UNIT 3, LESSON 1
TOTALITARIANISM AND FREEDOM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION
In this lesson, students will explore the nature of totalitarianism in the twentieth century in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Students will understand how these unlimited systems of government were marked by unrestrained state power in all aspects of public and private life, characterized by leaders who were unchallenged, exercised unchecked authority, and were made the object of a cult of personality. Students will examine how these governments limited freedom and targeted certain individuals for persecution.

GUIDING QUESTIONS
- What are the distinctive features of a totalitarian system of government?
- What conditions led to the rise of totalitarian systems of government in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century?
- Why did the governments in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union limit individual freedom?
- How did individuals experience life under these totalitarian regimes?

OBJECTIVES
STUDENTS WILL:
- Analyze the characteristics of totalitarianism in Hitler’s Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union.
- Understand how both regimes used oppression to limit political, economic, and personal freedoms and persecute individuals.

LENGTH OF LESSON
- 60 minutes
CURRICULUM STANDARDS

TEKS
- WH.12.A “Describe the emergence and characteristics of totalitarianism.”
- WH.12.B “Explain the role of various world leaders, including Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Hideki Togo, Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, prior to and during World War II.”
- WH.18.C-D “Identify the historical origins and characteristics of socialism/fascism.”
- WH 19.B “Identify the characteristics of the following political systems: theocracy, absolute monarchy, democracy, republic, oligarchy, limited monarchy, totalitarianism.”
- WH.22.C “Identify examples of politically motivated mass murders in Cambodia, China, Latin America, the Soviet Union, and Armenia.”
- WH 22.E “Identify examples of individuals who led resistance to political oppression such as Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, Oscar Romero, Natan Sharansky, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, and Chinese student protestors in Tiananmen Square.”
- WH.22.D “Identify examples of genocide, including the Holocaust and genocide in the Balkans, Rwanda, and Darfur.”
- WH.29.B “Analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, drawing inferences and conclusions, and developing connections between historical events over time.”
- WH.30 “The student communicates in written, oral, and visual forms.”
- WH.31.A “Use a decision-making process to identify a situation that requires a decision, gather information, identify options, predict consequences, and take action to implement a decision.”
- WG.14.B “Compare how democracy, dictatorship, monarchy, republic, theocracy, and totalitarian systems operate in specific countries.”

AP WORLD HISTORY
- AP. 6.2.IV.B “The sources of global conflict in the first half of the century varied.”
- AP.6.2.IV.C “The global balance of economic and political power shifted after the end of World War II and rapidly evolved into the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers, which led to ideological struggles between capitalism and communism throughout the globe.”

BACKGROUND

The twentieth century gave birth to two of the most destructive political movements in human history: Nazism and Soviet Communism. Both are variants of totalitarianism, a governing system marked by unrestrained state power, a single and all-powerful governing party, and state domination of religion, work, professional associations, and other institutions that ordinarily function under private, voluntary control. Another frequent feature of totalitarian systems is the cult of personality. The leader who is made the object of a personality cult is given near godlike status. He is said to have infinite wisdom, his
opinions are unchallenged, his writings are memorized by schoolchildren, and his ability to exercise authority is unchecked.

NAZI GERMANY

Nazism was an extreme form of totalitarianism that held sway over Germany from 1933 to 1945. The seeds of Nazism’s appeal were planted after World War I, when the victorious powers, including Great Britain, France, and the United States, compelled Germany to agree to terms of surrender that proved economically ruinous. This agreement, known as the Treaty of Versailles, led to high rates of joblessness and periods of uncontrolled inflation. In response to their increased misery, Germans became susceptible to appeals of the political extremes, which offered simplistic explanations and placed blame on various “enemies” inside and outside Germany.

From this polarized environment emerged the National Socialist, or Nazi, party. Its leader, Adolf Hitler, was a veteran of World War I who rose to Nazi leadership during the 1920s on the promise of punishing those responsible for the World War I defeat and restoring Germany to national greatness. Initially, the Nazis advocated policies that had some elements of socialism, including a large role for the state in the economic sphere. The Nazis, however, were unique in their obsessive emphasis on racial purity and the idea that Jewish people constituted an inferior and duplicitous class that had consistently undermined German advancement. Hitler also identified Communists as an enemy grouping principally on the ground that Communism was an alien, and primarily Jewish-inspired, idea.

Initially, the Nazis fared poorly in national elections. In 1933, however, the party won dominance in parliament, and Hitler became chancellor. Immediately upon gaining control of the state, the Nazis undertook a massive purge of the political opposition, killing, imprisoning, or forcing into exile Communists, Socialists, and even some Conservatives.

The Nazis moved quickly to extinguish the democratic freedoms that Germans had enjoyed under the Weimar government. Private associations, including trade unions, were incorporated into a vast Nazi party civic network that stripped organizations of their independence and assigned them the primary mission of promoting the interests of the Nazi party, the German state, and Hitler as national leader. Media independence was eliminated, and the editorships of all newspapers were placed under Nazi control. Under Hitler and his deputy, Joseph Goebbels, Germany was transformed into a propaganda state, in which print, radio, and especially cinema were given the mission of glorifying the Leader, demonizing enemies, and promoting the concept of lebensraum, based on a theory of German racial superiority that justified Germany’s expansion to the countries to its east.

Hitler singled out various groups for persecution: political leftists, Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavic peoples. But he identified Jews as the principal source of Germany’s economic troubles. The Nazis adopted a series of measures that transformed Jews from citizens to subjects and placed restrictions on where they could live, work, shop, and educate their children.

With the forced annexation of Austria in 1938, Hitler began a process that would lead to German domination of most of Europe, trigger World War II, and bring about the death of 7 million European Jews. In the countries and territories Hitler controlled, a totalitarian system much like Germany’s was
imposed. Hitler established a series of concentration camps in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Poland where he sent Jews, political dissidents, and other suspect groups. Some of these camps, such as Auschwitz, were transformed into death factories, where the annihilation of European Jewry, known as the Holocaust, was carried out.

At the height of his success, Hitler controlled practically all of continental Europe and much of Eurasia. With his failed invasion of the Soviet Union and the entry of the United States into the European war, German forces suffered a wave of military setbacks.

Hitler committed suicide in the final days of World War II. Germany suffered overwhelming defeat at the hands of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. Left in ruins by the war, Germany rebuilt itself as a democratic state with a strong commitment to civil liberties, freedom of expression, and the rule of law. Nazi literature, propaganda, and insignia are banned in Germany today.

SOVIET COMMUNISM

Like the Nazi state, the Communist state emerged from the ashes of World War I. Russia, ruled by an autocratic czarist system, withdrew from the war, leading to a struggle for power, a civil war, and the eventual triumph of the Communist Party under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin. Once in control, the Communists conquered the neighboring territories that had been part of the Russian Empire, and created the Soviet Union, an entity that eventually embraced 15 republics, or states, under the strict central control of the party leadership in Moscow. Although Communism never commanded the support of the majority of Russians, Lenin prevailed over his adversaries through ruthlessness and tactical brilliance. He took advantage of the post-war chaos to eliminate political parties that promised democracy. He also gained the support of the urban working class by promising a more prosperous quality of life and a leadership role in the new Communist system.

Under Lenin and his successors, Soviet Communism stood for an all-powerful party-state, the absence of personal freedoms, and the elimination of freedom of expression and the press. The state regulated practically every aspect of social life, including an individual’s right to move about the country, travel abroad, or emigrate. Teachers and academics were subject to political loyalty tests, and only one interpretation of history was allowed in schools and the media. Civic associations were stripped of their independence and placed under control of the Communist Party.

Unique among totalitarian or autocratic systems, Communism maintains strong opposition to free market economics, capitalist economic development, and private property. The Communist leadership in the Soviet Union placed all business and trade under state control.

After Lenin’s death in 1924, the Soviet Union came under the domination of Joseph Stalin. In his nearly 30 years in power, Stalin earned a reputation for ruthlessness that has seldom been matched in human history. Most authorities estimate that some 20 million Soviet citizens died either at Stalin’s order or as the result of his policies. Among Stalin’s most disastrous actions, both from human and economic standpoints, was the first “Five Year Plan,” a nationwide strategy for economic development instituted between 1928 and 1932. The Plan’s centerpiece was forced collectivization of agriculture, in which
farmland was taken from its owners and made the property of the state. Stalin’s agriculture policies led to widespread famine and death in the 1930s, with up to 7 million having died in Ukraine alone.

Stalin also conducted a massive purge of officials, military leaders, and Communist Party leaders, which cost the lives of millions. The purges were marked by torture, victims confessing to non-existent plots against Stalin, and carefully staged show trials.

After Stalin’s death in 1953, the Soviet leadership adopted less brutal methods of governing. But the principal features of totalitarianism, including the lack of personal and economic freedoms, were maintained right up to the final few years of the Soviet system.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the party leader from 1985 until the system’s collapse at the end of 1991, launched an effort to reform Soviet Communism. He introduced the concepts of glasnost, a Russian word meaning “openness,” and perestroika, Russian for “change,” as guiding principles for his leadership. Some changes were significant. Among other things, Gorbachev encouraged a degree of press freedom that was unprecedented under Communism. Ultimately, however, most of the non-Russian republics preferred an independent course, and the Soviet Union split into 15 separate sovereign states.

In the post-Communist period, Russia has drifted from a system notable for a combination of economic volatility and widespread civil liberties to one that has moved in a steadily repressive direction. The current president, Vladimir Putin, has nearly destroyed press freedom and systematically persecuted the political opposition and civil society.

Aside from the Soviet Union, Communism was embraced by educated elites in a number of countries. In China, Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and a few countries in Africa, Communist movements gained power through civil wars or coups. Communism was also imposed on the Baltic states and East-Central Europe after World War II by Soviet occupying forces. Today Communism has been abandoned by all but a handful of countries, and has become widely regarded as one of history’s great failures.

RESOURCES

- Class sets of Handout 1, Nazi Germany Backgrounder, and Handout 2, Soviet Communism Backgrounder
- Freedom Collection videos:
  - Doan Viet Hoat: Voice from Prison (Vietnam, English, 5:45) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/doan_viet_hoat/?vidid=477](http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/doan_viet_hoat/?vidid=477)
  - Vaclav Havel: Intimidating Dissidents (Czechoslovakia, subtitled, 4:41) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/vaclav_havel/?vidid=381](http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/vaclav_havel/?vidid=381)
  - Rebiya Kadeer: Family (China, subtitled, 1:32) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/rebiya_kadeer/?vidid=619](http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/rebiya_kadeer/?vidid=619)

UNIT 3, LESSON 1  FREEDOMCOLLECTION.ORG
PROCEDURE
(times below are suggested)

DAY 1

(5 minutes) Warm-Up: Write the phrase “quality of life” on the board at the front of the room. Ask students to brainstorm personal examples of what the phrase means to them. Allow volunteers to share their answers.

(10 minutes) To engage students in a discussion about the quality of life under a totalitarian government, begin by showing them one or more video clips from the Freedom Collection to illustrate the constraints on individual freedom. Instruct students to take notes indicating how each dissident’s quality of life and experience of freedom differs from their own life in a free society (using the Warm-Up activity as a frame of reference). Suggested video clips for use:

- Doan Viet Hoat: Voice from Prison (Vietnam, English, 5:45) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/doan_viet_hoat/?vidid=477]
  Doan Viet Hoat, a writer, scholar and former longtime prisoner of conscience in Vietnam, discusses his treatment in prison, including four years in solitary confinement.

- Vaclav Havel: Intimidating Dissidents (Czechoslovakia, subtitled, 4:41) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/vaclav_havel/?vidid=381]
  The late Vaclav Havel was a playwright, poet, and political dissident in communist Czechoslovakia. He later served as president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. In this video he recalls attempts by the Communist government to harass and intimidate dissidents.

- Rebiya Kadeer: Family (China, subtitled, 1:32) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/rebiya_kadeer/?vidid=619]
  Rebiya Kadeer is a human rights defender, a former prisoner of conscience, and a leader of the Uyghur people. The Uyghurs are Turkic Muslims from China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region. In this video she describes the high price her family has paid for her leadership of the Uyghur movement.

- Carlos Montaner: Prison and Contempt for Humanity (Cuba, subtitled, 4:25) [http://www.freedomcollection.org/regions/the_americas/cuba/carlos_alberto_montaner]
  This video clip describes the Cuban government’s oppression of youth who were trying to achieve change in their country.

After viewing the video(s), ask for student volunteers to share their conclusions about the quality of life and freedom in free and not-free societies. Explain to the students that they will spend the remainder of
the class period analyzing the totalitarian governments that came to power in the twentieth century in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

3. (20 minutes) Place the students in pairs, assigning one the reading on Hitler and Nazi Germany and the other on Stalin and the Soviet Union. After completing the reading, each student should create a stick figure character analysis of their assigned leader. Instruct students to include the following information:
   - Head—what promises the leader made to his followers
   - Stomach—how the leader increased power and control of the government
   - Arms and Legs—how the leader limited political, economic, and personal freedoms
   - Feet—who was blamed for the nation’s problems and suffered persecution

4. (10 minutes) Next, ask students to share their character analysis with their partner. After both have shared, they should work together to complete a Venn diagram noting at least three similarities and three differences between the two leaders.

5. (8 minutes) To allow students time to share their conclusions about the two totalitarian regimes and the broader impact of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, conduct a class discussion using the following questions:
   - What conditions contributed to the rise of totalitarian governments in Germany and Russia in the twentieth century?
   - How did the governments in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union limit individual freedom and enforce total control over government, society, and the economy?
   - How did the leaders of these governments justify the limits they placed on freedom and their persecution of particular groups in society?
   - What conditions eventually led to the fall of these governments?

6. (7 minutes) As a closing activity, have students complete a written assignment comparing the exercise of rights of individuals living under Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to that of an American citizen today. (NOTE: If time is short, teachers may assign this activity for homework.)

ENRICHMENT/EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Have the students investigate attempts at resistance and dissidence under both regimes, for example: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Raoul Wallenberg in Germany, or Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: http://www.ushmm.org/
- Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum: http://www.yadvashem.org/museum
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