Timeline of the 1930s in Germany. An example of this strategy is available at <https://www.facinghistory.org/human-timeline>.

In this strategy, students are given specific events or laws passed from 1932 to 1939 that show actions taken by Nazi leadership. These should specifically include laws that restricted Jewish participation in German society—well-known legislation such as the Nuremberg laws and lesser-known acts such as restricting who could be a government employee or who could own radios. This will help students identify the pressures that defined the society of Nazi Germany in which individuals made their choices.

Building historical context with these activities helps students “analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past” (D2.His.14.9-12) and “evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.” (D.2.Civ.13.9-12)

### Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

As students read sources from 1933–1945, they will investigate the diversity of choices available to some individuals and the lack of choices available to others. It is important to note that during this time period the range of choices and roles that individuals and groups had available to them was different than during the Weimar years. As they come to recognize and appreciate that difference, students engage in additional critical thinking discussions and activities to more fully understand the context of choice-making during the Holocaust.

Below are three individuals who made choices about how to respond to the violence of Kristallnacht. With the historical background already discussed, students are ready to engage critically in the inquiry about the choices available to ordinary German citizens in the 1920s and 1930s, and how the range of choices narrowed as the Nazis gained power.

#### **ALFONS HECK, FORMER MEMBER OF THE HITLER YOUTH**

Far from being forced to enter the ranks of the Jungvolk, I could barely contain my impatience and was, in fact, accepted before I was quite 10. It seemed like an exciting life, free from parental supervision, filled with “duties” that seemed sheer pleasure. Precision marching was something one could endure for hiking, camping, war games in the field, and a constant emphasis on sports... To a degree, our prewar activities resembled those of the Boy Scouts, with much more emphasis on discipline and political indoctrination. There were the paraphernalia and the symbols, the pomp and the mysticism, very close in feeling to religious rituals. One of the first significant demands was the so-called Mutprobe: “test of courage,” which was usually administered after a six-month period of probation. The members of my Schar, a platoon-like unit of about 40-50 boys, were required to dive off the three-meter board—about 10 feet high—head first in the town’s swimming pool. There were some stinging belly flops, but the pain was worth it when our Fahnleinfuehrer, the 15-year-old leader of our Fahnlein (literally “little flag”), a company-like unit of about 160 boys, handed us the coveted dagger with its inscription Blood and Honor. From that moment on we were fully accepted.

To hear Alfons Heck describe his response to Kristallnacht and to the deportation of Jews from his hometown, watch *Heil Hitler: Confessions of a Hitler Youth*. Facing History educators can borrow this from our library at <https://www.facinghistory.org/resources/heil-hitler-confessions-hitler-youth>.

#### **MELITA MASCHMANN**

Melita lived in a small suburb of Berlin and knew nothing of Kristallnacht until the next morning. As she picked her way through the broken glass on her way to work, she asked a policeman what had happened. After he explained, she recalls:

I went on my way shaking my head. For the space of a second I was clearly aware that something terrible had happened there. Something frighteningly

brutal. But almost at once I switched over to accepting what had happened as over and done with, and avoiding critical reflection. I said to myself: the Jews are the enemies of the New Germany. Last night they had a taste of what this means... With these or similar thoughts, I constructed for myself a justification of the pogrom. But in any case, I forced the memory of it out of my consciousness as quickly as possible. As the years went by, I grew better and better at switching off quickly in this manner on similar occasions.

Maschmann was not alone in placing the night in perspective. Dietrich Goldschmidt, a minister in the Confessing Church, explains that for most Germans “the persecution of the Jews, this escalating persecution of the Jews, and the 9th of November—in a sense, that was only one event, next to very many gratifying ones. Here the famous stories of all the things Hitler did come in: ‘He got rid of unemployment, he built the Autobahn, the people started doing well again, he restored our national pride again. One has to weigh that against the other things.’”

### **ANDRE**

It was the autumn of 1938. Andre was twelve years old and lived with his parents in a small town in northern Germany. One evening he came home from his youth movement meeting.

“Daddy,” he said to his father, “we were told at the meeting that tomorrow we are supposed to throw stones at the Jewish shops in town. Should I take part?”

His father looked at him. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I have nothing against the Jews—I hardly know them—but everyone is going to throw stones. So what should I do?”

Their conversation proceeded, the son presenting questions to his father, the father turning the questions back to his son.

“I understand,” said Andre. “You want me to make up my own mind. I’m going for a walk. I’ll let you know what I’ve decided when I come back.”

When Andre returned a short while later, he approached his parents, who were sitting at the table.

“I’ve made up my mind, but my decision involves you too.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve decided not to throw stones at the Jewish shops. But tomorrow everyone will say, ‘Andre, the son of X, did not take part, he refused to throw stones!’ They will turn against you. What are you going to do?”

His father’s sigh was one of relief tinged with pride. “While you were out, your mother and I discussed this question. We decided that if you made up your mind to throw stones, we would have to live with your decision, since we had let you decide, after all. But if you decided not to throw stones, we would leave Germany immediately.”

And that is what they did. The following day, Andre’s family left Germany.



All of these, and many other readings, can be found in the *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* resource book, available for free download at <https://www.facinghistory.org/resources/facing-history-and-ourselves-holocaust-and-human-behavior>.

After exploring these sources, teachers should return to a sample of student-created supporting questions:

- Did everybody turn against the Jews?
- How did individuals justify the violence they saw around them?
- Why did people accept the Nazi dismantling of democracy that took place in the 1930s?
- What conditions need to be present in a society for neighbor to turn against neighbor?

These primary sources give multiple perspectives for students to consider in their own questions as well as our mini-inquiry question, “What choices were available to ordinary German citizens in the 1920s and 1930s, and how did the range of choices narrow as the Nazis gained power?” They also contribute to a rich and nuanced response to our larger unit question of “Do our choices matter?” Through this process of deep investigation and analysis, we encourage students to listen carefully to the stories each source tells, to continue to add more contextual information to deepen their understanding of the history, and to reflect deeply about what these sources mean for the compelling questions about humanity and agency. By doing so, students practice C3 skills, such as “Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views.” (D3.1.9-12)

#### **Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action**

To conclude this mini-inquiry, students could write their own response to the question, *What choices were available to ordinary German citizens in the 1920s and 1930s, and how did the range of choices narrow as the Nazis gained power?* This engages them in articulating what they saw in the evidence, how they reconcile the choices made within that context, and how they recognize the moral implications of those choices and the significant consequences of those choices.

As students identify how choices mattered during the years leading to the Holocaust and what range of choices were available to individuals, groups, and nations during this history, they balance these understandings with speculations about human behavior,

and so reflect upon the different levels of intricacy that may go into a person's individual choice. (The psychology of human behavior might in and of itself be a mini-inquiry along the larger Inquiry Arc if time allows.) Students can now recognize that violence and injustice often begin with small steps of indifference, conformity, acceptance, and not thinking about what is happening. Additional readings such as "No Time to Think" might be shared to compare students' own writing about this question with the thoughts of somebody who lived through the experience and reflects back on the actions and inactions of German citizens. (See <https://www.facinghistory.org/no-time-think>.)



In their journals and class discussions, students discuss what words like perpetrator, victim, and bystander mean in the context of both everyday and extreme situations. At the same time, they begin to understand that these terms are dynamic, and that at different times throughout an event, people make all types of choices and may play the role of bystander one day and perpetrator or victim the next. This will help them write their own analysis for the mini-inquiry question. In doing this, students "construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses." (D4.1.9-12)



This analysis will also lead directly into future mini-inquiries as students grapple directly with the consequences by looking at the steps taken next in the years leading to the Holocaust. As they realize that this history is about far more than a person or group simply being "evil," and encompassed a whole series of choices and actions that eventually led to catastrophe and genocide, students may well come to understand that history is not inevitable and that crimes against humanity are rooted in a confluence of specific attitudes, choices, and circumstances.

As a result of this inquiry, students reflect upon connections to their own choices in their schools, communities, and democracies, a process that can encourage civic participation and a recognition by students that their choices matter.

While we introduce students to acts of informed participation and civic engagement throughout the case study, as the full Inquiry wraps up, it is valuable to spend some focused time here for students to "assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning." (D4.7.9-12) To accomplish this, teachers can give students space to reflect on the concept of Choosing to Participate in the context of their own identities and communities.

During Choosing to Participate, students are encouraged to ask questions like, "What issues are confronting me and my community? What actions might I take to participate?" The goal of these final lessons is not to force or even propel students into action. Instead, it is to open up their eyes to the different types of participation happening around them and provide a space for them to reflect on who they are, who they want to be, and what kind of world they want to create.

Students might spend time learning about examples of student participation, such as videos produced during the “Not In Our Schools” project (<http://www.niot.org/nios>), that illustrate student responses to injustice. They might meet current leaders at universities or in their communities to understand what propels people to decide to make a difference. At times, a Facing History class may decide to engage in a project to target an issue in their school. If this happens, a teacher may engage students in an exercise to examine strategies used in historical or contemporary examples of participation.



However, it would be equally valid for a student to simply begin to think differently about how he or she interacts with a classmate or family member. Facing History values a wide range of participation and believes that the small, often invisible steps toward creating a just society are as important as the ones that receive accolades and chapters in future history texts.



Ultimately, we hope to create a society of thoughtful citizens who think deeply about the way they live, as much when they are riding the subway to work as when they hear about a national disaster that needs aid. Indeed, at the end of the unit, we hope students believe their choices do matter and are compelled to think carefully about the decisions they make, realizing that their choices will ultimately shape the world.

## About Facing History and Ourselves

Facing History and Ourselves is an organization created in 1976 by educators who believed that instilling intellectual vigor and curiosity as well as developing emotional learning and ethical judgment must all be part of the teaching of historical content.

We provide training, professional development, and resources that support the practical needs and the spirits of educators worldwide who share the goal of creating a better, more informed, and more thoughtful society. Visit <http://facinghistory.org> to learn more and download all the resources mentioned in this chapter.

*The authors of this chapter are Mary Hendra, Associate Program Director for Los Angeles and Organizational Innovation, and Jocelyn Stanton, Senior Associate for Program Staff Development at Facing History and Ourselves. The copyright of this chapter is owned by Facing History and Ourselves. © 2014 Facing History and Ourselves.*