Narrative:
Irma Grese and Self-Deception

- I can identify and recognize the dangers of self-deception, and explain how self-deception can lead to the endangerment of others.

Essential Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>self-deception</th>
<th>Acting on a belief that a false idea or situation is true. Being deluded or deceived by ideas that endanger the humanity of others and movements that are unjust.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>martial</td>
<td>Another word for warlike.</td>
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<td>paramilitary</td>
<td>A group that is organized to act as a military, but is not part of a country’s official armed forces.</td>
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<td>fuhrer</td>
<td>German word for “leader” that is strongly associated with Adolf Hitler.</td>
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<tr>
<td>cadre</td>
<td>A group specially trained for a purpose.</td>
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<tr>
<td>wanton</td>
<td>To be careless.</td>
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Narrative

In the 1930s, the Nazi regime established total control over Germany with an ideology of racial purity, extreme nationalism, and national regeneration of the Volk (people) that called for the German people to subjugate themselves to the good of the state. The Nazis established totalitarian control over society, and mass culture subordinated the will and identity of the individual to the collective will of the people in the state. Many ruthless and ambitious individuals felt a sense of purpose and solidarity in carrying out the will of the state and its leader, Adolf Hitler. They deluded themselves into thinking that violently suppressing any perceived “enemies” and taking their human dignity and lives was an acceptable way to achieve their destiny.

Irma Grese was a young woman who was profoundly influenced by Nazi ideology when she was coming of age. Grese 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 by her father. Her sister described her as a shy and meek child who would often avoid conflict instead of starting it. She was bored in school and dropped out when she was 14. She worked several odd jobs until she eventually began working at a local hospital, where she received training to be a nurse. She seemed to be an ordinary teenager until she was shaped by Nazi ideology.

The Nazis tried to mobilize all members of society to form a mass movement of the entire nation. The Nazis established the Hitler Youth and League of German Girls and banned all other youth organizations. Their purpose was to indoctrinate young people to the radical Nazi ideology. The League of German Girls specifically attempted to persuade young women to serve the state by encouraging them to become mothers and learn homemaking skills.

Grese became a fervent believer in Nazi racial ideology. She attended Nazi Party rallies, which were grand spectacles full of Nazi propaganda about racial purity and symbols of martial glory. Irma also began to meet Nazi party officials and was dedicated enough to be assigned to the Schutzstaffel (SS).

The SS was the paramilitary organization that brutally carried out the Fuhrer’s will. They were responsible for state security and enforcing Nazi racial policies against Jews. SS members were fanatically loyal to Hitler and Nazism. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Hitler unleashed the SS to launch a racial war to cleanse western Russia of Jews, Slavic peoples, and others they considered “sub-humans” and enemies of the Third Reich.

The race war conducted by the SS was at first characterized by horrific mass shootings of thousands of people along the advance of the German army. The SS leadership thought the killing was proceeding at too slow a pace and mobile gas vans started killing thousands with carbon monoxide and a cyanide gas, Zyklon-B. At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazi leadership decided on the Final Solution to liquidate the Jews more efficiently by employing modern technology of trains, factory-like extermination camps, and poison gas. The SS employed a cadre of bureaucrats and sadistic camp guards to execute its murderous plan.

In 1942, Grese joined the SS Auxiliaries and volunteered to serve as a prison guard. That summer, she was posted to the Ravensbruck concentration camp for training with other females and soon became a supervisor. The female guards were trained primarily to oversee female prisoners in the camps. The following year she was assigned to the notorious death camp at Auschwitz. She was quickly promoted to the rank of Senior SS-Supervisor and was the
second highest-ranking female guard there. She was in control of some 30,000 Jewish women prisoners and acquired a reputation for wanton cruelty.

Grese saw the Jews as subhuman and treated them with disdain while other prisoners were forced to watch. She carried a whip which she used to inflict savage beatings that killed weakened prisoners. She had a pistol and would arbitrarily murder prisoners. She set attack dogs upon the helpless victims that tore them apart. 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 and punish anyone who fell out of line.

Grese was also tasked with selecting “unfit” prisoners who could not perform forced labor to be sent to their deaths in the gas chambers. Many prisoners would do all they could to disguise their poor health during these inspections. Irma was known personally to poke and prod prisoners violently as part of the selection process. The shy farm girl had turned herself into a sadistic tormentor who was guilty of willingly participating in the Holocaust, or extermination of the Jews, to protect a pure German race. An estimated six million Jews and millions of others died in the Holocaust and other forms of mass killing.

As Soviet armies swept across Eastern Europe and into Germany, the SS tried to destroy evidence of the Holocaust at several concentration camps and moved prisoners to other camps in forced marches for many miles. Many died or were killed along the way. In March 1945, Grese went to the Bergen-Belsen camp. A month later, elements of British and Canadian armies captured Irma when they liberated the camp and were shocked by the horrors they witnessed.

In September of 1945 she went on trial for the atrocities she committed at 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.

Grese stood trial with 44 others accused of acts of great barbarity. She was found guilty and hanged 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.
Analysis Questions

- Why do you think Irma was deceived by Nazi ideology?
- Why was the ideology of Nazism so deceptive to the German people?
- What experiences in Irma’s life may have influenced her views about Nazi ideology?
- To what extent are individuals responsible for their deeds while participating in a collective action?
- What do Irma Grese’s actions say about her views regarding the humanity of the individuals she was guarding?
- How did tenants of Nazi ideology corrupt Irma’s view of humanity?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- Considering her level of moral culpability, are any of her actions or choices forgivable? Explain.
- Should she be looked at as a truly horrific person who is responsible for deplorable acts or as a 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?
- What does it say about Irma that she denied or refused to admit to the charges that were arraigned against her?
- 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?