



Room 3: Understanding Historical Persecution and Oppression

Audience: Grades 6 - 8

Time: 50 minutes

Student Outcomes:

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Explain what pogroms were and their impact on Jewish communities in Russia.
- Describe key aspects of life under Stalin's rule and the system of repression he established.
- Compare and contrast these two historical examples of persecution and draw connections to modern issues.
- Analyze how fear and control can affect communities and relationships.

Aligned Standards (California Common Core)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

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Context:

This lesson from room 3 of the museum explores two significant periods of persecution and oppression: the pogroms against Jewish communities in the Russian Empire and life under Joseph Stalin's dictatorship in the Soviet Union. Students will learn about these historical events, analyze their causes and impacts, and draw connections to issues of human rights and resistance to oppression today. The lesson is designed to develop students' critical thinking about historical persecution and help them understand patterns of discrimination that continue to impact our world.

Glossary:

- **Pogrom:** Organized violent attacks against Jewish communities, especially in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- **Persecution:** Hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race, political or religious beliefs.
- **Displacement:** The forced movement of people from their homes or countries.
- **Soviet Union:** A communist state that existed from 1922 to 1991, covering much of Eurasia.
- **Gulag:** A system of forced labor camps established under Stalin's rule.
- **Totalitarianism:** A system of government that is centralized and dictatorial, requiring complete subservience to the state.
- **Communism:** A political theory advocating class war and leading to a society where all property is publicly owned.

- **Resistance:** The refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument.

Materials:

- [Read about the museum](#)
- [Access to virtual museum Room 3](#)
- Handout 1: Background Reading on Pogroms (see attached)
- Handout 2: Background Reading on Stalin's Era (see attached)
- Student Worksheet: Understanding Historical Persecution and Oppression (see attached)

Differentiation:

- **For English Learners:**
 - Provide key terms with translations and visual aids
 - Allow for partner work during reading and discussion activities
- **For Students with Learning Differences:**
 - Provide audio versions of the background readings
 - Chunk the lesson into smaller, manageable parts
- **For Advanced Learners:**
 - Provide additional primary source documents for analysis
 - Encourage deeper comparative analysis between historical events and current events

Assessment (Teacher Choice):

- **Reading Comprehension Questions:** Students will complete short-answer questions after reading background information on each historical period.
- **Discussion Participation:** Teachers will monitor student engagement and contributions during small group and class discussions.
- **Final Reflection Paragraph:** Students will write a paragraph addressing one of three reflection questions, demonstrating their understanding of the historical content and its significance.
- **Exit Ticket:** Students will complete a brief exit ticket identifying one key takeaway and one question they still have about the material.

Lesson/Activity:

Opening (7 minutes)

Due to the themes of hatred and discrimination that this lesson focuses on, it is recommended that students receive advanced notice of the challenging nature of the subject. Frame the lesson as a continuing conversation, and remind students of their options if they feel they need to take a break.

1. Begin by asking students to write a brief reflection: "What does persecution mean to you? Have you ever witnessed or learned about examples of persecution in history or today?"
2. Have 2-3 volunteers share their thoughts to activate prior knowledge.
3. Introduce the lesson objectives and explain that today's class will explore two historical examples of persecution and oppression.

Part 1: The Pogroms (15 minutes)

1. Distribute Background Reading on Pogroms (Handout 1).
2. Have students read the background information individually or in pairs. For EL or students who need support, consider reading as a class.
3. After reading, have students complete the reading comprehension questions:
 - Write 3-4 sentences explaining what a pogrom was and who was affected.
 - What role did local authorities play during the pogroms?
4. Facilitate a brief whole-class discussion on what students learned about pogroms.

Part 2: The Stalin Era (15 minutes)

1. Distribute Background Reading on Stalin's Era (Handout 2).
2. Have students read the background information individually or in pairs.
3. After reading, have students complete the reading comprehension questions:
 - Describe three ways Stalin's government controlled people's daily lives.
 - What were the Gulags, and what was their purpose?
4. Facilitate a brief whole-class discussion on what students learned about life under Stalin.

Comparative Analysis and Reflection (8 minutes)

1. Bring the class back together for a brief comparison discussion:
 - What similarities do you notice between these two historical events?
 - What differences stand out?
 - How do these events connect to issues we see in the world today?
2. Distribute Student Worksheet: Understanding Historical Persecution and Oppression and have students begin working on their paragraph response to one of the following questions:
 - What similarities do you notice between these two historical events?
What differences stand out?
 - How do these historical events connect to issues we see in the world today?
 - What can we learn from studying difficult periods in history like these?

Closing (5 minutes)

1. Have 2-3 students share highlights from their reflection paragraphs.
2. Distribute Exit Tickets for students to complete:
 - One important thing I learned today
 - One question I still have
3. Remind students that understanding difficult history is important for preventing similar events in the future.
4. Collect Exit Tickets and incomplete reflection paragraphs (to be finished as homework if necessary).

References:

Bartov, O. (2018). Anatomy of a genocide: The life and death of a town called Buczacz. Simon & Schuster.

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Anatomy-of-a-Genocide/Omer-Bartov/9781451684544>

Dekel, M. (2019). Tehran children: A Holocaust refugee odyssey. W.W. Norton & Company. <https://wwnorton.com/books/9781324001034><https://wwnorton.com/books/9781324001034>

Childhood under Stalin. *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, edited by James von Geldern and Lewis Siegelbaum, Michigan State University,
<https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/childhood-under-stalin/>. Accessed 16 June 2025.

Online Resources for Teachers:

Facing History and Ourselves - Soviet History Resources:

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/pact-soviet-union>

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - Pogroms:

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/pogroms>

Teaching about the Kristallnacht Pogrom (Echoes & Reflections), 29 Oct. 2020,

<https://echoesandreflections.org/2020/10/29/teaching-about-the-kristallnacht-pogrom/>. Accessed 16 June 2025.

Handouts For Room 3 Lesson

Background Reading on Pogroms (Handout 1)

Pogroms were violent, organized attacks against Jewish communities that occurred primarily in the Russian Empire during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (1881-1921). The word "pogrom" comes from Russian, meaning "to destroy" or "to wreak havoc."

During a pogrom, mobs would attack Jewish neighborhoods, destroying homes, businesses, and synagogues. Many Jews were beaten, injured, or killed during these attacks. Families would lose everything they owned and often had to flee to safety.

Local authorities, such as police and government officials, frequently did nothing to stop these attacks. Sometimes they even encouraged the violence. In many cases, false rumors and accusations were spread about the Jewish community to incite hatred.

The pogroms happened for several reasons:

- Government officials sometimes used Jews as scapegoats for problems
- Economic competition and jealousy
- Religious prejudice and long-standing antisemitism
- Political unrest and instability

After experiencing pogroms, many Jews decided it was no longer safe to live in Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe. Between 1881 and 1924, over 2 million Jews left these regions, many moving to the United States, Western Europe, or Palestine (later Israel).

These events represent an important example of how persecution can affect communities and why protecting minority rights is essential in any society.

Additional Reading Resources:

- [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - Pogroms](#)
- Echoes and Reflections - Anti-Jewish Pogroms:
<https://echoesandreflections.org/connect/?postname=“No-Jews”>

- PBS Learning Media - Russian Pogroms:

<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/0a24c7a8-f8d9-48be-9df4-9666e62c6f69/frank-gehrys-ancestry-and-the-pale-of-settlement-in-1882-lesson-plan/>

Background Reading on Stalin's Era (Handout 2)

Life Under Stalin's Rule

Joseph Stalin ruled the Soviet Union from 1924 to 1953. During this time, the Soviet government under Stalin's leadership established a system of total control over its citizens. This period was marked by extreme repression, where millions of people faced persecution, imprisonment, or death.

Key aspects of life under Stalin:

Government Control The government controlled almost every aspect of daily life. People could not freely express their opinions, especially if they disagreed with the government. Jobs, housing, education, and even food distribution were controlled by the state. Citizens were expected to be loyal to the Communist Party and to Stalin himself.

The Great Terror and Purges From 1936 to 1938, Stalin ordered massive purges (called "The Great Terror") targeting anyone he considered a threat. This included Communist Party members, military officers, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens. People could be arrested simply because of an accusation, often without evidence. Many were executed or sent to labor camps.

The Gulag System "Gulag" refers to the government agency that ran forced labor camps. Millions of people were sent to these remote prison camps across Siberia and other harsh regions. Prisoners worked in extremely difficult conditions with little food or medical care. Many died from exhaustion, disease, starvation, or extreme cold. The camps served both as punishment and as a source of free labor for industrial and construction projects.

Information Control Stalin's government-controlled all newspapers, radio broadcasts, and books. Photographs were altered to remove people who had fallen out of favor. History textbooks were rewritten to glorify Stalin and the Communist Party. This control of information meant that many citizens didn't know the full extent of what was happening.

Impact on Relationships Fear was a constant in daily life. People could be reported to authorities for saying the wrong thing, even by friends or family members. Children were encouraged to report "disloyal" comments made by their parents. This created an atmosphere of distrust where people were afraid to speak openly, even with loved ones.

Additional Reading Resources:

- [History.com - Joseph Stalin](#)
- [Khan Academy](#)
- [PBS Learning Media - Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union](#)

Student Worksheet

Understanding Historical Persecution and Oppression

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions for Students

1. Read each background section carefully.
2. Answer all reading comprehension questions in complete sentences.
3. Think about the discussion questions and make notes about your thoughts.
4. Complete the final reflection question in a well-organized paragraph (5-7 sentences).
5. Be prepared to share your thoughts during class discussion.

Part 1: The Pogroms

After reading the background information on pogroms, answer the following questions:

1. What was a pogrom and who was affected by them?
2. What role did local authorities play during the pogroms?
3. Why do you think these attacks happened? Consider social, political, and economic factors.

Discussion Questions:

- How do you think communities supported each other during these difficult times?
- What warning signs might have preceded these events?

- How could communities today respond differently if they see similar warning signs?
- How do you think these events influenced later Jewish migration to other countries?

Part 2: The Stalin Era

After reading the background information on Stalin's era, answer the following questions:

1. Describe three ways Stalin's government controlled people's daily lives.
2. What were the Gulags, and what was their purpose?
3. How did fear and control affect relationships between people during Stalin's rule?

Discussion Questions:

- How did fear and control affect society during Stalin's rule?
- How might this have affected relationships between neighbors and even family members?
- How did Stalin's government control information?
- What lessons can we learn from this period about the importance of protecting human rights?

Final Reflection

Choose ONE of the following questions to answer in a paragraph:

1. What similarities do you notice between these two historical events? What differences stand out?

2. How do these historical events connect to issues we see in the world today?
3. What can we learn from studying difficult periods in history such as these?

Your response:

Exit Ticket

One important thing I learned today:

One question I still have: