Background: Below is an excerpt from BBC correspondent Patrick Gordon-Walker about his experience at Belsen concentration camp on 24 April, 1945. Read the excerpt and discuss with your classmates your impressions.

“T
he camps were so full because people had been brought here from east and west. Some people were brought from Nordhausen, a five-day journey, without food. Many had marched for two or three days. There was no food at all in the camp, a few piles of roots- amidst the piles of dead bodies. Some of the dead bodies were of people so hungry that though the roots were guarded by SS-men they had tried to storm them and had been shot down then and there. There was no water, nothing but these roots and some boiled stinking carrots, enough for a few hundred people.

Men and women had fought for these raw, uncooked roots. Dead bodies, black and blue and bloated, and skeletons had been used as pillows by sick people. The day after we took over, seven block leaders, mostly Poles, were murdered by the inmates. Some were still beating the people. We arrested one woman who had beaten another woman with a board. She quite frankly admitted the offense. We are arresting these people.

An enormous buried dump of personal jewelry and belongings was discovered in suitcases. When I went to the camp five days after its liberation, there were still bodies all around. I saw about a thousand.”
HEROES & VILLAINS: THE QUEST FOR CIVIC VIRTUE

THE SELF-DECEPTION OF IRMA GRESE

Directions: Ordinary men and women have committed the most inhumane and immoral atrocities in human history. Whether falling into self-deception or being consumed by self-interest, these individuals lost their humanity. By studying these tragic events and the evil that drove them, we can learn to better avoid the dangers of deception poses for all of us. Read the essay below and answer the discussion questions.

The trial began on September 17, 1945. On the stand were 45 defendants, each accused of acts of great barbarity. One of them was a 22-year-old woman from northeastern Germany. Her beauty made her stand out from the crowd. With blonde hair and blue eyes, she was the picture of Aryan beauty. Her name was Irma Grese.

Irma was born on a small farm in northeastern Germany in 1923. Her mother committed suicide when she was only 13, leaving her to be raised only by her father. Her sister described her as a shy and meek child who would often avoid conflict instead of starting it. She left school when she was 14, as she was frustrated and bored of her schooling. After dropping out of school, Irma worked several odd jobs until she eventually began working at a local hospital, where she received training to be a nurse.

During the 1930s in Germany, a political movement called the National Socialist Germany Workers Party, or Nazis, seized power under the leadership of its charismatic, demagogic leader, Adolf Hitler, and the strong-arm tactics of its paramilitary troops, the SA brownshirts. The Nazis gained power and increasing popularity with a promise to overcome the economic calamity of the Great Depression, and an appeal to an ideology of racial superiority of the German people and extreme nationalism. By the mid-1930s, the Nazi Party dominated Germany, establishing a one-party totalitarian state and dictatorship of Hitler. The Nazis created laws targeted especially against Jews, including forbidding marriage with Germans, limiting Jewish citizenship, and banning Jews from professions.

The Nazis tried to mobilize all members of society to form a mass movement of the entire nation. Therefore, the Hitler Youth and League of German Women were set up for young boys and girls to be introduced to the radical ideology of the Nazi Party. These organizations encouraged a fervent faith in the Nazi ideology and to report anyone who disagreed, including family members if necessary. Irma joined the League of German Women and received indoctrination at a young age. She became a fervent advocate of the Nazi ideology.

While working at the hospital and attending Nazi rallies, Irma also began to meet Nazi party officials. In addition to her personal activities, Irma was surrounded by war propaganda, calling upon German youth to aide the Nazi cause in whatever way they could. Her dedication to Nazi ideals was rewarded by the regime. By 1942 she had joined the S.S. Auxiliaries and been posted to Ravensbruck concentration camp for
Irma, like all other Nazi camp guards, underwent several weeks of training which further brainwashed recruits by reinforcing the party ideology and taught the women how to control prisoners. The training also dehumanized the Jews by referring to them as “sub-human” and comparing them to parasites. Irma took to the training with avidity. The warped ideology of Nazism gave her what she thought was a purpose. This combined with her training would drive her to unspeakable acts of violence.

Irma served in several concentration camps from 1943 to 1945, including the notorious camp at Auschwitz. She saw the prisoners she was charged with as less than human and treated them with disdain. She became more and more sadistic with her prisoners. She was known to carry a whip and a pistol on her at all times; both tools she used to inflict pain and suffering upon those under her watch. She was also known to engage in the psychological torture of prisoners. She would often make them stand at roll call for hours, no matter the weather, to test their resolve. Irma was also tasked with selecting “unfit” prisoners to be sent to their deaths in the gas chambers. Many prisoners would do all they could to disguise their true health during these inspections. Irma was known personally to poke and prod prisoners to test their true health. The shy farm girl had turned herself into a tool for the racial ideology professed by the Nazis, which created a sadistic tormentor who participated in the Holocaust, or extermination of the Jews.

In April of 1945, the elements of the British and Canadian armies captured Irma when they liberated the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen where she was posted. In September of 1945 she went on trial for the atrocities that she and others committed at the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. She denied the severity of the charges that were brought up against her during the trial and never sincerely apologized for them.

Irma Grese was executed on December 13, 1945. She was only twenty-two, but had committed unspeakable crimes. She was deluded by an extreme racial ideology of hatred. Instead of a normal, happy childhood, she had deceived herself and enthusiastically participated in genocide and one of the greatest crimes against humanity in world history. When she was executed, she was the age of most college seniors today.

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**Defining Civic Virtues: Deception**

To lie to yourself and others either to deceive purposefully or because you are deluded into thinking that something is right when it is wrong and unjust.
Discussion Guide

Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. Why do you think Irma was deceived by Nazi ideology?
2. Why was the ideology of Nazism so deceptive to the German people?
3. What experiences in Irma’s life may have influenced her views about Nazi ideology?
4. To what extent are individuals responsible for their deeds while participating in a collective action?
5. What do Irma Grese’s actions say about her views regarding the humanity of the individuals she was guarding?
6. How did tenants of Nazi ideology corrupt Irma’s view of humanity?
7. Do you think that Irma believed what she was doing was right or was she deceiving herself in order to find a sense of purpose and belonging? Does this change her level of moral culpability? If so, how?
8. Because she joined the League of German Women at a young age, was she responsible for the person that she grew to be or was she merely a product of indoctrination?
9. If she was merely a product of indoctrination, does this reduce her level of moral culpability or is a person always responsible for his or her actions as an adult?
10. Considering her level of moral culpability, are any of her actions or choices forgivable? Explain.
11. Should she be looked at as a truly horrific person who is responsible for deplorable acts or as tragic figure who was indoctrinated at a young age into a dangerous and evil ideology? Can she be both of these things at the same time?
12. What does it say about Irma that she denied or refused to admit to the charges that were arraigned against her?
13. In light of this story, how should we examine the actions of those who joined the Hitler Youth and the League of German Women? Are they all morally culpable for their actions? Does indoctrination excuse or mitigate their actions?
PHOTO COMPARISON

PHOTO 1
Look at the image of the girls at the left. Write down as many observations about them as you can about them. What are their emotions? What do you believe their profession is?
PHOTO 2
Now review the second photo. What changes about your perception of the guards? What in the photo changed your perception of it? What happened to the ordinary people we saw in the pervious photo? Does your view of them change? What observations do you have about them now?
The girls in the photo were members of the League of German Women, the female arm of the Hitler youth. Several members of this league would go on to serve as female prison guards in concentration camps, such as the one pictured to the right.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION
How does this photo impact your view of the three girls from before? Do you think the girls in the first photo are capable of such atrocities? How do you think it was that ordinary individuals became involved in such barbaric actions? Though Irma Grese is not one of the girls pictured, she was apart of the same League of German Women. How does knowing Irma’s story affect how you view the girls?
SELF-DECEPTION

Suggested Launch Activity

TEACHER’S NOTES

About Launch Activities

This optional introductory activity is designed to support you in the classroom. However, the primary narratives and photos in the section that follows can be used with or without this introduction.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How can a person become so deceived by an idea that they will commit horrific acts against others? How can one prevent themselves from being deceived in a such a way?

PRIMARY SOURCES & THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was a unique event in human history. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime carried out the genocide of an entire group of people, the Jews. Although Jews were practitioners of a religion, the Nazis used Social Darwinism and other racial science theory to label Jews a race who were “inferior.” They used the modern technology of railroads to ship Jews from all over Europe and killed them in modern factory systems. The organization of the systematic mass murder was carried out by Nazi bureaucrats who saw it as a complex problem to solve. All of this happened in the modern twentieth century. As a result, the Nazis killed six million Jews and millions of other people deemed “inferior.” In the wake of World War II, the world cried, “Never Forget.”

Discuss with the students how primary sources are important to the Holocaust for several reasons. Primary sources help preserve the memory of this terrible crime so that it never happens again. Additionally, primary sources help us to remember the victims of the genocide. Since there are those who deny that the Holocaust happen or question its scope, primary sources provide stark and comprehensive evidence that the Holocaust happened. Finally, primary sources associated with the Nazi participants can help start to explain how the people could have deceived themselves into thinking that it was morally acceptable to kill Jews.
IRMA GRESE
AND DECEPTION

Analyzing Primary Source Documents

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he camps were so full because people had been brought here from east and west. Some people were brought from Nordhausen, a five-day journey, without food. Many had marched for two or three days. There was no food at all in the camp, a few piles of roots- amidst the piles of dead bodies. Some of the dead bodies were of people so hungry that though the roots were guarded by SS-men they had tried to storm them and had been shot down then and there. There was no water, nothing but these roots and some boiled stinking carrots, enough for a few hundred people.

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Virtue In Action

Strive to not be deceived or deluded by ideas that endanger the humanity of others and movements that are unjust.

Think about ways in which Irm Grese was deceived in her own life. What led her to be tempted on a dark path? Identify ways you can avoid that in your own life.

When working on group projects, be mindful how others are impacted by your decisions.
If you play sports, always remember to see other players as equals you’re competing against.
Let your own merits set you apart.
Treat others equally, never work to devalue others to create an advantage for yourself.

Sources & Further Reading

Virtue Across the Curriculum

*Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi* (1985), directed by Richard Marquand
Luke Skywalker is a young and often headstrong Jedi in training. He is fighting on behalf of the resistance against the Galactic Empire. The light side of the force guides his actions. When he learns that his father is the dread Darth Vader, a fallen Jedi who has been tempted away from the light side of the force by the power of the dark side, he is confronted with a choice. Will he continue fighting for his friends or join his father? Tempted by both the natural love of family and the power the dark side of the force offers, Luke must resist with all his might not to be tempted and swept away by the powers of evil.

*Captain America, Civil War* (2016), directed by Anthony and Joel Russo
Torn between loyalty to his friend and to a group fighting for justice, Captain America must think through what is right and what is wrong and how not to be deceived by the wrong side.

**OTHER WORKS**
*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank
*Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl
*Schindler’s List* directed by Steven Spielberg (1993)
*Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi
*Night* by Elie Wiesel
Self-Deception

**Directions** How does a person come to be deceived by an evil or unjust idea? What are important things to keep in mind when reading about an idea? How is self-interest and self-delusion? What can one do to keep themselves grounded? How can a diversity of opinions in a civil society help prevent deception?

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–Winston Churchill, September 3, 1939
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