

Ghettos: A History

Time: 20-30 minutes

Audience: 7-12th Grade

Learning Targets

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

- Describe what a Ghetto is.
- Understand the history of Ghettoization in a European context.

Aligned Standards

CA HSS Content Standards: 10.8.5

Common Core: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2,

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Context

Students should have a background in stages of genocide and antisemitism prior to beginning this lesson. Lessons the JFCS Holocaust Center has created aligned with those topics are linked.

Materials Needed

- 2 Post-Its per students
- [Google Slides](#)
- [Student Handout*](#)

*The student handout is a note-taking guide given in “cloze style” to help support all learners in the classroom. It is a resource to supplement and differentiate learning in the classroom.

Lesson

This lesson has been designed for in-person learning but has modifications for **virtual learning** noted in bold throughout the lesson. With the constantly changing educational spaces in mind, the Student Handout has been created to fit either model of instruction and is meant to accompany this lesson.

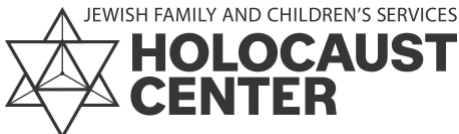
1. Prior to the start of class, place 2 post-its on each student desk and open the Google Slides for presentation.

Teaching Tip: If you are in a time crunch, a great “bell ringer” is to have students make their own post-its, by taking out a sheet of paper and cutting it in half OR having students open a Google Doc.

2. To assess the level of knowledge in the class, begin through a quick-write (2-minutes) to the following prompt: *What do you think of when you think of the word, “ghetto”? Write as many examples, stereotypes, definitions as you can think of in the next 2 minutes* (slide 2). On the slides, there is a Google Timer embedded to help keep track of time.

Virtual? Have the students write in the Zoom chat via “private messenger.”

3. Following the quick write, have the students share out with their peers through a quick (2 minutes) “turn and talk” via pair or group share.



Virtual? Place students in a 2-minute timed breakout room to share out with their peers.

4. Then, invite students to share something they or their partner/group think they know about Ghettos (slide 3). As they share, create a standing list of class knowledge on the whiteboard, Smartboard, or over the Zoom chat to be able to revisit at the end of class.
5. Once you have heard from several groups, pivot the students back to the Google Slides to review the two definitions of ghetto (slide 4) - one from the Urban Dictionary and one from the Oxford English Dictionary. Ask the students the following question: *What is similar and different about these two definitions and why might that be?*

Teaching Tip: If you have the time, you may find it helpful to continue the strategy of using quick-writes to turn-and-talks for students to bounce ideas off of each other prior to whole-class discussion.

6. Students might bring up that both definitions refer to poverty and poor conditions but only the Oxford English Dictionary refers to an isolated or segregated group. It is the focus on the isolated and segregated group that you want to use to transition to learning about the first ghettos in Venice, Italy (slides 5-6):

Slide 5: In 1516, Ghetto Nuova became the world's first ghetto, followed by Ghetto Vecchio. These ghettos were established/ created to isolate Jews from Non-Jews by forcing Jews out of the main community in Venice and requiring them to live separately to "protect" Christians in Venice. The Jewish inhabitants were allowed to work only in money lending, pawning, and secondhand clothing sales outside the ghettos during the daytime.

Slide 6: However, it was not freedom. Each time they left, they had to wear distinguishable clothing, (i.e. yellow circle, scarf, black hat). They had to return at night and were locked in. In Vecchio, the Jewish inhabitants were locked in via walls, but in Nuovo, they were locked in via gates at the bridges that went over the canals (waterways going through the city). Despite the segregation and apparent discrimination against the Jews of Venice, these ghettos actually became a refuge for many Jews of Europe experiencing violent antisemitism. The ghetto itself continued until 1797 when the Venetian Republic fell, but afterward, Jews of Venice were not accepted. They still experienced a remarkable amount of discrimination.

7. Ghettoization continued across Europe for Jewish populations but the ghettos created in Nazi-occupied Europe were very different from those created before (slides 7-9):

Slide 7: During the Holocaust, ghettos were created by Nazis and their collaborators to separate, persecute, and ultimately destroy Europe's Jews as part of the Holocaust. Ghettos were established prior to the discussion of the final solution (plan for the extermination of the European Jewish population). Ghettoization started in Poland (Piotrków Trybunalski) in 1939 and by 1942, there were over 1,000 ghettos established

throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. A select number of larger ghettos are shown on the map.

Teaching tip: If you have time, review the locations of the ghettos with your students on the map, pointing out that no ghetto was located west of Prague. This is not accidental. In fact, the Nazis did not want the collection of “unwanted people” in close proximity, but rather, out of sight.

Slide 8: Similar to Venetian times, Jews were forced to move into the ghettos, being isolated from non-Jewish populations. To further distinguish them, Jewish inhabitants had to wear distinguishable clothing (i.e. Star of David). The forced movement and symbolization were enforced by law.

The Star of David has a deep-rooted cultural significance for Jewish people. Scholars are unclear on the particular origination of pentagonal and hexagonal imagery; there are many theories, including that the Star of David evolved from the Seal of Solomon (five-pointed star) used in the ancient world as a talisman or originated from the Shield of David or *Magen David* in Hebrew, but it was not the 17th and 18th century that the symbol began appearing as part of Judaism on ornaments and in synagogues. The symbol drastically grew in frequency by the 19th century when the Star of David became a religious symbol widely recognized by the religion. At the time, European Jews became more integrated into Christian communities and needed a symbol of Judaism to place on houses of worship the same ways the cross is used in churches. Eventually, the symbolism of the Star of David spread and became synonymous with Judaism. It is that very fact that the Nazis used the symbol: to intentionally dehumanize the Jewish peoples (Cantz, 2014; Lewis, 2016).

Despite these similarities, there are some remarkable differences. Unlike Venetian times, segregation into ghettos was meant to be temporary: day(s), week(s), or year(s). Regardless of how long was spent in a ghetto, conditions were abhorrent and most inhabitants died of disease, starvation, violence against them, or being deported to an extermination camp.

Slide 9: Throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, Nazis created three types of ghettos. Closed ghettos were physically closed off by walls, fences, or barbed wire. The Nazis required Jews to move from surrounding areas to inside the ghetto, leading to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. This often caused outbreaks of epidemics, like typhus and dysentery. This was the most common type of ghetto throughout WWII and the Holocaust. Found mostly in Nazi-occupied Poland and Soviet Union, Open ghettos did not have walls, but still had entry and exit restrictions enforced by guards or police assigned to maintain “order.” Found mostly in Nazis-occupied Soviet Union, Destruction ghettos were heavily secured or sealed as their entire goal was to either transport inhabitants to extermination camps or kill them in the camp 2-6 weeks after entry.

8. After learning about the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe and the Holocaust, ask the students the following question (slide 9): *Why do you think there were three different types of ghettos and how might those differences affect those inside them?*

Students might respond by referencing back to the stages of genocide, noting that for the Holocaust to have occurred, there were many stages of “buy-in” from Nazis and their collaborators in the development of discrimination prior to extermination. Students might also reference hopelessness coming from the squalid living conditions or resistance that might have brought hope inside the ghettos themselves.

Use their discussion to loop back to your class community list of what students thought they knew about the word ghetto.

9. Then, transition students to the exit ticket or final activity (slide 10). Instruct students to use the second post-it on their desks to respond to the following question: *What did you learn about the word ghetto today that you did not already know?*

Virtual? Have the students write in the Zoom chat via “private messenger.”

Next Steps? History comes alive through primary sources. The next lesson in this series, “Ghettos: Experiences & Conditions from the Voices Within,” does just that, focusing on primary sources in both video and written form. It is expected to be out in the fall of 2023. In the meantime, to learn more about inviting a Holocaust survivor to your classroom through our virtual Speaker’s Bureau Program, contact the JFCS Holocaust Center (holocaustcenter@jfcs.org).

Supplementary Resources

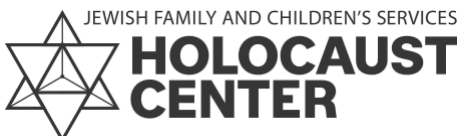
- To learn more about the Venetian Ghettos, this piece on “[The Centuries-Old History of Venice’s Jewish Ghetto](#)” (Worrall, 2015) from the *Smithsonian Magazine* allows for you to dive into the context of who was an inhabitant of the ghetto and what they experienced in far more detail.
- To learn more about Ghettos in the frame of WWII, visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s (USHMM) *Holocaust Encyclopedia* entry, called “[Ghettos](#).”
- To learn about an expanded history of ghettoization in the United States specific to the African American community, these two articles would fit in the frame of Ethnic Studies, U.S. History, or other survey courses that focus on power, equality, racism, and discrimination: “[How America’s Ugly History of Segregation Changed the Meaning of the Word ‘Ghetto’](#)” (Schwartz, 2019) from *Time Magazine* and “[Segregated From Its History, How ‘Ghetto’ Lost Its Meaning](#)” (Domonoske, 2014) from *NPR*.

References

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Map of the Jewish quarter in Venice, Italy, showing the Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Nuovo sections and adjacent canals. Copyright of Florida Center for Instructional Technology.