

Lesson Plan: An American Soldier Reflects on Fascism and Slavery in a Letter from Spain Social Studies

Lesson Plan

Title	An American Soldier Reflects on Fascism and Slavery in a letter from Spain
Subject	US History
Grade(s)	High School
Standards	CCSS-ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2 CCSS-ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1
Author credits	Michelle Sass, Mike Leist, Tracy Blake
Keywords	African-Americans, rise of fascism, Nazism, origins of World War II, civil rights, antisemitism, genocide.
Essential questions	What different reasons did international volunteers have for fighting in Spain? How did some perceive Hitler, fascism and racial nationalism in 1937 (well before the outbreak of World War II)? Why would a black experiencing segregation and racism in his own country fight in a war “between whites” in another part of the world?
Synopsis	Canute Frankson was an African-American mechanic from Pennsylvania, and a volunteer who gave his expertise to the International Garage in Albacete, in southeastern Spain. In a letter to a friend, Frankson justified his reason for fighting by comparing Nazism to the worst horrors of American slavery.
Standard Alignment(s) used	Common core State Standards (literacy in history/social studies)
Recommended Teacher Background	
Connection to other disciplines	English Language Arts
Number of class periods	1 or 2

Standards

Objectives	Standards addressed
Determine the central ideas in a primary source about the Spanish Civil War; provide an accurate summary of how an idea develops over the course of the text.	CCSS-ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS-ELA-
Literacy.RH.9-
10.1

Primary Sources

- Canute Frankson letter excerpts
- Chaim Katz letter

Secondary Sources

- Dictionary or other source for vocabulary enhancement
- History textbook or other source on civil rights/rise of Nazism as needed

Procedures

1. Possible Lead-Ins/Hooks: What are the effects of standing up for your beliefs and principles when those close to you disagree with your stance? Would you risk losing a friend in order to take a moral stance? How would you attempt to preserve a friendship with someone who disagrees with you on a big issue? Is it possible and/or desirable to take personal responsibility for global injustice?
2. Pre-assessment and activation of prior knowledge: What were the features of Hitler's racial nationalism? What forms of discrimination/racism existed in the U.S. in the 1930s? What is meant by Jim Crow?

3. Step by Step:

1. Brief introduction to the Spanish Civil War:

- In the 1930s, Spain became a reform-minded republic for the first time in its history, but not without controversy and violence from people who were “monarchists” or others who embraced Spain’s traditional past..
- In 1936, a civil war broke out. Conservative minded rebels, some embracing fascism, fought against the republican government. They were backed with weapons from Nazi Germany.

2. Before reading – Define vocabulary to be found in reading: Progressive, degenerate, fascism, democracy, lynching.

3. Read biographical summary and letter by Canute Frankson (see appendix) by dividing students into smaller, heterogeneous groups. Have one or more students read the letter out loud to group members.

4. After reading – Consider the following questions/statements about the reading (either in whole-class or small-group discussion):

- (from “Directed Note Taking”) What events motivated Frankson to fight in the war? What beliefs or ideologies influenced his decision? What did Frankson think was at stake for him and his people? What personal relationships influenced him to fight?
- Why does Frankson sympathize with the Jews and the Spanish people in their struggles against fascism and Nazism?
- What is Frankson’s vision for an outcome to the conflict? Do you believe this is realistic? Why or why not? Is your answer influenced by hindsight? How would your response be different if you were his friend reading the letter in 1937?
- Theorize on how Frankson’s political ideology has influenced him to fight for democracy in a foreign country.
- Based on the letter, what tension might have existed between Frankson and the recipient of the letter? How does Frankson connect his highly-valued personal friendship to this international struggle in which he has become a part?
- Are Frankson’s comments fair in comparing Nazi racism to racism in the South in the 18th and 19th centuries? (Keep in mind that the letter was written in 1937, before the outbreak of World War II and before the Holocaust.)

4. Closure:

Return to the hook. Ask students to consider whether or not they would break the law or risk jeopardizing a friendship, or whether or not an individual can make a difference in a global conflict.

Differentiation

- Struggling: Use “Directed Note Taking” assignment (see appendix).
- Advanced: Compare and contrast Canute Frankson’s letter to that of another Lincoln Brigade volunteer, such as Hyman Katz (see appendix for Katz’s letter)

Assessment

- If not used for differentiation, the letter by Hyman Katz (see appendix) could be used to test students' ability to find central ideas or use textual evidence to support analysis of a primary source. Specifically, Katz's views about fascism in relation to events in Europe could be addressed, or the differences in tone when writing to a friend (Frankson's letter) or writing to a mother (Katz's letter).
- Students could also be asked to compare or contrast a letter to another type of primary source, citing examples from the Frankson letter to support their conclusions regarding strengths and weaknesses.

Appendix 1: Frankson bio

Canute Frankson Frankson was born in the Parish of St. Catherine, Old Harbor, Jamaica on April 13, 1890. In 1917, together with his wife, Rachel, he emigrated to Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, where Frankson worked as a machinist. Frankson eventually settled in Detroit, where he worked in the auto industry. Frankson joined the Communist Party in 1934. He sailed for Europe aboard the *Queen Mary* on April 21, 1937. In Spain, skilled machinists were scarce and Frankson with his proven ability was rapidly promoted. He was appointed Head Mechanic at the International Garage in Albacete. Fellow International Garage veteran, Marion Noble, noted that Frankson's fluency in Spanish was a great asset and that many hours of his free time were spent teaching engine repair classes to young Spaniards. Frankson returned to the United States aboard the *President Harding* on September 24, 1938. Frankson was killed in an auto accident in either 1939 or 1940.

Appendix 2: Frankson letter excerpts

Citation: Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, *Madrid 1937* (New York, 1996), pp. 33-35. *Excerpts from letter* Albacete, Spain July 6, 1937 My Dear Friend, I'm sure that by this time you are still waiting for a detailed explanation of what has this international struggle to do with my being here. Since this is a war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery, and have heaped every kind of insult and abuse upon us, segregated and jim-crowed us; why I, a Negro who have fought through these years for the rights of my people, am here in Spain today? Because we are no longer an isolated minority group fighting hopelessly against an immense giant. Because, my dear, we have joined with, and become an active part of, a great progressive force on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving human civilization from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush Fascism here we'll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's Fascist heels. All we have to do is to think of the lynching of our people. We can but look back at the pages of American history stained with the blood of Negroes; stink with the burning bodies of our people hanging from trees; bitter with the groans of our tortured loved ones from whose living bodies ears, fingers, toes have been cut for souvenirs, living bodies into which red-hot poker have been thrust. All because of a hate created in the minds of men and women by their masters who keep us all under their heels while they suck our blood, while they live in their bed of ease by exploiting us... ..We will crush them. We will build us a new society – a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching. That is why, my dear, I'm here in Spain. On the battlefields of Spain we fight for the preservation of democracy. Here, we're laying the foundation for world peace, and for the liberation of my people, and of the human race. Here, where we're engaged in one of the most bitter struggles of human history, there is no color line, no discrimination, no race hatred. There's only one hate, and that is the hate for Fascism. We know why our enemies are. The Spanish people are very sympathetic towards us. They are lovely people. I'll tell you about them later... Don't think for one moment that the strain of this terrible war or the many miles between us has changed my feelings towards you. Our friendship has meant a great deal to me, and still means much to me. I appreciate it because it has always been a friendship of devoted and mutual interest. And I'll do whatever is within my power to maintain it. No one knows the time he'll die, even under the most favorable conditions. So I, a soldier in active service, must know far less about how far or how close is death. But as long as I hold out I'll keep you in touch with events. Sometimes when I go to the fronts the shells drop pretty close. Then I think it's only a matter of minutes. After I return here to the base I seem to see life from a new angle. Somehow it seems to be more beautiful. I'd think of you, home and all my friends, then get to working more feverishly than ever. Each of us must give all we

have if this Fascist beast is to be destroyed. After this is over I hope to share my happiness with you... So long. Until some future date. One never knows when there'll be time to write. There's so much to do and so little time in which to do it. Love, Salud, Canute

Appendix 3: Directed Note Taking

Directions: Record notes containing the most important information relevant to the following guiding question – What actions or events, beliefs, or personal relationships motivated Canute Frankson to fight in the Spanish Civil War?

(Check Relevant Categories)

Paragraph #	Notes	Actions/Events	Beliefs	Relationships
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Appendix 4: Hyman Katz bio and letter

Hyman (Chaim) Katz Hyman Katz was a volunteer from New York. He went to Spain without telling his mother because he did not want to upset her. But when he was wounded in action in 1937, the young volunteer decided to explain to his mother why he had enlisted against her wishes. His letter home reveals the motives of many other Jewish volunteers. **Citation:** Aaron Katz, "Letter from the Front in Spain," *Jewish Currents*, XL (February 1979), pp. 4-6, 16-17. 11/25/37 Dear Ma, It's quite difficult for me to write this letter, but it must be done; Claire writes me that you know I'm in Spain. Of course, you know that the reason I didn't tell you where I was, is that I didn't want to hurt you. I realize that I was foolish for not understanding that you would have to find out. I came to Spain because I felt I had to. Look at the world situation. We didn't worry when Mussolini came to power in Italy. We felt bad when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, but what could we do? We felt—though we tried to help and sympathize—that it was their problem and wouldn't affect us. Then the fascist governments sent out agents and began to gain power in other countries. Remember the anti-Semitic troubles in Austria only about a year ago. Look at what is happening in Poland; and see how the fascists are increasing their power in the Balkans—and Greece—and how the Italians are trying to play up to the Arab leaders. Seeing all these things—how fascism is grasping power in many countries (including the U.S., where there are many Nazi organizations and Nazi agents and spies)—can't you see that fascism is our problem—that it may come to us as it came in other countries? And don't you realize that we Jews will be the first to suffer if fascism comes? But if we didn't see clearly the hand of Mussolini and Hitler in all these countries, in Spain we can't help seeing it. Together with their agent, Franco, they are trying to set up the same anti-progressive, anti-Semitic regime in Spain, as they have in Italy and Germany. If we sit by and let them grow stronger by taking Spain, they will move on to France and will not stop there; and it won't be long before they get to America. Realizing this, can I sit by and wait until the beasts get to my very door—until it is too late, and there is no one I can call on for help? And would I even deserve help from others when the trouble comes upon me, if I were to refuse help to those who need it today? If I permitted such a time to come—as a Jew and a progressive, I would be among the first to fall under the axe of the fascists;—all I could do then would be to curse myself and say, "Why didn't I wake up when the alarm-clock rang?" But then it would be too late—just as it was too late for the Jews in Germany to find out in 1933 that they were wrong in believing that Hitler would never rule Germany. I know that you are worried about me; but how often is the operation which worries us, most necessary to save us? Many mothers here, in places not close to the battle-front, would not let their children go to fight, until the fascist bombing planes came along; and then it was too late. Many mothers here have been crippled or killed, or their husbands and children maimed or killed; yet some of these mothers did not want to send their sons and husbands to the war, until the fascist bombs taught them in such a horrible manner—what common sense could not teach them. Yes, Ma, this is a case where sons must go against their mothers' wishes for the sake of their mothers themselves. So I took up arms against the persecutors of my people—the Jews—and my class—the Oppressed. I am fighting against those who establish an inquisition like that of their ideological ancestors several centuries ago, in Spain. Are these traits which you admire so much in a Prophet Jeremiah or a Judas Maccabeus, bad when your son exhibits them? Of course, I am not a Jeremiah or a Judas; but I'm trying with my own meager capabilities, to do what they did with their great capabilities, in the struggle for Liberty, well-being, and Peace... Lovingly, Chaim

