



INTRODUCTION

The **occupation** of Berlin that followed the end of World War II presented an overwhelming number of challenges for both the citizens living in Berlin and the armed forces occupying the city. As discussed in the **overview essay “Occupying Germany and Japan,”** US servicemembers in Germany worked to help **displaced persons**, to hold off Nazi resistance fighters, and to try to maintain order in a city with too little food and people who were formerly under the rule of a hostile regime. In addition to these challenges, Soviet forces in the city continued to attack and destroy buildings in the city, while also wreaking havoc on the German population. The Soviets were the first to invade Berlin, and because this action had been established in agreement with the other Allied powers, US forces had no choice but to contend with the Soviet forces and their conduct, while at the same time aiming to keep order among a defeated people. In this lesson, students will examine the conditions of Berlin in the immediate aftermath of World War II by studying differing perspectives. By viewing the oral history of US soldier John “J.J.” Witmeyer, reading selections from German citizen Dorothea von Schwanenflügel Lawson, and by reading the primary sources by Americans Richard E. Berlin and Joel Sayre, students will analyze the unique or shared experiences of the occupier and the occupied and will take into account the effect of perspectives on historical narratives.

MATERIALS

- + Copies of the **overview essay “Occupying Germany and Japan”**
- + Selections from **Richard E. Berlin’s diary**
- + Selections from **Dorothea von Schwanenflügel Lawson’s *Laughter Wasn’t Rationed***
- + Selections from **Joel Sayre’s “Letter from Berlin”**
- + Oral history by John “J.J.” Witmeyer available on ww2classroom.org
- + Copies of the **Student Worksheets**

OBJECTIVES

Watching Witmeyer’s oral history, along with reading the provided primary accounts and **overview essay “Occupying Germany and Japan,”** students will analyze the importance of understanding perspectives in the construction of narratives. They will examine the conditions of occupied Berlin in the immediate aftermath of World War II in order to assess the monumental challenges that faced both the occupying US forces and the German citizens who lived there. Based on reading and discussion, students should be able to contextualize this moment in time following the war, explain how the experience affected different groups on the ground, and construct clear arguments on what actions were of the greatest importance in such a situation and why.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1


Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

 John “J.J.” Witmeyer Oral History

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 2

The student comprehends a variety of historical sources; therefore, the student is able to demonstrate the following:

- Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses and the purpose, perspective, or point of view from which it has been constructed.
- Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved—their probable values, outlook, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Appreciate historical perspectives and the ability to (a) describe the past on its own terms, through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, diaries, letters, debates, arts, artifacts, and the like; (b) consider the historical context in which the event unfolded—the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place; and (c) avoid “present-mindedness,” judging the past solely in terms of present-day norms and values.

PROCEDURES

1. Have students read the **overview essay “Occupying Germany and Japan”** before the start of this lesson. Open by setting the historical context for the class by mentioning, or have the students discuss, what Berlin was like after the war ended. Discussing the level of devastation and the scarcity of available resources, ask the students what they believe the responsibilities of the US troops were while occupying the city.
2. Have students collectively watch the oral history of John “J.J.” Witmeyer, focusing on his experiences occupying Germany. Follow with a full-class discussion on the responsibilities and challenges faced by **occupation** forces.
3. Break students into small groups and assign them a role of “occupier” and “occupied.” Have them focus on the specified sources listed in the directions on the **Student Worksheet** and fill out the worksheet as they read and discuss. To save time, you may have the students read the sources at home and prepare for discussion the following day.
4. After students have finished discussing the primary sources and their respective roles, have them discuss what they found with the full class. What similarities appeared between the two groups? What are the differences?
5. Conclude the discussion by asking the students how a change of perspective can affect understanding of historical narratives. What major takeaways do the students have about the history of occupied Berlin and how does that history fit into their broader understanding of the end of World War II?

ASSESSMENT

Through in-class discussion and written responses, students should demonstrate the ability to analyze different perspectives of the same historical event. By looking at different viewpoints from people in postwar Berlin, students should formulate clear arguments on the ways perspectives can affect the understanding of historical narratives. Through their analysis of the experiences of both occupier and the occupied, students should gain a sense of the complexities that shaped postwar Berlin, and the challenges that awaited the occupying forces. By the end of the lesson, students should be able to articulate clearly how these experiences fit into the broader history of World War II, and how these narratives change their understanding of postwar Germany.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

1. In his oral history, John "J.J." Witmeyer references difficulties with "Werewolves." For an extension exercise, have the students conduct research on Nazi resistance fighters and the ways they complicated the efforts of US forces to maintain order after the war.
2. By looking at the history of postwar Berlin, ask the students to connect these narrative accounts to the history of the Marshall Plan and US-led efforts to rebuild Western Europe. How do these stories change their understanding of the Marshall Plan? What challenges faced those who took up the task to rebuild these devastated cities? Do these sources show that there was a need for the Marshall Plan after World War II, or do the students see it as an effort primarily concerned with preventing the spread of **communism**?

RICHARD E. BERLIN

Diary of a Flight to occupied Germany, July 20 to August 27, 1945, pp. 70-82.

ON DISPLACED PERSONS (DPs)

"This D.P. problem is one of the most serious problems in all Europe. Returning from the camp back to Frankfurt we stopped at a railroad crossing and saw a camouflaged train passing. Thousands of D.P.s were riding in open cars in the rain—household belongings, prams, all kinds of bedding, etc. were packed in the cars, everyone sitting on belongings. The train was moving in the direction of Poland. We were told that when it got into the Russian zone the people possibly will be thrown off the train to start endless wanderings. This prospect of hardship is one of the reasons why the Poles do not like to leave the American zone. There are approximately 700,000 D.P.s in the American zone at present."

ON CONDITIONS IN BERLIN

"We were told not to drink the water as it was contaminated; we were given insect-repellent powder and warned there was malaria from mosquitoes, caused by wrecked sewer mains, uninterred [sic] bodies, etc."

"You get a sickly feeling of nausea from the stench of body decomposition and the devastating wreckage all about. You see old women on the street faint from malnutrition. You never see a smile on the face of a Berliner."

"One hears explosions continually in the outskirts of Berlin. You are told that these explosions are the Russians demolishing factories. One authority reports the Russians stripped a large electric bulb manufacturing plant outside of Berlin of all of its inventory and machinery, then demolished the factories. The city has no electric light bulbs at present."

ON THE SOVIETS

"It is difficult to find anyone who knows exactly what is going on to the east of Berlin as this region is in the hands of the Russians and travel is positively forbidden to the Allies."

"Occasionally a stray traveler who gets through the lines from a Russian-held region says that the Russians remove everything humanly possible from buildings, even down to the wash bowls, the bath-tubs [sic], doorknobs, toilets, etc. They strip the factories completely. After having stripped the factories they detonate, and say it is a casualty of war."

"In contacts with the Russians, American officers are treated with extraordinary civility. There is bowing and saluting, procrastinating and procrastinating till the Americans are worn out and fail to accomplish what they requested."

DOROTHEA VON SCHWANENFLÜGEL LAWSON

Laughter Wasn't Rationed: A Personal Journey Through Germany's World Wars and Postwar Years (Tricor Press, 1999).

THE FINAL BATTLE FOR BERLIN

"On April 16, 1945, the final battle for Berlin began. The Soviets gradually cut off the last escape route and we sat in a death trap from which survival would be a matter of luck. We could already hear the Soviet heavy artillery as we huddled together in the seclusion of our cellars, trembling for our lives and praying that the Americans would get here in time to liberate Berlin. We knew they were only sixty miles away. Why did it take them so long? There was no German army blocking their way. But our hope was in vain because General Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces, had stopped the American troops the day before, April 15, to give the Soviets the sole honor of capturing Berlin. We were left like prey to the Red Army."

A SHATTERING NOISE

"The Soviets battled the German soldiers and drafted civilians street by street until we could hear explosions and rifle fire right in our immediate vicinity. As the noise got closer, we could even hear the horrible guttural screaming of the Soviet soldiers which sounded to us like enraged animals. Shots shattered our windows and shells exploded in our garden, and suddenly the Soviets were on our street. Shaken by the battle around us and numb with fear, we watched from behind the small cellar windows facing the street as the tanks and an endless convoy of troops rolled by...

...

The next morning, we women proceeded to make ourselves look as unattractive as possible to the Soviets by smearing our faces with coal dust and covering our heads with old rags, our make-up for the Ivan. We huddled together in the central part of the basement, shaking with fear, while some peeked through the low basement windows to see what was happening on the Soviet-controlled street... At the ruin across the street from us the first Soviet orders were posted, including a curfew. Suddenly there was a shattering noise outside. Horrified, we watched the Soviets demolish the corner grocery store and throw its contents, shelving and furniture out into the street. Urgently needed bags of flour, sugar and rice were split open and spilled their contents on the bare pavement, while Soviet soldiers stood guard with their rifles so that no one would dare to pick up any of the urgently needed food. This was just unbelievable. At night, a few desperate people tried to salvage some of the spilled food from the gutter. Hunger now became a major concern because our ration cards were worthless with no hope of any supplies."

OUR NIGHTMARE HAD BECOME A REALITY

"The next day [May 2, 1945], General Wilding [Helmuth Weidling], the commander of the German troops in Berlin, finally surrendered the entire city to the Soviet army. There was no radio or newspaper, so vans with loudspeakers drove through the streets ordering us to cease all resistance. Suddenly, the shooting and bombing stopped and the unreal silence meant that one ordeal was over for us and another was about to begin. Our nightmare had become a reality. The entire three hundred square miles of what was left of Berlin were now completely under control of the Red Army. The last days of savage house to house fighting and street battles had been a human slaughter, with no prisoners being taken on either side. These final days were hell. Our last remaining and exhausted troops, primarily children and old men, stumbled into imprisonment. We were a city in ruins; almost no house remained intact."

JOEL SAYRE, "LETTER FROM BERLIN"

Originally published in *The New Yorker Magazine*, July 28, 1945, p. 40.

With some friends, I walked one day down the short, narrow Oberwallstrasse, which runs off Unter den Linden. What we saw there can, with a few variations, can be seen today in hundreds of Berlin side streets. A wrecked American half-track with S.S. license plates lay keeled over to starboard, and other military vehicles were strewn along behind it.

...

Halfway up the street, an elderly woman and a little girl were foraging for fuel in another wrecked house. A sign on one wall of it said, in German, "Warning! As per order of the Herr Police President of Berlin, this property has been strewn with a highly poisonous rat exterminator. Children and domestic animals are to be kept at a distance." The old woman and the little girl hadn't read the sign or, more likely, didn't care. Under a fallen joist the child found a man's left shoe, in fairly good condition, and this she put into her rucksack. Single shoes are a commodity on Germany's black market.

My friends and I walked back to Unter den Linden. A pale, bald man with protruding black eyes pedaled slowly by on a bicycle with no tires on its wheels.

...

In front of the Brandenburg Gate a pretty Russian WAC [Women's Army Corps], with the help of two flags, was directing what traffic there was. Above the gate's arches hung a Russian banner inscribed "Long live the Soviet Armies that planted their victory standards in Berlin!"

...

A thin old man, who must have taken us for Russians, approached and said in a whining voice, "Guten Tag, comrades. Can you spare me a little tobacco?" He wore a black homburg that almost covered his ears, a wing collar and a string tie, a dark suit and overcoat that were very neatly brushed and pressed, and beautifully shined black shoes. We turned him down, and he sorrowfully walked on with his hands clasped behind him.

...

Next we got talking with a pale youth who was carrying a portfolio. He told us that he was a Jew and showed us his card to prove it. Jews and half-Jews in Berlin have identification cards issued by the Russians. Each card has the bearer's photograph, declares that he is a victim of National Socialism, and asks that he be given special consideration. This youth didn't mention tobacco. When one of us handed him a cigarette, he was overwhelmed.

No tobacco has been sold legally in Berlin since May 2nd. On the black market a single cigarette costs from fifteen to twenty marks (a dollar and a half to two dollars, at the official rate of exchange), depending on its quality. American cigarettes are considered the best, and the standard black-market price for a pack of twenty is three hundred marks, or thirty dollars. The value of a pack of Chesterfields can run as high as seventy-five to ninety dollars.

NAME:

DATE:

Directions: Depending on class size, divide the students into two separate or multiple small groups. Assign the roles of “occupier” and “occupied” to the respective groups. Have the groups then focus their reading and analysis and fill out the worksheet using the following sources:

- Occupier** – John “J.J.” Witmeyer’s oral history, Joel Sayre’s “Letter from Berlin”
- Occupied** – Dorothea von Schwanenflügel Lawson’s *Laughter Wasn’t Rationed*, Richard E. Berlin’s diary segments

Students should also take into account information presented in the **overview essay “Occupying Germany and Japan”** for context and reference as needed.

OCCUPIER	OCCUPIED
What is your primary goal?	What is your primary goal?
What challenges do you face?	What challenges do you face?
How do you see the occupied?	How do you see the occupier?

NAME:

DATE:

Directions: During the full-class discussion, have the students fill out the following diagram, in which they note the unique and similar experiences encountered by both the occupiers and the occupied.

