



City of Fate

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Teaching Guide

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RATIONALE & THEMES

The WWII siege of the Russian city of Stalingrad, in the winter of 1942, was a brutal battle. In this story we experience urban warfare through the struggle for survival of Yuri, Peter, Tanya and a small group of boy soldiers.

The story allows us explore contemporary conflicts through the prism of the actions, decisions and consequences experienced by the citizens of Stalingrad, when they resisted the German army's attempt to crush them and obliterate their city.

The themes explored are:

- Courage
- Hope
- Selflessness
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Cruelty
- Patriotism
- Despair
- Bereavement

SUMMARY

In August 1942, the German airforce, the Luftwaffe, launched a sudden aerial bombardment on Stalingrad, to reduce the city to ruin, while the German land army, the Wehrmacht, attempted to quell any last shreds of resistance, so they could claim the city for the German Reich.

However, the remaining citizens and rag-tag defenders refused to surrender.

In this dangerous, war-torn city, the story follows the lives of Yuri, Peter, Tanya and a group of boy soldiers as they survive starvation, violence and a bitter Russian winter, only to reach a final climax with the German invaders that demands their very last shred of courage.

APPROACH

This guide has been divided into three sections to allow an exploration of the major events in the story.

The novel deals with themes that have a contemporary resonance, offering an opportunity to see how people survive and live through violent urban conflicts.

The story presents a clear experience of the daily challenges and trauma that are a consequence of such conflict.

The activities develop SPHE skills and suit group or whole class participation in particular.

Unit 1 Stalingrad: The Assault Pages 5-78

SUMMARY

The air attack launched on Stalingrad is sudden and merciless, shattering lives and reducing the city to smoldering rubble.

One moment Yuri Bogdanov is enjoying a swim with his friends on his 14th birthday, the next he is cowering in a bomb-blasted cellar with his mother and baby sister.

With the city pulverised, from the bombing, the Germans begin the process of taking control of Stalingrad.

As the citizens are ordered to surrender, Yuri's mother has to decide whether to ignore the order and try to stay free or whether to surrender. She decides to split the family. Yuri is to stay, hiding out in the basement, while she takes her chances, with baby Anna, in the hands of the German invaders.

Circumstance throws Yuri and orphaned

5-year-old Peter together and Yuri assumes the role of protector.

Life for them becomes a deadly routine of scavenging for food and prowling for shelter.

Yuri learns just how dangerous life is for the Russian soldiers. They face execution for the slightest reluctance to engage the enemy.

Stalingrad is pulling troops from all over Russia to her defence. Ninety miles away Mr Belov surveys his class for the last time as he prepares to escort them to the enlistment office.

Wandering the rubble with Yuri, Peter meets his neighbour Tanya, who explains that she and her mother have found shelter in a basement.

Dazed by the responsibility of sending his class to war, Mr Belov finds himself lost while the boys swing from patriotism through apprehension to fear. The class bids farewell to their parents.

Searching for food, Yuri climbs an apple tree while Peter is told to stay below. On climbing down, Yuri finds Peter gone. An anxious search reveals that a woman's singing has drawn Peter to a basement.

Entering the basement, Yuri finds Peter sitting watching a deranged woman's attempt to continue life as if everything was normal. Yuri realises she is tending a dead baby.

Tanya recalls how the destruction of her fiancé's letters, with all his expectations, had in a strange way freed her.

Just 15 of Mr Belov's class of 30 boys arrive at the station to register, and they are immediately transported to Stalingrad.

Mr Belov faces interrogation for failing

to deliver all 30 from his class to the defence of the Motherland.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read p9): Mrs Bogdanov leaves Yuri behind in the cellar. She explains that she wants to find food for Anna. However, if she thought that staying in the cellar was dangerous, why do you think that she left Yuri behind? Had she other fears that she didn't share and were these influencing her decision?
- (Read p24): If it were clear that both Hitler and Stalin were "two pompous ambitious tyrants", why do you think that so many people were prepared to follow them and do terrible things? How do you think that people like them are able to gain control over others? What sort of things do they do/say to persuade others to follow them?
- (Read p32): The friendship between Yuri and Peter was an unusual one because of their age difference, yet it seemed that they relied on each other. The friendship benefitted both of them. Why do you think that this is true?
- (Read pp36 & 38): In time of war, a government can decide who is eligible to fight and force its citizens to join the army. This is called conscription and anyone who tries to avoid it can be sent to jail. Do you think that everyone should be able to decide for themselves? Do you think that governments have the right to make this decision for everyone?
- (Read p41): Mr Belov realises that the Russian defenders of Stalingrad are killing their own men if they show any reluctance to fight. This is common practice in war where deserters can be shot. Do you think that this punishment is too harsh? Why do you think that this punishment has been chosen rather than just sending them to jail?

ACTIVITIES

1. Can you hear it? (Read p8)

As Stalingrad buckles under the onslaught of the Germans, the city itself raises a scream of terror and desperation. The combined sounds of the attack mingle with the voice of the city as the buildings burn and collapse.

Create a short (30-second) audio clip of

what this might have sounded like for the people there.

You can make your own sounds or use the Internet sites below.

soundbible.com/tags-war.html

2. I was Yuri (Read pp10-14)

An instinct deep inside Yuri whispers that he may never see Anna again.

Imagine he has time to write her a short note and push it into her pocket, so she can know about him later.

Years later, Anna, who has survived the war, donates the letter to the War Museum in Stalingrad.

Create a copy of the letter.

3. Stalingrad (Read p16)

The once beautiful city of Stalingrad has become alien and grotesque, reduced by the German bombing to a smoking ruin. Yuri can never forget that first sight of the devastated skyline.

Imagine he draws the image, in charcoal, on a cellar wall so that no one will ever forget.

Create the image he drew. You can use chalk on black paper or charcoal on white paper. Which technique do you think is the more effective?

4. To Konstantin's mum

(Read p19)

Ivan and his friend have written to Konstantin's mum to tell her that her son has died. They want to comfort her by telling her that he died a hero's death. However, they must be careful what they write as it will be read by the censor.

Work in small groups to create both the original letter that they wrote and the letter that eventually reached her after the censor had edited it.

Show which sections the censor might have changed and how were they changed.

5. School Reports (Read pp41-46)

In addition to bringing his class for registration, Mr Belov has to write a brief report for each of his students on their suitability as soldiers. He has to outline each of their strengths and his concerns.

Recreate the reports he wrote for Misha, Anton, Vlad and Leo.

6. The Speech (Read p46)

Nicola Pierce, the author, thought that Mr Belov should make a speech to both the boys and their parents before they all left.

Help her to decide what he might say and write the speech for him.

7. I can smell it (Read p52)

When Yuri climbed into the tree, the fresh smell had a very powerful effect on him. It reminded him of peace and comforted him.

Write a short poem of smells for him. Describe some of the different smells he could imagine that would help to comfort him.

8. Too Small (Read p62)

Yuri has been shocked into total confusion by the sight of the dead baby. Bewildered he murmurs, "babies are too small to die in war ..."

Amnesty has asked you to help in an anti-war campaign by creating a list of things that should not happen in war, prompted by Yuri's comment.

Work in groups to create a list of 10 statements similar to Yuri's. Add a short reason for each of them.

9. War is ... (Read p 71 & 72)

As the train trundles towards Stalingrad, the conversation between the boys and the old passenger begins to develop.

On the spur of the moment, Vlad poses a question to each of them. He asks them to finish this statement:

War is ...

And then adds his own comment.

Complete the statement that you think each of them made. How do you think that the statements might be different?

(You can extend this activity by adding what mothers, teachers or soldiers might say, for example)

10. Mr Belov's interview

(Read pp75-78)

Mr Petrov has the task of interviewing Mr Belov and deciding what action is to be taken against him.

Mr Petrov is very thorough and keeps notes of all his interviews. There are three columns on the page he uses for Mr Belov:

My Questions

His Answers

What the answers tell me.

Work in groups to recreate the notes he made of Mr Belov's interview and explain what action he decided to take.

Unit 2 Stalingrad: The Defence Pages 79-181

SUMMARY

Delighted to meet Tanya again, Yuri's behaviour reveals how she has charmed him and when she suggests that Peter and he share the basement shelter she has with her mother, he eagerly agrees.

Wandering aimlessly until it is time to meet Tanya, they are accosted by a small band of Russian soldiers.

The soldiers suspect that Germans are hiding in an adjoining building and are anxious for information about them.

They propose that Peter crawls through a ventilation duct to scout the building.

A tense wait follows for Yuri while Peter locates the Germans. When a burst of gunfire shatters the silence, Yuri fears the worst. However, the shuffling and sniffing noises from the tunnel confirm that Peter is returning, unhurt, with the vital information.

The train carrying the schoolboy conscripts, to Stalingrad is attacked by a German fighter plane, forcing the boys to leap to safety in a trackside ditch before continuing to their destination.

Once they arrive, Sergeant Batyuk claims them as his recruits and sets them digging trenches before facing the horror of the river-crossing into Stalingrad.

As the boys blend into the unit, making friends with some of the veterans, they begin to realise the horror of their situation; the foreboding smell of burning pervades everything.

Yuri and Peter accompany Tanya to her basement, where they meet Mrs Karmanova.

After sharing a spartan meal, Yuri and Tanya are left alone when the others fall asleep and Tanya reveals her thoughts on the disaster of Stalingrad.

Waking the next morning to find that Tanya has already left for work, Yuri realises that Mrs Karmanova has become

delusional and he and Peter make an excuse to escape back to the streets.

Their first glimpse of Stalingrad from the banks of the Volga confirms the conscripts' fears but does nothing to prepare them for the nightmare of the crossing.

Cramped into flimsy boats with no protection, the soldiers face German firepower on the river, with the unrelenting command to keep moving or be shot ringing in their ears.

As they begin their own crossing, the boys witness the boat carrying Misha take a direct hit.

Wading the last 20 metres to shore among the dead and dying and the flying German bullets, Anton takes charge and leads them to the relative safety of the rubble that was once the city of Stalingrad.

Wandering the streets waiting for Tanya's return, Peter and Yuri are drawn to the smell of freshly baked bread. Without hesitation, they accept an invitation to disappear into the bowels of the street as they follow Isabel, an old lady to her subterranean sanctuary, where her sister Sarah has been baking. She explains that they have been trying to survive as best they can and offers the boys a share of their food.

They are interrupted when a pitiful trio of German soldiers, drawn by the smell, stumbles into the room and attempts to barter some meat for a share of the bread.

Distressed by the sight of Peter, the German sergeant confesses to the horrific killing of the inhabitants of a Jewish village.

Damned by Sarah's anger, the men complete the trade and leave.

Anton and his friends, armed now with weapons taken from dead soldiers move stealthily through the city, without any clear idea of where to go, until they stumble upon a Russian unit and are welcomed into their ranks.

DISCUSSION POINTS

□ (Read p83): When a country is at war all the eligible citizens are expected to join the armed forces to defend the country. Do you think it is reasonable for someone to choose NOT to fight if they are able? How would you justify deciding not to fight, ie becoming a

conscientious objector?

□ (Read p86): Yuri is teasing Peter about his dream of marrying Larissa and living on a farm. Do you think it is important to be able to dream what might happen in the future? Is this ability that humans have, an imagination that allows us to consider what might happen a benefit or a distraction?

□ (Read p119): Anton asks the question that they all want an answer to but it is deflected as being silly. Why do you think that the soldier described it as silly? Do you think that the boys were really asking the same question? What answers do you think that they hoped to get?

□ (Read pp142-143): The Russian command has ordered its soldiers to attack the Germans without issuing them with any weapons. They are to draw the German fire so as to deplete their ammunition supplies. Do you think that this waste of human life is ever justified? What rights do you think a soldier should have and what level of care for his safety should a soldier expect from his commanders?

□ (Read p181): Leo quotes a Russian proverb: "there is no evil without good." What do you think this means? Do you think that the presence of evil is inevitable and therefore must be accepted? Might Leo be trying to comfort the others by suggesting that good can always be found in every situation? Do you think that the proverb suggests hope or despair?

ACTIVITIES

1. Recipes (Read pp80-81)

The author uses two cooking terms 'stewed & cooked' to describe the air and the buildings.

Compile a short list of 6 cooking verbs and then use them to write your own description of what Stalingrad might have looked/felt/sounded/smelled like.

2. Diary Bites (Read p90)

Yuri has realised that there are many people living in Stalingrad, each struggling to cope in different ways.

Work in small groups to create a cast of several different characters. Try to decide who they are and give a little background detail for them.

Write a diary entry that they each might

make for that day, giving a sense of the hardship and the hope.

3. The Lone Wolf (Read p99)

The sniper Vasily Zaitsev is a scourge for the Germans. He has been able to kill many of them and strike fear into the others, just knowing that he is lying in wait, targetting them.

The Russians know this and have decided to make a propaganda leaflet drop to create more fear for the Germans.

Create the propaganda leaflet.

You can use the site below to research information.

russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/military/vasily-zaitsev/

4. Молодцы Питер (Well done, Peter) (Read pp100-105)

The sergeant has decided to make a report of Peter's actions. It will be printed in the underground press, as an example of bravery, to inspire all the citizens of Stalingrad.

Help him to write the report.

5. Your City needs YOU!

(Read p115)

Everywhere the same poster could be seen, encouraging people to fight. The committee who created the poster had to think carefully about the words and images they used, remembering that many who saw the poster could not read very well.

How do you think that they could communicate their message using images, symbols and a minimum of words?

Work in small groups to create one of the posters.

6. It was beautiful

(Read pp121-122)

Leyosha reminisces about the beauty of Stalingrad when he worked there before the war.

Think of a place that you know which has inspired you because of its beauty.

Write a brief description of the place, explaining why it inspired you.

7. Stalin (Read p128)

Yuri is shocked to hear Tanya blame the Russian leader Stalin for the carnage.

He knows only what the Russian propaganda has told him about Stalin, which is that he is a great leader.

He is struggling to believe what he hears from Tanya.

In order to create a balanced picture of Stalin for him, use the sites below to research 5 facts that will help him to understand Stalin?

bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/stalin_joseph.shtml

youtube.com/watch?v=QF_fOHjWJMo

8. City in Ruins (Read pp132-133)

Leyosha curses in shock at the sight of the devastation of Stalingrad.

When the Germans bombed the Spanish Basque town of Guernica, Picasso created a very powerful picture to show what the bombing had done. He did this by cutting and reshaping familiar images to give a sense of the ruin left behind.

Work in small groups to create a similar picture for Stalingrad.

You can see Picasso's painting on the site:

pablocicasso.org/guernica.jsp

9. Anton's Scream (Read p136)

Anton witnesses the destruction of the boat carrying Misha, and a terrified scream of horror is ripped from him.

Edvard Muncce's famous picture, 'The Scream' captures a similar emotion.

Look carefully at Muncce's picture and then draw a similar picture to show the depth and power of Anton's feelings when he saw the boat explode.

You can see Muncce's picture on the site:

www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1330

10. Hushed (Read pp147-148)

The sight of a dead child tortures Vlad. Later, he decides to write a short Haiku poem to her memory.

There are three lines in the poem.

The first line describes the hopes that the child had.

The second line describes the carnage that took her life.

The third line describes his feelings at the devastation that has been caused.

Use the site below for information on how to write a Haiku.

www.poetry4kids.com/blog/lessons/how-to-write-a-haiku/

11. Rescued (Read p156)

Isabella and her sister have rescued the library books to save them from destruction. They want to preserve some of the artifacts to remind others, when the war is over, what Stalingrad had been like.

If you had to rescue *one thing* only from your city/town for future generations, what would you keep safe, and why?

12. They're only Jews

(Read pp166-172)

The German soldiers are traumatised when ordered to execute an entire Jewish village. Their officer dismisses their compassion for the remaining children by stating that "They're only Jews."

The soldiers are haunted by nightmares. In their nightmare, the slain appear to them, quietly reveal their names and describe themselves before asking why they were killed.

Each of the soldiers tries to explain.

Work in small groups to create 5 of these dialogues You could perform them for the class?

Unit 3 Stalingrad: Deliverance Pages 182-268

SUMMARY

Finding themselves alone in the basement with Peter and her mother asleep, Tanya and Yuri share their hopes and thoughts.

Yuri is shocked to realise that Tanya is preparing to leave her mother and Stalingrad in an escape being engineered by her German boyfriend Volker.

Confused and wrestling with the magnitude of their plan, Volker sets out to meet Tanya.

Before they get the chance to meet, Tanya, decides that she cannot leave and, turning to go back, whispers a silent goodbye to Volker, unaware that just a few streets away a Russian machine gunner has Volker in his sights.

Finding themselves occupying a wrecked apartment block inside German-held territory, Anton, Vlad, Leo and their

small company wait for the German counter-attack.

Sergeant Pavlov directs their defence of the building and the attack is repulsed. Their relief becomes amusement when Anton sheepishly confesses that the tank he destroyed was in fact the one beside the tank he had been aiming at.

When Yuri awakens, the dream he had of his baby sister slips beyond his grasp again. The grim reality that she is gone fills his thoughts and he weeps.

Confronted by Peter, he hears Mrs Karmanova announce that she is going shopping for eggs.

Believing her insane, Yuri tries to persuade her not to go. When Peter tries to intervene, he and Yuri argue and Mrs Karmanova begins to laugh at the comedy of it. The spell broken, Mrs Karmanova persuades Yuri to rest while she and Peter forage for food.

Yuri drifts off to sleep again and dreams of Tanya. As her voice calls to him, it becomes shriller and more insistent, drawing him back to consciousness and the realisation that something awful has happened to Peter and Mrs Karmanova.

A stealth attack is launched against Pavlov's men and Vlad, Anton and Leo find themselves fighting for their lives. Vlad is in shock at what he has done.

As sergeant Pavlov tries to rationalise the carnage for him they hear a woman screaming and from the window they see Mrs Karmanova berating a group of Germans who have gagged and blindfolded Peter.

Watching from their vantage point, Vlad makes the decision that they should try and rescue the small boy.

Following Tanya to 9th January Square Yuri realises with horror the danger Peter is in when he sees a line of other children who had been captured swinging gently on a makeshift gallows.

Spotting the Russians troops trying to manoeuvre into an attack position, Yuri, Mrs Karmanova and Tanya attempt to distract the Germans.

Events escalate when a shell from Anton's rifle hits a German tank and it explodes.

In the confusion of gunfire that follows, Yuri races to free Peter, only to find him drawn trancelike to the line of dead children.

Screaming his name, Yuri follows as the German machine gun sweeps slowly across their paths, reaping two more victims.

Possessed, Tanya rushes into the path of the gun to reach them. Anton, shrieking with fury, bursts from cover, racing towards the gunners. He releases the pin of the grenade in his pocket before leaping among the Germans, saving both Tanya and her mother.

Standing in front of the statue of the laughing children and the snapping crocodile as the old year exits and with it the last of the German control over the city, Leo and Vlad toast the memory of their friend and ask Tanya and her mother about Yuri and Peter.

As they walk through the snow, a violinist begins to play. He plays Bach as a reminder that home is always a place of hope for both Russians and Germans, in spite of the terror and destruction that has happened.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- (Read p191): Tanya tries to justify what is happening in Stalingrad, pleading that some Germans like Volker don't really agree with it but are forced to follow orders. Do you agree with her that this is an acceptable excuse? Do you think that we are always responsible for our actions or do we sometimes need to follow orders? Are there exceptions when we should not follow orders?
- (Read pp192-193): Tanya is desperate to escape life in the city and plans to go to Germany. Do you think this is reasonable for her? Is she right to think this way? Can she justify abandoning her mother? Would this change if her mother were to plead with her to leave? Where do you think a person's first responsibility should lie?
- (Read p204): Leo has written a letter to his mother, and Vlad challenges him that most of it is a lie. Do you think it is right of him to hide the reality of their situation from his mother? Do you think it would cause her more or less anxiety if she were aware of the full facts?
- (Read p221): Mrs Karmanova begins to laugh both at their situation and Yuri & Peter's argument, explaining that she chooses to laugh rather than cry. Do you think that humour can

be an appropriate response in every situation? Is laughter effective even in a tense situation? Has laughter ever helped you in a difficult situation?

- (Read pp236-237): Sergeant Pavlov voices his approval to Vlad after the attack, dismissing the boy's qualms about killing. He explains that he simply did his job as a soldier. Do you think he was entirely correct? Are there some things that are worth killing to achieve? Should Vlad just accept this as part of his job?
- (Read pp259-260): Leo and Vlad discuss Anton with Tanya and her mother, explaining what he was like before they left home. What do you think prompted Anton to do what he did? Was it really courageous or did Anton have another motive?

ACTIVITIES

1. Farewell (Read p194)

Before she leaves, Tanya takes a last look around the basement and then bends and tucks a note she has written into her mother's coat.

In the note she remembers one particular happy event that they shared and tries to explain why she is leaving and why she hasn't told her.

Create the note that she might have left.

2. Citizens of Stalingrad

(Read p201)

Leo has kept one of the leaflets that the Germans dropped on the city, encouraging the soldiers to desert. It reminds him of the struggles they endured.

What promise or threats do you think the Germans used?

Make a copy of Leo's leaflet.

(You could use Google Translate to find suitable Russian words to use)

3. Yesterday (Read p202)

When Vlad finds the copybook he is very moved by what he reads and decides to add another entry.

He adds one entry only for yesterday because he is unsure whether he will survive today.

He tries to include all that he has seen and feels, and he adds an illustration.

Recreate his entry.

4. PAPA 1 (Read pp213-215)

PAPA 1 is the call Id for the lead Panzer and, during the skirmish, the tank commander is in contact by radio with HQ, both taking orders and describing what is happening.

Every sentence is brief and gives important detail accurately so that decisions can be made.

Recreate the radio exchange between the commander and his HQ from the time that the first shell was fired until they retreated.

5. Yuri, Peter or Anton?

(Read pp255-256)

The author Nicola Pierce had to make a decision about who should die before the end of the novel and eventually decided that Yuri, Peter & Anton would be killed.

Why do you think that she chose these three?

She has asked now for your help to decide if she was correct.

Can you make a pro/con table for each of the characters with your reasons for and against why the story needed them to die? Do you agree with the author?

If you had been writing the novel, what decisions would you have made?

6. Request Surrender (Read p257)

After the war the Russians discover transcripts of the communications between the commander in Stalingrad, requesting permission to surrender, and

the refusal of the Germany army HQ in Berlin.

The descriptions of the conditions for the soldiers are bleak and the refusals are blunt.

One of the pages from the transcripts is missing (20 January 1943). Could you recreate it?

7. Dear Mrs Vasiliev (Read p259)

Tanya and her mother decide to write together to Anton's mother, to offer their condolences and their thanks.

They are both unsure what to write in the letter and what might be a comfort for her to know.

Work in small groups to create a template for the letter that they should send, being careful to avoid including any details which you think might be too distressing for her to hear.

8. Родина героев (Homeland Heroes)

(Read pp263-264)

Immediately after the war ended, the people of Stalingrad created a Book of Heroes.

There was to be a page for each hero, describing who they were, what they did and why they were heroes.

Now that you have read the book, can you complete the entries for Peter, Yuri and Anton?

Decide on three other heroes to add to the book and then complete their entries too.

Class Project

Reading the novel provides an excellent background to examine some of the effects of contemporary conflicts.

The basis of any approach should focus on identifying the empathy issues in order to avoid trivialising the political context or patronising the conflict.

Possible activities might include:

- Diary of a refugee.
- Compile aid agency list of essentials for a survival pack.
- Instructions for keeping safe in a conflict zone.
- Compile a list of public health do's/don'ts.
- Create poster for fund-raising.
- Compile contents of comfort pack for an orphaned child.
- Template letter for friends to send to governments/combatants, asking them to resolve issues peacefully
- Letter to TD/MP/MLA asking them to become involved in assisting the refugees.
- Information pack for local newspaper to ask them to publish an article to raise local awareness.



About the author

Tallaght-born [Nicola Pierce](#) is a writer, living in Drogheda.

Her first novel for young readers, *Spirit of the Titanic*, has been a huge hit, and widely praised.

'I would not mind betting that readers in Northern Ireland having read this story, will make their way to Belfast City Cemetery to see the unmarked grave of one Samuel Joseph Scott' *Books for Keeps*

'Little did I know that this book would be gripping, exciting and unimaginably shattering. Towards the end, things picked up a lot, and I realised that this would just get better and better and better.' *Guardian's Children's Books*

You can see a video all about the book, and Samuel Scott's story, here: www.obrien.ie/spirit-of-the-titanic#video

