

# Lesson Plan: An American Soldier Writes Home From A Hospital in Spain Social Studies

## Lesson Plan

Title	An American Soldier Writes Home From A Hospital in Spain
Subject	U.S. history
Grade(s)	High School (standards below aligned with grade 11)
Standards	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8</a>
Author credits	Tracy Blake
Keywords	Isolationism, rise of fascism, rise of Nazism, rise of communism, post traumatic stress disorder, shell shock, civilian bombing, causes of World War II
Essential questions	Governments and their people often come into conflict; sometimes this conflict results from ideologies and/or sentiments that people hold that their government opposes.
Synopsis	Recovering from physical and psychological wounds in a Spanish hospital, Boleslaw (Slippery) Sliwon writes to a friend in San Francisco and reflects on the mental anguish of aerial bombing and his disgust for war, but also his compassion during an encounter with an enemy soldier.
Standard Alignment(s) used	Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Literacy (specifically in regards to reading historical documents)
Recommended Teacher Background	
Connection to other disciplines	English Language Arts
Number of class periods	2

## Standards

Objectives	Standards adressed
Determine the central ideas in a primary history source from the Spanish Civil War.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2</a>
Determine the meaning of words and phrases from a specific context.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4</a>

Cite specific evidence to support analysis of a primary source.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1</a>
Evaluate explanations for actions and whether or not these explanations are supported in the text.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3</a>
Evaluate the author's point of view on his experience in the war.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6</a>
Evaluate the validity of the author's assertions by corroborating with other information.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8</a>

## LESSON 1

### Lesson Objectives and Corresponding Standards

- Determine the central ideas in a primary history source from the Spanish Civil War. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#)
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases from a specific context. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4](#)

### Primary Sources

- Textbook and/or notes

### Procedures

1. Lead-In/Hook: Why do soldiers write letters home? Also, what purpose do those letters serve to family members or others (such as historians) when the letters are "saved for posterity"?
2. Pre-assessment and activation of prior knowledge:
  1. What was the world-wide/U.S. economic climate like in the 1930s?
  2. Where and when did WWII begin?
  3. What European and Asian countries were involved in armed conflicts by 1937?
  4. Explain America's foreign policy of isolationism during the 1930s.
  5. How did Europe attempt to appease Hitler and other fascist leader's demands during the 1930s?
3. Step by Step:
  1. Develop vocabulary: Isolationism, fascism/fascist, communism, faction, ideology, sentiment
  2. Make connections between the rise of fascism and communism, a worldwide depression, and reasons for American isolationism.
  3. Discuss/answer the following
    - When was the Spanish Civil War?
    - What were the factions that fought in the war and what were their ideologies and aims?
    - What other international events were occurring during this time period?
    - What was the prevailing international (and U.S.) sentiment regarding events in Spain.

4. Closure: Discuss how isolationism is a governmental policy but like any policy does not necessarily reflect the desires of individual citizens within a country.

## LESSON 2

### Lesson Objectives and Corresponding Standards

- Cite specific evidence to support analysis of a primary source. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#)
- Evaluate explanations for actions and whether or not these explanations are supported in the text. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3](#)
- Evaluate the author's point of view on his experience in the war. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6](#)
- Evaluate the validity of the author's assertions by corroborating with other information. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#)

### Primary Sources

- Letter by Boleslaw (Slippery) Sliwon to Samuel Kutnich.

### Procedures

1. Lead-In/Hook: Is it possible for individuals to experience conflicting emotions simultaneously? For example, can someone feel both anger and pity at the same time, or hatred and love?
2. Pre-assessment and activation of prior knowledge: Review material from lesson 1. In addition, answer the following:
  1. What strategies/tactics did the Germans use in the Spanish Civil War?
  2. When did foreign intervention begin?
  3. When did the first members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade enter Spain to fight?
3. Step by Step:
  1. After activating prior knowledge, read the biographical information and the letter from Slippery Sliwon (see Appendix)
  2. Answer the following questions in small and/or large groups:
    - What clues are there that give you answers to Sliwon's age, ethnicity, social class, and political philosophy?
    - What is his job in the Lincoln Battalion?
    - What indications are there for Sliwon's reasons for fighting?
    - What is his attitude toward the war?
    - Sliwon said in the last paragraph, "Those who start wars are not human." What does he mean, and to what extent do you agree?
    - Do you agree with Sliwon's assertion that rebel prisoners (in the last paragraph) "were happy that they at last were with the loyalist people"? Why does he make this statement?
    - How do you think he justifies fighting in the war when he appears to be adamantly against war?
    - What is the tone of the document? (What emotions does Sliwon communicate?)
    - Sliwon said he feels "hatred" and "pity." Are these feelings contradictory? Why or why not?

4. Closure: Discuss the strength of the letter as a means of understanding war, as compared to a textbook? What are the strength and weakness of each?

## Differentiation

Struggling learners could have opportunities to learn from advanced learners if small, heterogeneous groups are used to read the document. Volunteers can read aloud to other group members to take advantage of multiple learning styles. Before the reading, the groups could be asked to pronounce, define, and/or clarify words and phrases from the reading, including “comrade,” “remuthism,” “strafing,” “demoralizing,” “shrapnel,” “humanitarian,” “loyalist,” and “War Mongering”. Differentiation can also be present in the complexity and/or rubric of the assessment items. For example, when reading and analyzing another SCW letter, struggling learners can be given a different set of questions to answer, or greater emphasis can be placed on some questions.

## Assessment

An assessment could include:

1. A free response question regarding the strengths and weaknesses of letters as a means of understanding history.
2. A free response question regarding a soldier’s experience in war:
  - The conflicting emotions present, especially when our beliefs/ideologies about serving collide with the horrors of battle.
  - The conflicting emotions when our beliefs (and propaganda) about an enemy conflict with an encounter with a prisoner of war.
3. Reading and analysis of the tone of another Spanish Civil War letter (see Hyman Katz letter in Appendix.)

## Appendix 1: Boleslaw (Slippery) Sliwon

Boleslaw “Slippery” Sliwon was born in Karakow, Poland in 1913. He immigrated to the US with his parents. He lived in San Francisco, managing one year of high school, before beginning work as a seaman. He joined the Seaman’s Union of the Pacific. He sailed for Spain in 1937, saw action in several battles, and was wounded when he wrote this letter to his friend Samuel Kutnich. “Comrade Samuel” was head of the San Francisco chapter of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which sent small gifts to the soldiers. Sliwon was killed in 1938, still fighting the fascists. (We have left in most of the spelling and grammatical errors to give a feel for his spoken vocabulary.) **Boleslaw (Slippery) Sliwon 15<sup>th</sup> International Brigade Lincoln Battalion c/o S.R.I. 17.1 Albacete Spain Nov 28, 1937 Dear Comrade Samuel Oh you must know that I am in the hospital recovering from a physical breakdown, nervous breakdown, yellow Jaundice, at the present I have a minor touch of remuthism in my left shoulder, and a cold not worth mentioning, but since I began coughing while I began to write this letter, it made me do so. At this beautiful seaside health resort, there are some boys you may know... I almost forgot to tell you about our bombing we got the other day. Sitting in a café the other afternoon eating some nice fried fish, there was a loud Booming, I jumped about two feet of my chair and fell on the floor, soon I heard a roar of planes, they flew over the café, with their machine guns strafing the road or street. Good Christ I say, they’re going to blow hell out of us soon, so they circled around went back to the railroad station, and then there was another Boom Boom. They flew low as hell strafing their machine guns at people who were panic stricken, running for shelter, the town being no military value, was not armed with Antiaircraft batters. Doing their bit of demoralizing the population they flew down where all the hospitals are situated and began bombing the railroad tracks, somehow their poor bombmanship, they missed landing their bombs near an orphanage... I hope they never come around again. I have been nervous since my hand shakes like as if I were cold or something. I was getting over a nervous breakdown from the bombing, I was at the front in a hospital, and**

*now I'm back again, nervous. What a sensation to be bombed. When bombs drop near you and the noise grows louder and louder, and the next one it seems like you're going to be blown to hamburger. I have figured out a good punishment for people who want war, and those who provoke wars. First take the bastards and put them in a place surrounded by barbed wire so that they can't crawl out, then have about 100 airplanes fly over the place for a while, low so these bastards could see the bombs. Next on the menu have the little pursuit planes come swooping down with their machine guns rattling, with hot lead dropping around this fence, but not hitting any of these guys for that would be too easy for them at once. After half hour of these little planes, let the bombers come over and drop their load of big bombs but not on the men, no near them so that the noise could be heard, but not touched by shrapnel. After several hours of bombing, let those bastards out, and I guarantee that they would be cured of their War Mongering or any kind of war propaganda, they all would become pacifists. This kind of treatment would be the best, because when they send bombers to bomb children, how could a person be a humanitarian, and let bastards like that get away. Give them some of their own medicine. Many times I went through a village where fascist bombed the people, their faces showed it, sometime I was so mad at the fascists that tears began to run down my cheeks. Dud told me you wanted to know what I thought of war. Quote Slowen, War is something miserable, that cannot be described on paper, tales of war maybe written, but one must be in war to really know what war is and its effects. Those who start wars are not humans, for war become a place where people forget they are humans and fight with no mercy shown, its either you or I that going to exist or both of us shall die. Unquote that my way of saying just how I feel, but I am sorry to say my emotions sometimes run high with hatred or pity. One day some fascists surrendered one had his arm shot off. He was in pain and was thirsty. Sez he to me, Please give me some water. Sure, I answered and gave him the canteen, he took about two swallows, and hand it back to me, he was afraid to drink more. I knew that he was dry so gave him the canteen and told him to drink all the water. Joy swept his face, he gulped down all the water to the last drop. Thanks comrade he said, tears rolled down cheeks with happiness, they were told by the fascist officers that it meant death and torture to be captured, but after they surrender they were happy that they at last were with the loyalist people. This young boy with his shot off arm was rushed to a hospital in our ambulance... With a Salud Boleslaw (Slippery) Sliwon*

## **Appendix 2: 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*