

## Breaking Stalin's Nose by Eugene Velchin

**Grades:** 5-6

### **Common Core Standards:**

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1**

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2**

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.3**

Identify key steps in a text's description of a process related to history/social studies

#### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

### **Illinois State Goals:**

**14.C.3** Compare historical issues involving rights, roles and status of individuals in relation to municipalities, states and the nation.

**18.B.3a** Analyze how individuals and groups interact with and within institutions (e.g., educational, military).

**18.B.3b** Explain how social institutions contribute to the development and transmission of culture.

### **Materials:**

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### **Big Idea:**

The book brings about an opportunity to discuss various themes dealing with life in the Soviet Union as well as issues of propaganda and political culture. Some possible discussions could focus on living in communal apartments, forms of government, youth as political actors, various methods of propaganda, and citizenship.

### **Objective:**

The objective of teaching this book is two-fold. First and foremost, the book provides an engaging narrative which describes life in the Soviet Union under Stalin's repressive rule. Second, the book provides opportunities for students to reflect upon their own ideas of political participation, citizenship, and propaganda.

### **Summary of book:**

The book centers around Sasha Zaichik, a ten year old boy living in Moscow with his father during Stalin's great terror. Sasha idolizes Stalin, and is excited about his upcoming initiation into the Young Pioneers of the Communist Party. But the night before the initiation his father, a high ranking member of the secret police, is himself arrested. The narrative follows Sasha on this day, the day he has waited for his whole life, as his world is turned upside down, and he begins to question everything he has been taught.

### **Procedure:**

#### **Historical Context:**

Before reading the book, provide some background information on the setting and time period of the story. Sasha is living in Moscow under the dictatorial regime of Joseph Stalin, which lasted from 1923 to 1953. Though Stalin's time in power saw the transformation of the Soviet economy from agrarian to industrialized, this was coupled with a culture of paranoia intended to strengthen state control. With the use of propaganda, mass arrests, show trials, and executions, Stalin's regime created a climate of mistrust and fear. Neighbors informed on neighbors, children on parents, and husbands on wives, either for personal gain or because the push to turn in "enemies of the people" was so great. Many innocent people were sent to prison, including those who considered themselves loyal communists and supporters of Stalin. This dictatorial method has been seen in other parts of the world as well, such as North Korea and China.

#### **Vocabulary:**

Before reading the text, it might be helpful to go through some of the vocabulary used throughout the story. Have students define these words and review their uses and parts of speech.

aggravate	on principle
capitalist	scheming
communal	solemnly
Communist	suspicious
infiltrated	vermin
interrogating	vigilant
kommunalka	wrench
legion	

#### **Discussion Questions following reading:**

*Ask students to find evidence from the text to support their answers.*

Describe life in the kommunalka. How is it different to your own home? How is it similar?

Why did the state security officials take away Sasha's father?

Why don't Aunt Larisa and her husband not allow Sasha to stay with them?

What does Vovka Sobakin mean when he says, "Who's not with us is against us"? (page 52)

How are uncooperative students treated at Sasha's school? How does this differ from your school?

What does Sasha predict will happen to him for breaking the statue? Why would you say he would think this?

Why does Vovka become an enemy of the state? Why is this ironic?

What does the State Security senior lieutenant want from Sasha? What does the lieutenant suggest happened to Sasha's mother? His father?

**Teacher Resources:**

Interactive website for the book, including pages with pictures and information on Sasha's Moscow, Komunalka: Living with Strangers, Who Was Sasha's Dad, Sasha's Mom: From the USA to the USSR, Who Were the Young Soviet Pioneers, Inside Sasha's School, Comrade Stalin: Brilliant Genius of Humanity, Enemies of the People, and Inside Lubyanka Prison.

<http://www.eugeneyelchinbooks.com/breakingstalinsnose/>