

The Shtetl: An Incubator of Jewish Culture

INTRODUCTION

Overview:

Beginning in the sixteenth century, when the Polish nobility invited Jews to settle their private lands, the shtetl became an incubator of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. With life orbiting around the central marketplace, it was a place where devotion to Judaism, education, and community were dominant. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, much of Jewish life in Eastern Europe was confined to shtetls, and while the Jews shared some economic ties with their Christian neighbors, they had their own institutions, religious beliefs and practices. Nostalgia for shtetl culture, such as music and food, has continued to permeate modern Jewish life. This lesson looks at the various elements of shtetl culture while examining the political and economic roots behind the shtetl's formation.

Grade Level: Middle School, High School

Subjects Covered: Jewish History, Geography, World History, Social Studies

Goals:

Students will understand migration patterns of Eastern European Jews and how they relate to the formation of the shtetl. Students will know what is meant by the terms “shtetl” and “Pale of Settlement,” and will understand the nature of the world of the shtetl. They will investigate the rich Jewish culture that developed within the shtetl in addition to the economics of shtetl life.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. explain the reasons behind the formation of the shtetl;
2. describe cultural components unique to the shtetl;
3. define the terms “Pale of Settlement” and “shtetl”;
4. describe the kinds of professions Jews were engaged in the shtetl;
5. understand the basic structure of shtetl life, including the role of the rabbi, Jewish ritual, and scholarship;
6. locate the Pale of Settlement on a world map.

Suggested Time Frame: Two to three 45-minute class sessions.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Before you begin:

Teachers should be sure to explore all bookmarked pages of the DVD-ROM used in this lesson.

Introductory Activity: What is a Shtetl?

1. Ask the class if they are familiar with the word “shtetl,” and know what it is or anything about it. Ask them to come up with a list (or a web diagram) outlining words they might associate with shtetl life.
2. Explain that shtetls were small Jewish communities and towns in Eastern Europe in which a distinctive Jewish culture and way of life developed, lasting from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.
3. Have the students ask any questions they have concerning shtetl life. Write these questions on the board, and be sure they are addressed by the end of class.

Learning Activity 1: History: The Formation of Polish and Russian Shtetls

Explain to students that shtetls originated in Poland in the sixteenth century, and, when Russia annexed the country two centuries later, were largely confined to a region known as the Pale of Settlement.

Poland

The first shtetls formed in Poland, following an influx of Jews to the region. Students will examine this wave of migration.

1. View the video [Polish Jewry](#), which describes the arrival of German Jews in Poland in the late fifteenth century, in response to the Polish nobility’s attempts to stimulate their economy.
2. Ask students what they learned about the origin and role of Poland’s Jewish population.
 - Why did the Polish nobility turn to the Jews, and how did the Jews respond?
 - How did the rest of Poland respond?
 - What are some of the benefits and drawbacks to economic competition?
 - How were economic competition and religious tension in the region related?

Russia

When Poland was annexed by Russia in the late eighteenth century (please note the time period change), Russia inherited a significant portion of the world’s Jewish population. Life for these Jews was very different in Russia, and ultimately the Russian government confined them to a single geographic region called the Pale of Settlement.

The following video segment describes Russia’s annexation of parts of Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, and the reaction of Russian merchants who feared competition from the new Jewish population.

1. Watch The Russian Empire, cueing the segment to start with the narration “At the end of the 18th century Russia annexed....”
2. Make sure students understand the creation of the Pale of Settlement. Pause the video when it displays a map of the area so students can see its borders.
3. To learn more about Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement, read Jewish Residence Restricted,.
4. Ask students to think about the impact of Russia’s governance on the Jewish communities of Poland.
 - In what ways did life change, and in what ways did it stay the same?

Learning Activity 2: Culture: Life in the Shtetl

The distinctive culture of Eastern European Jews largely developed in the shtetls.

1. Explain that Jews of the shtetl shared close economic ties with the Christians of the region while still participating in their own social institutions and strictly adhering to their religious beliefs and practices. Folktales, synagogue architecture, clothing, food, music, and special ritual objects are all a part of the unique shtetl culture that developed in this environment.
2. Ask students what they think of when they hear the word “culture.” What features or aspects make up the culture of a particular group of people?
3. You might assist students by asking them what comes to mind when they think of Jewish culture. Answers will likely fall into such categories as
 - language
 - food
 - synagogues
 - art
 - music
 - clothing
 - holidays
4. Help students by contributing some of your own answers that fall into these categories. Write all of the responses on the board and divide them into these categories to prepare students to explore the cultural features of Eastern European Jewry.

5. Play the multimedia [Shtetl Life & Culture](#), which presents some of the distinctly Eastern European elements of the shtetl, such as the voice-like qualities of klezmer music and the local style of synagogue architecture. For Learning Activity 3, students will explore the multimedia panels at the end of the presentation.

6. Ask students:

- How did shtetl culture reflect the surrounding Eastern European culture, and how did it remain distinct?
- Which cultural elements of the shtetl are you familiar with? Which are new to you?

Learning Activity 3: Going Back in Time: The Shtetl Talk Show

1. Divide students into groups and have them conduct research on their own to create a talk show interviewing shtetl members about daily life. Students can use a fair amount of creativity in this project to determine what specific members of the shtetl community they will highlight and what topics they will discuss.

2. Students can utilize the following resources in creating their shows:

Shtetl Life & Culture Video

This video highlights the relative independence of the shtetl, with its own culture, language, and religion. It is run by its own local government and the rhythms of the Jewish calendar are paramount.

Shtetl Life Multimedia Panels: Folktales, Food, Music

These panels explain the prevalence of folktales, the commonalities between shtetl food and traditional Eastern European fare, and the popularity of klezmer music.

Polish Jewry Multimedia Panels

Torah study and Jewish scholarship were of utmost importance to Eastern European Jews. Religious educational pursuits gained them the respect and admiration of Jews throughout the world and allowed for the development of a unique culture.

Making a Living in Luboml

From the memoirs of Yisroel Garni, the author reminisces about the economic life of a shtetl in southeastern Poland prior to World War I.

A Gentile's Description Historical Document

This document is a Christian description of the active involvement of Jews in Polish commerce.

Teachers can supplement these resources with books, websites, etc.

3. Students will present their talk shows to the class and then discuss similarities/differences among the shows. Were there ideas/themes that were mentioned in every show?

4. The teacher should make sure presentations include discussion of the market town, the Jewish economic role, and the shtetl governing structure. The teacher should present this material if it is not sufficiently covered by the students.

Culminating Activities:

■ Lead a class discussion to compare shtetl life with our own as 21st century Americans. To guide the discussion, ask students to consider the following questions:

- What rituals/customs have remained constant?
- Which have changed?
- How has the emphasis on community shifted since the time of the shtetl?
- What is easier and what is more difficult about being a Jew in today's society?

■ Have students form a mock *kehilla* (the Jewish governing body of the shtetl) and debate/discuss issues of concern in the shtetl.

1. Students should read the multimedia panel [Kahals](#) to inform the activity.

2. Students should consider:

- Are any shtetl values and customs still relevant to Jews in today's society? Why or why not?

Extension Activity (Optional): The Shtetl in Modern-Day America

Discuss how elements of the shtetl have a presence in contemporary life. Specifically, you can discuss the revival of klezmer music in America (i.e. the Klezmatics, a New York City-based klezmer band that formed in 1986 and has released nearly a dozen CDs) or you can discuss the shtetl's impact on modern American literature using Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (which is partly set in the shtetl of Trachimbrod) as an example. You can read and discuss passages from the novel or have students read the entire work and discuss. Ask students to think of other shtetl characteristics that continue to have an impact today.

MATERIALS

No extra materials needed

STANDARDS

World History

Standard 34: Understands how Eurasian societies were transformed in an era of global trade and the emergence of European power from 1750 to 1870

Level III, Benchmark 2: Understands political conditions in Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great (e.g., the effects of the French Revolution, Napoleonic invasion, and world economy on Russian absolutism; the significance of imperial reforms and popular opposition movements in the late 19th century; the extent of Russian expansion into Eastern Europe and Central Asia; how Poland was partitioned in 1772, 1793, and 1795, and the location and significance of Russian ports on the White and Black Seas and the Baltic)

Standard 35: Understands patterns of nationalism, state-building, and social reform in Europe and the Americas from 1830 to 1914

Level IV, Benchmark 4: Understands the status of different groups in 19th-century Europe (e.g., the changing roles and status of European Jews and the rise of new forms of anti-Semitism; the goals of the women's movement in the 19th century, and the essential ideas outlined by Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*; support for and opposition to women's suffrage in the late 19th century)

DVD-ROM BOOKMARKS

Polish Jewry (Video > Search for Deliverance > Ashkenazim > Polish Jewry); Time: 4:09

The Russian Empire (Video > Roads from the Ghetto > Eastern Europe > The Russian Empire. From “At the end of the 18th century.”)

Jewish Residence Restricted (Video > Roads from the Ghetto > Eastern Europe > The Russian Empire > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > Jewish Residence Restricted); Time: 1:46 (From “At the end of the 18th Century”).

Shtetl Life & Culture Multimedia (Video > Roads from the Ghetto > Eastern Europe > Shtetl Life & Culture > Explore Topic > Play)

Shtetl Life & Culture (Video > Roads from the Ghetto > Eastern Europe > Shtetl Life & Culture > Play)

Shtetl Life & Culture Multimedia Panels (Video > Roads from the Ghetto > Eastern Europe > Shtetl Life & Culture > Explore Topic > Play) Explore the “Folktales,” “Food,” and “Music” panels at the end of the presentation.

Polish Jewry Multimedia Panels (Video > Search for Deliverance > Ashkenazim > Polish Jewry > Explore Topic > Media Presentations > Jewish Life in the 16th and 17th Centuries > Synagogues/Khevrot/Kahals/Yeshivot)

Making a Living in Luboml (Video > Roads from the Ghetto > Eastern Europe > Shtetl Life & Culture > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > Making a Living in Luboml)

A Gentile’s Description of Jewish Merchants (Video > Search for Deliverance > Ashkenazim > Polish Jewry > Explore Topic > Historical Documents > A Gentile’s Description of Jewish Merchants)

Kahals (Video > Search for Deliverance > Ashkenazim > Polish Jewry > Explore Topic > Media Presentations > Jewish Life in the 16th and 17th Centuries > Kahals)