Responsibility After Atrocity

How the Holocaust changed expectations for people and governments

SS24.HOS.22b "Explain how the concepts of personal and civic responsibility have evolved following the Holocaust.*"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline a change in expectations for individuals, circle a change in expectations for governments, and number two ways people can act in their communities.

Who Is Responsible?

1 Before and during the Holocaust, many officials treated obedience to government orders as a duty, even when those orders enabled persecution. Nazi Germany used laws, police, and government offices to strip Jews of rights and carry out mass murder. Other groups were also persecuted and murdered. After the war, the Nuremberg trials prosecuted leading Nazis for crimes including crimes against humanity. The trials rejected the idea that following orders always excuses participation in such crimes. This shift placed a stronger burden on each person with power to judge their actions, refuse participation in atrocities, and face responsibility for their choices.

2 The war also changed expectations for governments. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Genocide Convention, which calls on countries that join it to prevent and punish genocide. That same year, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which set out rights that belong to all people. The declaration was not itself a treaty, but it gave citizens and leaders a shared standard for criticizing abuse. These steps did not stop later genocides. They did, however, challenge the claim that a government can mistreat people within its borders without concern from anyone else.

3 Responsibility also extends beyond courts and treaties. A resident might hear a neighbor repeat a false accusation about a religious group. Personal responsibility could mean questioning the claim and refusing to spread it. Civic responsibility could mean working with a school board to improve lessons about discrimination or asking local officials to protect equal access to public services. Neither action by itself prevents mass violence, and people may disagree about the best lawful response. Still, the history of the Holocaust has helped shift civic thinking from simply obeying rules toward examining whether institutions protect everyone's rights.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Nuremberg trials change expectations for people who carried out harmful government orders?

2. How did the Genocide Convention challenge an older view of a government's responsibilities?

3. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not a treaty. How could it still change civic expectations?

4. How is questioning a neighbor's false accusation different from working with a school board, and what broader change do both actions show?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A town library lets community groups reserve its meeting room, but its director proposes denying one group a reservation because of its religion. In four sentences, explain one personal action and one civic action you could take, and connect each to a change in responsibility described in the passage.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HOS.22b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline a change in expectations for individuals, circle a change in expectations for governments, and number two ways people can act in their communities. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Nuremberg trials change expectations for people who carried out harmful government orders?	**The trials established that following orders does not always excuse participation in atrocities. Individuals can be held responsible for their choices.**
2	How did the Genocide Convention challenge an older view of a government's responsibilities?	**It called on countries that join it to prevent and punish genocide, challenging the view that abuse within a country's borders concerns no one else.**
3	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not a treaty. How could it still change civic expectations?	**It gave citizens and leaders a shared standard for judging and criticizing abuses of rights.**
4	How is questioning a neighbor's false accusation different from working with a school board, and what broader change do both actions show?	**Questioning the accusation is a personal choice; working with a school board is civic action to change an institution. Both show a shift from passive obedience toward protecting others' rights.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would tell the director that denying a room because of religion is unfair, even if others stay quiet. The postwar focus on individual responsibility reminds me not to excuse my own silence by saying I was following others. I would ask the library board to apply its room policy equally and invite residents to speak. The postwar human rights framework gives the community a standard for judging a public institution's actions.

Accept other accurate distinctions between personal choices and civic action through institutions. For Part 3, look for four sentences that propose both kinds of action and connect each to a postwar change without equating this situation with the Holocaust.