

Playing Dangerous Games with History or a Review of Selected Nazi Myths

Łukasz Migniewicz

Lesson scenario

Introduction

1. Explain to the students that the aim of this lesson is to try to determine the extent to which the falsification of history and the creation of myths consolidated Nazi regime's power, and how far the manipulation went. Try to raise their awareness of the ease with which Nazi propaganda influenced the minds of citizens by reporting on the surprising passivity of the German public in the face of the brutality and crimes of the regime.
2. Inform the students that they will be working individually or in groups and that your deliberations will be based on a joint discussion of the issues raised. It is important to be able to express ideas freely and to create arguments and counter-arguments.
3. Distribute the worksheets and sets of source materials to the students. In the scenario, I have suggested one way of using them. However, they are structured in such a way that you can adapt them.

Development

1. The falsification of history and propaganda in history are not an invention of the 20th century. In a short teaching discussion (including a mini-lecture), give the students examples of manipulations that have had a major impact on the generation of the day and future ones. I suggest focusing on specific examples from general or regional history that refer to events familiar to the students, such as the manipulation of history by communist governments in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. You are free to choose, but focus on a few examples that clearly show the contrast between manipulation and facts. After the mini-lecture,

ask students to speak about the power of historical lies and how they become embedded in society. While they are speaking, ask them what examples of fake news they have come across in modern history. Write down all the observations on the board (for online learning, it may be useful to write them on the screen or allow the students to share their own screens with the others). When all answers have been collected, introduce the students to the definition of propaganda. Point out its important role in creating a society subjugated to those in power and that it often plays on historical fears. Ask whether manipulating/falsifying history can be the most effective component of propaganda.

2. Divide the students into groups (of four to six members each) and distribute the worksheets to them. In this part of the lesson, they will work on Sources A, B and C and work on the answers to Exercises 1 and 2. Then propose to sum up the students' work in the form of a mini-discussion panel, according to the long table principle, i.e. a representative of each group sits at the table and discusses a given topic (Exercises 1 and 2 with points)¹. The others are the audience. The role of moderator² is played by you. While the discussion is going on, any participant who thinks they have exhausted the topic can leave the table at any time to make room for another discussant from the audience. The principle also works the other way round. Observers can also ask for a seat at the table and replace a debater. It is important that as many students as possible have the floor during this exchange of ideas and opinions. This principle allows for a lively and dynamic exchange of ideas. At the end of the discussion, the participants write down the results and conclusions on a flipchart, which will include answers to exercises related to Sources A, B and C.³

Summarise the discussion, pay attention to the arguments. Emphasise the fact that anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda repeatedly manipulated facts and made use of

¹ A description of the method can be found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Table [accessed 31 December 2021].

² In itself, the long table method does not envisage this role, yet if you think that exerting a degree of control over the discussion is necessary, feel free to go ahead.

³ The long table formula can be successfully applied in online teaching. Those willing have a discussion, with other discussants joining in. Some online teaching applications make it possible to create separate rooms for groupwork, which considerably facilitate the completion of this exercise and application of all possible groupwork methods.

historical relics, which were interpreted freely by the regime and often taken out of context.⁴

3. The school in totalitarian systems was supposed to shape a new man completely obedient to the authorities, uncritically accepting all information as the only correct. Inform the students about the role of education in the Third Reich. Ask them to read Sources D and E together. Draw their attention to the issue of 'race' in German legislation, also referring to the arguments formulated in the previous part of the class. Tell them that they will do Exercise 4 on their own. Then, following the snowball method, they should get into pairs and compare their arguments and justifications.⁵ The next step is for the groups of twos to form fours, fours to form eights, etc., until the whole class comes up with a justification. The students can do Exercise 5 on their own (e.g. as homework).
4. Introduce the students to another myth used by Nazi propaganda to manipulate history - the 'stab in the back'. Point out that this was one of the main arguments the Nazis used to revise the Treaty of Versailles. Ask the students to read Source F and G. Suggest that they do Exercise 6. Together, reflect on the question in Exercise 7, which concludes this part of the lesson.
5. Explain to the students that the Nazis, in their drive to falsify historical and anthropological facts, tried to justify the myth of the *Übermensch* and the Aryan race⁶ and the aggression directed towards other peoples and countries by creating another myth – that of a living space in eastern Europe. This led to an extermination machine that cost millions of lives in the name of false assumptions in biology, archaeology and history. Ask the students to read Sources H and I, and then suggest a discussion on the following topic: *Do both sources refer to the falsification of the history of the origin of the German people?* Writing the arguments on the board/flipchart, etc., work out together, how the narrative looks

⁴ At this point, it is worthwhile emphasising the broad importance of economic and social factors of reluctance towards Jews, resulting not from a particular obsession harboured by Hitler and his entourage, but the negative phenomenon of anti-Semitism present in society and culture for centuries.

⁵ The snowball method can be modified in case of online teaching, proposing the students to hold group discussions and then to exchange the agreed justifications between the groups.

⁶ This motif frequently comes up in literature and films. Some of the time of the lesson could be devoted to a conversation about it. Ask the students whether they know some specific titles.

in both sources and what the opinions of scholars on anthropological and historical research in the Third Reich have in common. Finally, present all the arguments that have emerged in the discussion.

Summary

During the class, you and your students have made a small catalogue of historical myths and the historical manipulations and falsifications which have arisen from them. In conclusion, you should gather all the materials worked out together with your students and create a graph: a mind map⁷ focused on the myth – history falsification as its central point. It will be helpful for the students when they are doing their homework.

Homework

Write an essay on 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.'⁸ Do you agree with the author George Orwell's words? You can use sources from the lesson in your work.

Keywords

historical myth, manipulation of history, falsification of history, propaganda, anti-Semitism, racism, backstabbing, education in the Third Reich, George Orwell

⁷ One of the activating methods used in class where the participants create a poster during a discussion/debate as its graphic summary.

A description of the method can be found at: <https://www.szkolazklasa.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Metaplan.pdf> [accessed 14 December 2020].

⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Classics, 2021).