

# DISEASE DURING WARTIME

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## **LEVEL:**

High School

## **TIMEFRAME:**

3 Class Periods

## **OBJECTIVES:**

Students will analyze the connection between war and the spread of disease

Students will read and interpret primary, secondary, and tertiary sources

Students will appraise George Washington's handling of the smallpox threat during the Revolutionary War

## **STANDARDS:**

- Reading and Writing Literacy in History/Social Studies
- Analysis of Primary Sources
- Reading Informational Texts
- Writing Standards
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- Science, Technology, and Society

## **MATERIALS:**

Access to a computer lab or class set of Internet-capable tablets

Copy of "More destructive ... than the Enemy's Sword" webquest form for each student

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

When the Revolutionary War brought thousands of soldiers from Europe to the American colonies, smallpox inevitably came with them. Although smallpox was a danger in many countries around the world in the late 1700s, the American colonists found themselves at far greater risk of death from smallpox due to their isolated, largely rural lives. George Washington, the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, was keenly aware of the risk of such an easily communicable disease. He had suffered from smallpox as a youth and was thus immune. His soldiers, however, had no such immunity.

Washington had to fight against stiff resistance to the practice of inoculation, but he was eventually able to gradually set into motion a system to try to keep smallpox from taking a large toll on his fighting force. He first required all new recruits to be inoculated for smallpox before joining the ranks of his Continental Army. Later, he called for the inoculation of the rest of his troops in winter encampments in 1777 and 1778.

In 1918, the world saw a mutation of the influenza that killed on a staggering scale. This flu, often inaccurately called the "Spanish Flu," started in a small town in America, then spread rapidly through the

mobilization and training system in place for World War I. American soldiers brought this deadly flu overseas, where it continued to spread. By the time it was done killing, the 1918 strain of influenza had killed millions, sometimes wiping out entire towns. Though doctors and researchers worked feverishly for many months during the pandemic, they were not able to isolate the virus causing the influenza in time to stop its deadly progress.

## **PROCEDURES**

### Pre-write:

Have students respond to the following pre-write question:

- How does war affect people?

This pre-write question is purposely very broad. It encourages students to think “widely” as well as “deeply.” This writing opportunity is intended to get students thinking about the diverse ways in which war affects soldiers and civilians alike. Give students 3-5 minutes to prepare a written response to this question. Have several students share their answers with the class.

### Hypothetical Connection

Present students with the following hypothetical:

- Imagine that you are the top commander of an army in the midst of a serious war. Your country’s population, soldiers and civilians alike, are faced with a serious challenge. An easily communicable (or spreadable) disease threatens your people, who are particularly susceptible to this illness because they have never been exposed to it before. You know that the war is already giving this disease new opportunities to spread by concentrating large numbers of soldiers in small areas. Now there are rumors that your enemy might even be purposely spreading this disease among your population!

The preventative treatment for this disease, unfortunately, is very unpopular. It has some serious risks, and in some places it is actually illegal.

What would you do?

Give students 5-10 minutes to respond independently to this hypothetical situation in writing. Students should retain their answers; they will be referencing these responses again later in the lesson.

### Setting the Stage

Tell students that George Washington faced a similar dilemma as commander in chief of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. The following activity will help students explore Washington’s dilemma and decision-making process.

### Webquest

Distribute the “More destructive ... than the Enemy's Sword” webquest form to students. Assign students to mixed-ability pairs to complete the webquest. This webquest has students access six digital resources, which include primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. Students will use those resources to answer questions and complete graphic organizers. Most students will likely need 1-1.5 class periods to complete the webquest.

### Debriefing

After giving students ample time to complete their webquests, follow up with them about their answers. An answer key to the webquest is included at the end of this lesson.

- Task 1: Have students share and discuss their answers.

- Task 2: Construct a flowchart on the board for all students to follow along. Ask students about the difficulties of reading this primary source. Discuss why consulting primary sources is valuable to historians.
- Task 3: After students share and discuss their answers for the graphic organizer and questions, ask students to refer back to their answer to the hypothetical at the beginning of the lesson. Ask students to compare and contrast their own decisions with Washington's.
- Task 4: Have students share and discuss their answers.
- Task 5: Have students share and discuss their answers.
- Task 6: Have students share and discuss their answers.

### Reflection

Have students respond to the following reflection question:

- Do you agree with George Washington's handling of the smallpox problem? Why or Why not?

Give students 5-10 minutes to respond to this question in writing. This question is meant to give students the opportunity to reflect on what they learned about the smallpox problem and Washington's response to it by integrating their learning from several different sources from the webquest. Have students share their answers. Encourage students to respond to one another's writing by citing specific statements from classmates to agree with or challenge.

### Post-write:

To wrap up the lesson, have students answer the following post-write question:

- How does wartime affect disease?

This question reinforces the connection between the smallpox problem during the Revolutionary War and the influenza pandemic during World War I. Have students share their answers with the class.

### Assessments

Formative: pre-write, hypothetical answer, webquest answers

Summative: reflection answer, post-write answer

### **ACCOMMODATIONS**

Exceptional Education Students: Complete Task 2 together as a class. Begin by explicitly teaching students about some unique challenges of reading 18th century text, such as the font used for the letter "s" when it is used at the beginning or middle of a word. Then read the text aloud to your students while they follow along. Stop frequently to check for understanding by having students summarize the section just heard.

### **ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNERS:**

Explicitly pre-teach students some of the academic vocabulary they will encounter in this lesson. Examples include *disease*, *immune*, *inoculation*, *smallpox*, and *influenza*.

### **GIFTED STUDENTS:**

Have students study sequences 9-18 of Cotton Mather's *Some account of what is said of inoculating or transplanting the small pox*. Students should be prepared to answer the following questions:

- Why did Mather write this book?
- What was the history of inoculation, as known to Mather?
- What treatments were recommended for patients before and after inoculation?

### **SUGGESTION FOR EXTENSION**

While inoculation was tremendously better than suffering smallpox “the natural way,” it still had significant risks. Have students research and prepare reports on the life and work of Edward Jenner, the scientist who developed the much safer *vaccination* method.