

The World's First Ghetto

Students examine why the Republic of Venice confined its Jews to a walled neighborhood in 1516, weigh evidence of exclusion and of survival, compare the ghetto with the mellah of Morocco, and trace how one word changed over five centuries

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 9 to 12: public, independent, and Jewish schools

TIME

Two 45 minute class periods, or one 90 minute block

APPENDICES

A: Background Reading
B: Evidence Cards
C: Structured Academic Controversy

Overview

In 1492, Spain expelled its Jews, and many of the refugees, known as Sephardim, rebuilt their lives in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and Italy. On March 29, 1516, the Senate of the Republic of Venice ordered all Jews in the city to live on a small island called the Ghetto Nuovo, the site of an old foundry, behind gates that were locked every night. The word “ghetto” was born, and over the next five centuries it would come to describe the walled Jewish quarters of Italy, the Nazi ghettos of the Second World War, and segregated neighborhoods today. In this lesson, students investigate the Venetian Ghetto through eight evidence cards, debate whether it was primarily a tool of exclusion or also a place of survival and creativity, compare it with the mellah, the walled Jewish quarter of Moroccan cities, and reflect on how the meaning of a word carries history.

Essential Questions

1. Why did the Republic of Venice both welcome and confine its Jews?
2. Was the ghetto a place of exclusion, of protection, or both?
3. How did the meaning of the word “ghetto” change from 1516 to today, and why does that history matter?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Explain the causes of the 1516 Venetian decree, including the 1492 expulsion from Spain, war, economics, and religious hostility.
2. Analyze evidence of both restriction and Jewish communal and cultural life in the ghetto.
3. Argue both sides of a historical question and reach a nuanced, evidence based position.
4. Compare the Venetian ghetto with the mellah of Morocco and other compulsory Jewish quarters.
5. Trace the changing meaning of “ghetto” and explain why historical terms should be used with care.

Curriculum Connections

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.His.1.9-12 (evaluate how events are shaped by their historical context); D2.His.14.9-12 (analyze multiple causes of events); D2.His.16.9-12 (integrate evidence into an argument); D2.Civ.10.9-12 (analyze how rights have changed over time).
- **World History:** the Spanish expulsion and Sephardic diaspora; the Ottoman Empire; Renaissance Venice; the Reformation and Counter Reformation; emancipation in the nineteenth century.
- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RH.11-12.1 and RH.11-12.9; SL.11-12.1 (collaborative discussion); WHST.11-12.1 (write arguments).
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** Sephardic, Italian, and Ashkenazi communities; Jewish life in Christian and Muslim lands.

Key Vocabulary

- **Ghetto:** a district where a group is required, by law or by pressure, to live apart; first used for the Jewish quarter of Venice in 1516.
- **Sephardim:** Jews whose families trace their roots to Spain and Portugal.
- **Levantine Jews:** Jewish merchants in Venice who were subjects of the Ottoman Empire.
- **Republic of Venice:** a powerful trading state ruled by an elected Doge and Senate.
- **Scola** (plural **scole**): the Venetian word for a synagogue.
- **Mellah:** the walled Jewish quarter of a Moroccan city, first established in Fez in the fifteenth century.
- **Segregation:** the enforced separation of a group from the rest of society.
- **Emancipation:** the granting of equal civil rights to a group that was denied them.

Teacher Background

Jewish moneylenders worked in Mestre, on the mainland near Venice, from the late 1200s, but were rarely allowed to live in the city itself. When the War of the League of Cambrai brought invading armies in 1509, Jews fled into Venice. The city valued their loans and taxes, while preachers and many residents demanded their expulsion. The Senate's compromise, in March 1516, was to allow Jews to stay, but only in the Ghetto Nuovo, with gates locked at night and Christian guards whose wages the Jews themselves had to pay. The ghetto later expanded into the Ghetto Vecchio (1541), largely for Ottoman Jewish merchants, and the Ghetto Nuovissimo (1633). Because the walls could not move, buildings rose seven or eight stories.

Inside, German, Italian, Levantine, and Spanish and Portuguese Jews built five synagogues and a rich communal life. Venice became the leading center of Hebrew printing in Europe, and Christian visitors came to hear the sermons of Rabbi Leon Modena. At the same time, Jews had to wear a yellow, and later red, hat, were limited to a few professions, and lived under the threat of expulsion and censorship; in 1553, copies of the Talmud were burned in Venice. In 1555 the pope ordered a ghetto in Rome, and the model spread across Italy. Napoleon's army tore down the Venetian gates in 1797, and Jews gained lasting equality when Venice joined the Kingdom of Italy. During the Holocaust, more than 200 Jews of Venice were deported; only eight returned.

The Venetian ghetto was the first to carry the name, but not the first compulsory Jewish quarter. In Morocco, the first mellah was established in Fez in the fifteenth century beside the royal palace, decades before Venice's ghetto, and Frankfurt confined its Jews to the Judengasse in 1462. Comparing these spaces helps students see how rulers in both Christian and Muslim lands used separate quarters to control, tax, and sometimes protect Jewish communities. When discussing the modern word, guide students to treat the Nazi

ghettos, which were stages on the way to mass murder, and segregated neighborhoods in the United States as related by language but distinct in history.

Sources: Harry Freedman, "A Brief History of the Venice Ghetto," My Jewish Learning; Smithsonian Magazine, "The Centuries Old History of Venice's Jewish Ghetto" (2016); Jewish Museum of Venice; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia; JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Morocco.

A note on the original resource: This page previously linked to a PBS LearningMedia video and materials from *The Story of the Jews*. That resource is no longer available, and the PBS materials were licensed for classroom use only, not for redistribution. This JIMENA lesson replaces it with original materials.

Materials

- Projector and speakers; sticky notes
- [Video: The Jewish Ghetto of Venice: History, Faith, Survival](#) (SLICE documentary with Venetian scholar Shaul Bassi, 25 minutes; preview and select an 8 to 10 minute segment)
- Handouts:
 - [Appendix A: Background Reading](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix B: Evidence Cards](#) (one set per group of four)
 - [Appendix C: Structured Academic Controversy](#) (one per student)

Procedures

Day 1. Introduction (15 minutes)

- 1 One word (5 min).** Write "ghetto" on the board. Students write, anonymously on sticky notes, the first images or ideas the word brings to mind. Sort the notes together without judgment. Ask: Where did these meanings come from? Explain that the word has a specific birthplace and birthday: Venice, March 29, 1516.
- 2 Setting the scene (5 min).** Using the timeline in Appendix A, review the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. Where did the refugees go? Introduce the Ottoman welcome under Sultan Bayezid II and the famous line attributed to him, that King Ferdinand had impoverished his own kingdom and enriched the sultan's. Ask students why historians treat the quote with caution (it was recorded later and may be legend), even though the welcome itself was real.
- 3 Watch (5 min).** Show a short selected segment of the documentary, or skip to the reading if time is short. Ask: What surprised you about life in the ghetto?

Day 1. Body of the Lesson (30 minutes)

- 4 Background reading (12 min).** Students read Appendix A and mark one cause of the 1516 decree, one rule imposed on Jews, and one sign of Jewish community life.
- 5 Evidence cards (18 min).** In groups of four, students read the eight cards in Appendix B. For each card, they decide whether it is evidence of exclusion, protection, community and creativity, or more than one, and record it in Part 1 of Appendix C with a one line explanation.

Day 2. Structured Academic Controversy (25 minutes)

- 6 Prepare (5 min).** Within each group, one pair takes Position A: *The ghetto was primarily a tool of exclusion and humiliation*. The other pair takes Position B: *The ghetto also made survival, community,*

and creativity possible. Each pair selects its strongest three pieces of evidence.

- 7 Argue and restate (12 min).** Pair A presents (3 min) while Pair B listens and then restates A's argument to A's satisfaction (2 min). Then switch. Pairs may ask clarifying questions but may not rebut.
- 8 Drop the sides (8 min).** The four students abandon their assigned positions and work toward a shared, nuanced answer to the question "Was the ghetto a place of exclusion, of protection, or both?" They record it in Part 2 of Appendix C.

Day 2. Conclusion (20 minutes)

- 9 Venice and Fez (8 min).** Return to Card 7, the mellah of Fez. Ask: What did the ghetto and the mellah have in common? How were they different? What does the comparison suggest about how both Christian and Muslim rulers treated Jewish minorities?
- 10 A word that travels (12 min).** Using Card 8, discuss how "ghetto" came to describe the Nazi ghettos and segregated neighborhoods today. Students complete Part 3 of Appendix C, writing an evidence based paragraph answering essential question 2 and one sentence on how knowing the word's history might change how they use it.

Assessment

- **Formative:** sticky note discussion, card sorting in Part 1, and the restating step of the controversy, which shows whether students understood the other side.
- **Summative:** the Part 3 paragraph. A strong paragraph takes a clear, nuanced position; cites at least three evidence cards; acknowledges the strongest counterargument; and reflects thoughtfully on the word's history.

Differentiation

- **Students who need support:** assign two cards per pair rather than eight per group; provide sentence frames ("Card ___ shows exclusion because ___."); preview vocabulary.
- **English learners:** pair the reading with the documentary segment; allow notes in the home language during preparation.
- **Advanced learners:** compare the Venice decree of 1516 with Pope Paul IV's 1555 order creating the Rome ghetto, or research the mellah of Marrakesh (1557 to 1558) and write a comparative analysis.

Extension Activities

- **Five synagogues, five communities.** Students research one of the five synagogues of the Venetian ghetto and the community that built it, then present how German, Italian, Levantine, and Spanish and Portuguese Jews kept distinct traditions in one small space.
- **After 1492.** Connect to JIMENA's [El Otro Camino 1492](#) lesson and map where Sephardic refugees settled, from Venice and Salonica to Fez and Istanbul.
- **Jews in Christian and Muslim lands.** Using JIMENA's [Jews in the Islamic World](#) lesson, students compare the legal status of Jews in Renaissance Venice with the status of Jews as protected minorities (dhimmi) in the Ottoman Empire and Morocco.
- **Segregation and the city.** Students research how laws and policies, such as redlining and restrictive covenants, shaped segregated neighborhoods in American cities in the twentieth century, and how the Fair Housing Act of 1968 sought to end them.

Resources and External Links

- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/
- [Jewish History \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/jewish-history/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/jewish-history/
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Morocco](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco
- [The Jewish Ghetto of Venice: History, Faith, Survival \(SLICE, documentary\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfiX8DWpXgl)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfiX8DWpXgl
- [The Centuries Old History of Venice's Jewish Ghetto \(Smithsonian Magazine\)](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/venice-ghetto-jews-italy-anniversary-shaul-bassi-180956867/)
www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/venice-ghetto-jews-italy-anniversary-shaul-bassi-180956867/
- [A Brief History of the Venice Ghetto, by Harry Freedman \(My Jewish Learning\)](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/a-brief-history-of-the-venice-ghetto/)
www.myjewishlearning.com/article/a-brief-history-of-the-venice-ghetto/
- [Jewish Museum of Venice \(Museo Ebraico di Venezia\)](http://www.museoebraico.it/)
www.museoebraico.it/
- [What Were Ghettos During the Holocaust? \(United States Holocaust Memorial Museum\)](http://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos
- [The World's First Ghetto, The Story of the Jews \(PBS; archived page\)](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/story-jews/classroom/lesson-plans/the-worlds-first-ghetto/)
www.pbs.org/wnet/story-jews/classroom/lesson-plans/the-worlds-first-ghetto/