

“History of My Family” Lesson Plan

Mednoe Memorial Complex, Russia

Program Overview:

“History of My Family” trains local youth to research their family’s experience with state repression, through oral history and research into official sources such as the NKVD archives. The discoveries students make provide new information for the Museum and the public, and serve as starting points for dialogue on the role of the state and citizens in contemporary Russia.

Age/Grade Range: Secondary school students

Time Frame: Several months

Materials and Resources:

- Map of the USSR
- Books by A.Solzhenitsin, V. Shalamov, A. Ribakov, A. Pristavkin
- Archive materials and documents of the Mednoe Memorial Complex
- Press from the Stalinist era
- *Memory Book of Victims of Political Repression in Tver Region*

Objectives:

- Provide an overview of state repression policy in the USSR during the Stalinist era, emphasizing its different forms and reasons for its development.
- Demonstrate that the totalitarian regime divided society into “enemies of the nation” and “honest citizens.” This resulted in the repression of targeted social groups and classes; the repression of church and religion; and the genocide and deportation of national groups.
- Help students to understand that democratic societies operate by the model “the state for the citizen,” whereas totalitarian societies operate by the model, “the citizen for the state.”
- Using historical examples, especially facts from students’ family stories, demonstrate that ideological intolerance in a society can cause violence, tyranny, genocide, lawlessness and inhuman behavior.
- Draw students’ attention to the history of their families, as an important part of social and the national history.
- Help students identify the key institutions required for democracy and their role in promoting democracy as they define it.

Part I: Introduction

Review relevant terms and concepts, asking students to discuss their understanding of and associations with the following:

- State
- Democracy
- Totalitarianism
- State terror
- Ideological intolerance
- Tolerance
- Political repression

Define and discuss the roles of the following institutions of state repression:

- NKVD
- VCHK
- OGPU
- GULAG

Part II: Visit to Mednoe Memorial Complex

Students visit the Mednoe Memorial Complex and attend a civic and religious memorial service for victims. Students tour the Museum's permanent exhibit, "Sentenced to Death!"

Part III: Researching Family History

1. Students fill out a survey that asks questions about their relatives and identify if they were victims of the totalitarian regime.
2. Mednoe staff analyze survey data and identify the names of any victims who were related to students.
3. Mednoe staff search for case files of the people identified in the survey in the Tver region archives.
4. Mednoe staff prepare archival materials for presentation to students upon their next visit to the site, making copies of relevant materials and writing short biographies about the victims.
5. Using the information collected, students write an essay titled "My Family in the Years of Political Repression," describing their family's experience.

Part III: The State and Society in Russia Today

Using what they have learned about their own families and the experiences of others in Russia, students discuss the following questions:

- What is the "State?"
- Why do democratic societies need a state?
- How do you understand the words: "terror" and "state terror?"

Through the discussion, the facilitator helps students to understand "state terror" as a negative attitude of the state toward its citizens, when the state considers some of its citizens "enemies of the nation."

Students then discuss:

- What is ideological intolerance?
- What states do you know that you would define as democratic? Why?
- What states do you know that you would define as undemocratic? Why?

Conclusion: In democratic society, the state exists for society; in non-democratic society it is the opposite.

Students explore the concept of a totalitarian state in three stages:

I. Totalitarianism

Questions:

- Does a totalitarian state serve its nation?
- What is the basis for totalitarian states?
- What is a cult of personality?
- What is political repression?

During the discussion, students define totalitarianism as an autocratic regime.

II. Reasons for political repression and state terror in the former USSR

Students discuss the topic of political repression in the former USSR, and a Mednoe staff member shares information about repression in the Tver region (e.g. political repression of 1920-1930; *raskulachivanie* repression of farmers whose land was confiscated; the Great Terror from 1937-1938; repression during World War II, etc.).

Question for students:

What kind of institutions should we develop in order to protect democracy?

Students are asked to think about:

- Tolerance of conscience and behavior
- High living standards
- *Glasnost*
- Legal system
- Strong democratic institutions that can protect human rights
- Democratic state

III. “My family in the time of repression”

The teacher reads passages from some personal essays, including an essay by Maxim Dzikovetskiy, a 9th grade student whose great-grandfather, a rail-road worker, was arrested in 1937. The family only knew that he was sentenced to be shot without any justification.

The teacher tells the class that this student, through completing the survey, had the opportunity to learn about his great-grandfather’s case. A member of the Mednoe staff shows his case file to the class, including documents of his interrogation and his fingerprints. This personal, well-documented story elicits an emotional connection with students, and illustrates the historical component of the lesson.