

Students asked to Defend Nazis and the Holocaust in Homework Assignment

"Okay class, today's assignment is to write an essay about 'The Final Solution' the plan created by Nazi Germany to exterminate Jewish people and others they deemed to be not worthy of life. I want half of you to make an argument in favor of the plan, and half of you to argue against it."

Those weren't the exact words used by Oswego County (NY) high school teacher Michael DeNobile when he addressed his students, but it captures the essence of his assignment. According to a [report in Syracuse.com](#), the assignment included the advisory, "Ultimately, this is an exercise on expanding your point of view by going outside your comfort zone and training your brain to logistically find the evidence necessary to prove a point, even if it is existentially and philosophically against what you believe."

Let that sink in for a moment. A high school teacher assigned students to write about the advantages and benefits of one of humanity's darkest events, the systematic murder of millions of people. And to do it from the perspective of a Nazi official.

Apparently in the environs of Syracuse, New York, genocide isn't a particularly troubling subject. When students Jordan April and Archer Shurtliff initially voiced their objections to being asked to write an essay in support of the Nazi killing machine, New York Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia defended the assignment. According to another [Syracuse.com article](#), "Elia was not aware of the assignment given locally, but said the critical thinking that stems from this type of essay could be good for students."

Four days later, she changed her opinion stating, "Since first learning of the assignment, I've done my homework to determine the facts in this situation. I spoke with district officials about this serious matter. We agree the assignment should not have been given. The teacher apologized and the assignment will not be used in the future."

Without question, writing in support of actions one finds unsettling or revolting is an excellent means of learning to think critically, and unemotionally about a topic. But selecting a subject that is current would have had greater impact as it could have related to students' personal experiences or direct knowledge.

Surely, there was controversy surrounding some recent events in Oswego County, or in New York state, or somewhere in the United States. And just as surely, writing about those events would not have involved asking high school students to present justification for the murder of millions of people.

However, in selecting the Holocaust, an event that took place more than 75 years ago, DeNobile perhaps thought he was playing it safe (if he thought at all). The Jewish community isn't known for vigorous protests and rioting in response to anti-Semitic activities.

It's not surprising that some people didn't find the assignment objectionable. In fact, Rachel Trumble, one of DeNobile's students wrote a [letter to the editor](#) in support of her teacher and the assignment.

She stated, "At first glance, this assignment looks horrific in itself. However, the overall goal of it is to help us become more sympathetic to everyone, even those that are not considered 'mainstream.'"

I have to wonder whether she would have felt sympathetic if the assignment had been to write an essay justifying the murder of people close to her.

From the ivory tower of academia, it's no doubt difficult to see the effects of an essay assignment that asks high school students to support genocide.

In fact, treating the Holocaust as if it had no more significance than a Coke Versus Pepsi taste test trivializes the lives of those who were murdered. Even more disturbing, it positions the decision to commit murder on the same plain as picking the best tasting soft drink.