**Why were 1 million Mexican Americans and immigrants forced to move to Mexico during the 1930s?**

Topics: Mexican American Repatriation, Great Depression

Erik Altenbernd, UC Irvine History Project

**History Standards**

**11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government.**

**11.6.4** Analyze the effects of and the controversies arising from New Deal economic policies and the expanded role of the federal government in society and the economy since the 1930s…

**CCSS Standards: Reading, Grades 11-12**

**RH 1.** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

**RH 2.** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

**RH3.** Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**RH7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g. visually quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**RH9.** Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

**CCSS Standards: Writing, Grades 11-12**

**WH 1.** Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*.

**WH2.** Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.

**WH4.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization, and style are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.

**Overview of Source Set**

The introduction below was written with students in mind. It explains the events surrounding Mexican American repatriation during the Great Depression. The sources and related inquiry questions check for understanding but also ask students to evaluate the causes of repatriation. The final activity has the students write an essay that identifies and explains the causes of repatriation.

**Documents**

1. George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American* (1993, excerpt)

2. *Los Angeles Times* report (1932)

3. “Mexicans returning home by train” (1933, photo)

4. George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American* (1993, excerpt)

5. “Mass Deportation May Sound Unlikely, But It’s Happened Before” (2015, excerpt)

6. *Latino Americans* (2013, video clip)

7. “Mass Deportations during 1930s Spurs Apology” (2005, excerpt)

**Introduction**

During the hard years of the Great Depression, approximately 1 million Mexican immigrants and native-born Americans of Mexican descent were forced to leave the United States for Mexico. This still largely unknown episode in US history is usually referred to as “Mexican repatriation.” Repatriation occurred across the US—from Western states like California, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas to Midwestern states Illinois and Michigan.

Repatriation began as early as 1929, but continued throughout much of the 1930s. Between 1929-1935, roughly 400,000 people were forcibly deported or pressured to move to Mexico. Another 85,000 immigrants voluntarily returned to Mexico during that same time.

During the period of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), large numbers of Mexicans immigrated to the United States. By 1920, Mexicans were the largest foreign-born group in California. By 1930, Mexican immigrants made up 19% of the immigrant population of California, and Los Angeles had the largest population of Mexican citizens outside of Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. However, by 1940, one-third of the Mexican population of Los Angeles would be gone due to repatriation.

Why did repatriation happen? In cities like Los Angeles, tremendous pressure was put on Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans to leave the city. The Great Depression affected thousands of people and sparked nativist responses towards different groups of immigrants (nativism is a term used to describe policies that favor native-born citizens over immigrants or the children of immigrants). As the Depression worsened and more native-born white families struggled to find work and make ends meet, Mexicans and Mexican Americans also found it difficult to find work and were increasingly cut off from receiving relief (i.e. public assistance or welfare money). In Los Angeles, local and federal officials did one of two things: they used their powers to deport Mexican undocumented immigrants back to Mexico; and, under pressure to save jobs and relief money for native-born Americans, they pressured legal immigrants and Mexican Americans to leave the US for Mexico.

A final word about the word “repatriation.” **Repatriation** is a word used to describe the process of returning people (and/or their property) to the nation of their birth. Large numbers of Mexican immigrants did voluntarily return to Mexico in the early days of the Depression. However, many left under pressure from government officials. Also, the majority (about 60%) of all those “repatriated” were US rather than Mexican citizens. In their efforts to repatriate “Mexicans,” government officials forced out large numbers of Americans—the sons and daughters of Mexican immigrants born in the US. Considered outsiders because of their ancestry, Mexican Americans were not repatriated but **depatriated**—banished from their country of birth due to economic fears and racial discrimination.

**Source 1**

**George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American* (1993)**

Almost everyone in the United States was deeply affected by the economic problems caused by the Great Depression. People all over the nation found it difficult to find jobs, and thus struggled to make enough money to keep their homes and eat. However, the Depression affected different groups of people in different ways. In this excerpt, historian George Sánchez explains how and why Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles were hit especially hard by the Depression.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| In Los Angeles, the census of 1930…reported that 50,918 residents were unemployed, or just under 10 percent of the **gainful** workers.…Though, **proportionally**, Los Angeles had fewer unemployed than industrial cities such as Cleveland, Buffalo, and Detroit, by the end of 1930 one out of every five **Angelenos** could not find work. One study showed unemployment in Los Angeles peaking at 41.6 percent in 1933. Even those with jobs severely felt the impact of the Great Depression. Wages fell by one-third in the United States, as both wages and hours were cut. In Los Angeles County, average wages declined 38 percent between 1926 and 1932.  Because of their seasonal employment in agricultural work, Mexicans were among the first in Los Angeles to experience the consequences of the Depression.…Agriculture cold no longer absorb urban workers who increasingly needed to **supplement** their low wages from unskilled industrial jobs. This development caused Mexican workers to depend even more heavily on wages earned in urban Los Angeles.  Finding work in the city, however, became more and more difficult. By April 1930, one of every seven Mexican laborers was unemployed, a figure twice as high as that of any other ethnic group in Los Angeles. Moreover, as **Anglo Americans** found themselves without work—particularly after several months of unemployment—they began to exert pressure on city employers to hire only “citizens” for work that had normally or occasionally been limited to Mexicans.…  Many Mexican families were forced to turn to public and private **charities** for help in surviving unemployment and economic **deprivation**. Yet here, too, discrimination, became the norm. During the 1920s, Mexicans constituted about one-fourth of all city residents who received some form of public assistance.…But during the Great Depression more **Anglo Americans** residents also found themselves in difficult circumstances. The result was increasing pressure on public officials to give preference in welfare allocations to American-born heads of households.…  As unemployment climbed, almost all new relief was allocated for Anglo laborers who had lost their jobs. In Los Angeles County…Expenditures skyrocketed from $1,690, 450 in 1928-29 to 2,469,520 in 1929-30, and $4,209,729 in 1930-31. Yet the percentage of Mexicans on relief steadily decreased from 21.5 percent in 1928-29 to 15.8 percent in 1929-30, and to 12.5 percent in 1930-31, despite widespread impoverishment in the Mexican community.… | **gainful**—productive employment that pays well  **proportional**—to compare two or more things equally  **Angelenos**—residents of Los Angeles  **supplement**—something added to something else; extra income  **Anglo Americans**—white Americans; Americans of European, or especially British, descent  **charity**—private or public organization that provides money, goods, and services to the poor, unemployed  **deprivation**—to lack or be denied basic necessities of life |

Source: George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 210-211.

**Questions**

**1.** What, according to one study, was the unemployment rate in Los Angeles in 1933?

**2.** What two economic problems did all workers across the United States experience during the early days of the Great Depression?

**3.** What two forms of discrimination did Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles experience during the early days of the Great Depression? Provide two examples, and at least one important fact, from the text.

**Source 2**

***Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1932**

In coordination with officials in the Herbert Hoover administration, government officials for the city and county of Los Angeles used police raids to deport illegal immigrants and other scare tactics to intimidate Mexican immigrants and their family members into leaving for Mexico. This program began in 1931 with a raid on La Placita Olvera, the central plaza located in Downtown Los Angeles near Olvera Street. Shortly thereafter, the County of Los Angeles, with support from the government of Mexico, started a program that paid for thousands of one-way train tickets to Mexico.

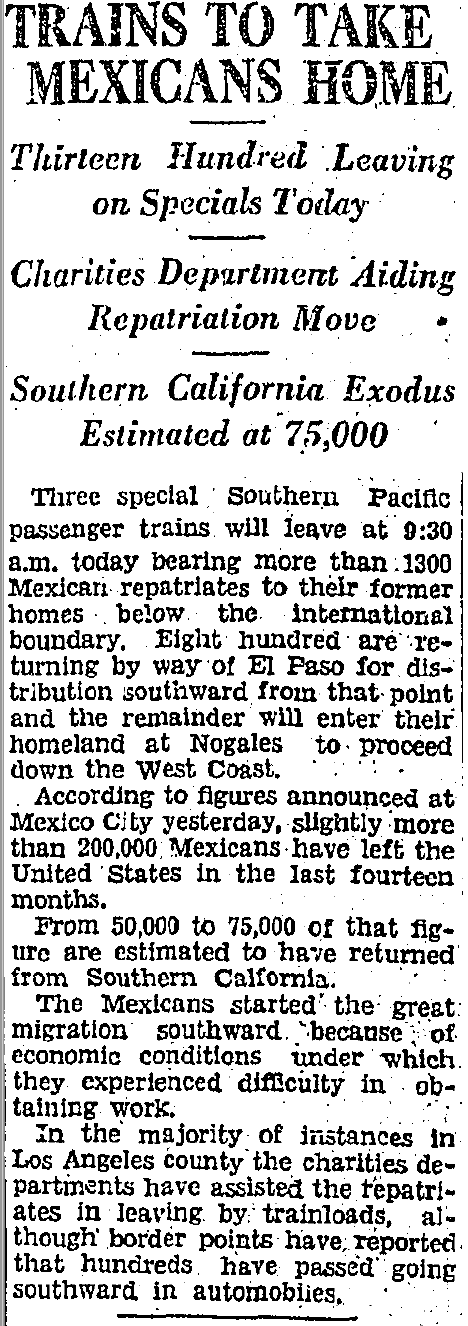
**Questions**

**4.** How many “Mexicans” does the report estimate were “repatriated” to Mexico over the previous “fourteen months?”

**5.** Does this report imply repatriation was a voluntary act? Or does it imply that it was an involuntary act? Explain your answer using two pieces of evidence from the newspaper report.

**6.** How many times does this report make reference to the idea that those leaving the United States are “returning” to their original “homeland” of Mexico?

**7.** Why do you think the report repeats this idea—that all those leaving are foreigners rather than Americans?



**Source 3**

**“Mexicans returning home by train”**

***Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, January 12, 1932**

Original newspaper caption: “Photo shows a crowd of 1,400 Mexicans at Central Station when they departed today for their old homes in Mexico. The families, with their babies, guitars, blankets, shawls and bundles, left on three special Southern Pacific trains chartered by Los Angeles county, which set aside about $15,000 to aid them in their repatriation. Officials estimated that this sum spent on transportation would have recovered within six weeks in savings on charity.”

****

Source: Los Angeles Public Library, <http://photos.lapl.org/carlweb/jsp/FullRecord?databaseID=968&record=1&controlNumber=4946521>

**Questions**

**8.** In 2-3 sentences, describe this image of Central Station. What do you see when you look at this photograph?

**9.** In what ways is the Herald-Examiner coverage of “repatriation” similar to, or different from, the reporting by the *Los Angeles Times* in Source 1?

**Source 4**

**George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American* (1993)**

In this excerpt, historian George Sánchez explains how the process of repatriation illustrated in Sources 2 and 3 changed during the early 1930s.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Many Mexican residents of Los Angeles responded to the worsening economic conditions and growth pattern of discrimination by returning to Mexico. Although most of the early repatriates came from Texas border towns, during the winter of 1929-30 a sizeable group of Los Angeles residents departed for their homeland. This group was usually not **destitute**; many returned with automobiles and furniture accumulated by hard years of work and saving in the United States.…  In 1931, many **destitute** Mexicans in Los Angeles also began to believe that a return to their homeland would be **prudent**.… Compared with those who left the city before formal deportation and repatriation campaigns began, Mexicans who departed after 1931 were more likely to be low-paid blue collar workers. They were **destitute**, unemployed for many weeks or months, and usually on relief.…Many if not most, experienced little improvement in their status once back in Mexico. While early repatriates had brought resources with them that could be put to good use in starting over, later returnees often found themselves unable to translate their American experience into tangible economic results in Mexico.…  [Even after the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933,] Los Angeles County officials who had committed themselves to a policy of repatriating or deporting Mexican **aliens**…doubled their efforts to entice Mexicans to leave.  This third phase of repatriation produced the most overt examples of abuse and manipulation, and certainly increased the level of racial discrimination by local officials against Mexicans.…  Señor Navidad Castañenda, like most others who left during this third phase of repatriation, entered the depression decade as a skilled worker…In many ways, repatriates of this third phase closely resembled those who refused to return to Mexico during the [early days of the] Great Depression. What often set them apart, however, was a particular misfortune that made family survival extremely precarious and forced them to reevaluate their previous decisions. Castañenda’s family, for example, finally agreed to repatriation only after the mother fell ill and died of tuberculosis, and the family home was foreclosed by the state. | **destitute—**poor; without the basic necessities of life  **prudent**—to act with forethought or care  **alien**—term used by US government to describe foreign-born immigrants who are not US citizens |

Source: George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 212-213, 216-217, 222-223.

**Questions**

**10.** What years did the three “phases” of repatriation occur in Los Angeles?

**11.** Which phase of repatriation do Sources 2 and 3 document?

**12.** In what ways were the three phases of repatriation similar and different from one another? Describe each phase and provide at least two examples highlighting similarities and differences over time.

**Source 5**

**National Public Radio, “Mass Deportation May Sound Unlikely, But It’s Happened Before”**

**September 8, 2015**

During the Presidential Election of 2016, candidate Donald Trump outlined a hardline immigration policy that called for deportation of illegal, or undocumented, immigrants in the United States. This report, which originally aired on the radio, assess Trump’s policy suggestions in light of repatriation policies of the Great Depression.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Presidential candidate Donald Trump's proposal to deport all 11 million immigrants living in the country illegally, along with their U.S.-born children, sounds far-fetched. But something similar happened before.  During the 1930s and into the 1940s, up to 2 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were deported or expelled from cities and towns across the U.S. and shipped to Mexico. According to some estimates, more than half of these people were U.S. citizens, born in the United States.  It’s a largely forgotten chapter in history that Francisco Balderrama, a California State University [Los Angeles] historian, documented in [the book] *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. He co-wrote that book with the late historian Raymond Rodriguez.  “There was a perception in the United States that Mexicans are Mexicans,” Balderrama said. “Whether they were American citizens, or whether they were Mexican nationals, in the American mind — that is, in the mind of government officials, in the mind of industry leaders — they're all Mexicans. So ship them home.”  It was the Great Depression, when up to a quarter of Americans were unemployed and many believed that Mexicans were taking scarce jobs. In response, federal, state and local officials launched so-called “repatriation” campaigns. They held raids in workplaces and in public places, rounded up Mexicans and Mexican-Americans alike, and deported them. The most famous of these was in downtown Los Angeles’ **Placita Olvera** in 1931.  Balderrama says these raids were intended to spread fear throughout Mexican barrios and pressure Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to leave on their own. In many cases, they succeeded.  Where they didn’t, government officials often used **coercion** to get rid of Mexican-Americans who were U.S. citizens. In Los Angeles, it was standard practice for county social workers to tell those receiving **public assistance** that they would lose it, and that they would be better off in Mexico. Those social workers would then get tickets for families to travel to Mexico. According to Balderrama's research, one-third of LA’s Mexican population was expelled between 1929 and 1944 as a result of these practices.  That's what happened to Emilia Castañeda and her family.  Castañeda was born in Los Angeles in 1926 to immigrant parents. Her mother died while she was growing up, and her father struggled to get work during the Depression. When Castañeda was nine, Los Angeles County paid to put the family on a southbound train to Mexico. They lived with relatives, but often had to sleep outdoors for lack of space.  “The oldest of the boys, he used to call me a *repatriada*,” Castañeda remembered in a 1971 interview, using the Spanish word for a repatriate. “And I don't think I felt that I was a *repatriada*, because I was an American citizen.” Castañeda didn’t return to the U.S. until she was 17, by which point she had lost much of her English. Her father never returned.  Balderrama says these family separations remain a lasting legacy of the mass deportations of that era. Despite claims by officials at the time that deporting U.S.-born children — along with their immigrant parents — would keep families together, many families were destroyed.  Esteban Torres was a toddler when his father, a Mexican immigrant, was caught up in a workplace roundup at an Arizona copper mine in the mid-1930s. “My mother, like other wives, waited for the husbands to come home from the mine. But he didn't come home,” Torres recalled in a recent interview. He now lives east of Los Angeles. “I was 3 years old. My brother was 2 years old. And we never saw my father again.”  Today, Torres serves on the board of La Plaza de Cultura y Artes in Los Angeles, a Mexican-American cultural center. In front of it stands a memorial that the state of California dedicated in 2012, apologizing to the hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens who were illegally deported or expelled during the Depression.  “It was a sorrowful step that this country took,” Torres said. “It was a mistake. And for Trump to suggest that we should do it again is ludicrous, stupid and incomprehensible.” | **Placita Olvera**—plaza located in Downtown Los Angeles near Olvera Street  **coercion**—to persuade by force or threat of force  **public assistance**—relief; welfare money used to help poor and unemployed during the Great Depression |

Source: NPR, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/09/08/437579834/mass-deportation-may-sound-unlikely-but-its-happened-before>

**Questions**

**13.** What percentage of Los Angeles’s Mexican American population was “repatriated” during the 1930s?

**14.** Why, according to historian Francisco Balderrama, did deportation take place during the Great Depression? Explain this issue in 2-3 sentences using a direct quotation from the text.

**15.** What were some of the social consequences for reptriates like Emilia Castañeda? Explain your answer using 2-3 examples from the article.

****

Commemorative plaque dedicated to history of repatriation at La Plaza de Cultura y Artes in Downtown Los Angeles.

**Source 6**

**PBS, *Latino Americans* (10:19, 2013)**

<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/03aba0cf-1bfa-4443-b049-e27ed718ede7/deportations/>

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Questions** | **Answers** |
| **16.** Why does historian George Sánchez say the Great Depression was “devastating” for the Mexican American community in Los Angeles? |  |
| **17.** What does Sánchez mean when he says the Mexican American community was a “scapegoat?” |  |
| **18.** In what ways does deportation policy change in 1932? |  |



Emilia Castañeda being interviewed at La Plaza de Cultura y Artes before repatriation commemorative plaque.

**Source 7**

**“Mass Deportations during 1930s Spurs Apology”**

***Sacramento Bee*, December 28, 2005**

In 2005, the California State Legislature passed a bill known as SB 670. The name of the law is “Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program.” The law serves as a public apology for the Mexican repatriation programs of the 1930s and authorized a public commemoration site in Los Angeles. By apologizing for the law, the state of California effectively admitted that repatriation was a terrible mistake.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Carlos Guerra was only 3 years old when Los Angeles County authorities came to his family's house in **Azusa** and ordered his mother, a legal United States resident, and her six American-born children to leave the country. It was 1931. The administration of President Herbert Hoover backed a policy that would repatriate hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans, more than half of them United States citizens.  Amid the economic desperation of the Depression, Latino families were viewed as taking jobs and government benefits from “real Americans.” In Los Angeles County, a Citizens Committee for Coordination for Unemployment Relief urgently warned of 400,000 “deportable aliens,” declaring: “We need their jobs for needy citizens.”  Up to 2 million people of Mexican ancestry were relocated to Mexico during the 1930s, even though as many as 1.2 million were born in the United States. In California, some 400,000 Latino United States citizens or legal residents were forced to leave.  Now California, for its part, wants to say it is sorry.  On Sunday, Senate Bill 670 - the so-called “Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program” - becomes official. It acknowledges the suffering of tens of thousands of Latino families unjustly forced out of the Golden State that was their home.  “The state of California apologizes...for the fundamental violations of their basic civil liberties and constitutional rights during the period of illegal deportation and coerced emigration,” the act reads.  California's apology was inspired by the work of California State University, Los Angeles, Chicano studies professor Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, a history professor emeritus at Long Beach City College.  In their book, “Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s,” they describe long-term emotional trauma by children, born in the United States, who were forced to grow up in Mexico.  “For American-born children, trying to adjust to life in Mexico proved to be a very traumatic experience,” the authors wrote. “... Deep-seated scars of rejections by both cultures would remain embedded in their lives forever.”  The little-acknowledged history of Mexican Americans repatriated in the 1930s became embedded in the mind of state Sen. Joe Dunn, D-Santa Ana, after he read “Decade of Betrayal” on a flight to Washington, D.C. Dunn drafted SB 670 with the help of Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez, D-Los Angeles, and Assembly members Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, Lloyd Levine, D-Van Nuys and Lori Saldaña, D-San Diego.  Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the bill Oct. 7, but vetoed a companion measure - Senate Bill 645 - that would have created a commission to study paying reparations to survivors of the 1930s repatriations. | **Azusa**—city located east of Pasadena in Los Angeles County |

Source: University of Arizona MECHA, <http://clubs.arizona.edu/~mecha/pages/MassDeportationApology.html>

**Questions**

**19.** What is the official name of Senate Bill 670?

**20.** Why, according to the report, was the law passed?

**21.** What “companion measure” or (bill) did Governor Schwarzenegger veto despite signing into law SB 670?

****

Francisco Balderrama, co-author of the book *Decade of Betrayal*

**Final Activity**

Today, “Mexican repatriation” is understood as a terrible mistake. The California legislature, for instance, passed the “Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program” in part so that Californians—and, hopefully, Americans—will not forget what happened and so that nothing like repatriation will happen again.

As you learned from the primary sources above, racial, or ethnic, discrimination played a major role in the events usually referred to as “Mexican repatriation.” However, discrimination is only part of the story.

Events like repatriation happen in certain ways, and at certain times, for particular reasons.

For this final activity, your task is to answer the question: **Why were 1 million Mexican Americans and immigrants forced to move to Mexico during the 1930s?**

To answerthis question, you’ll need to explain the specific causes that led to Mexican repatriation during the Great Depression.

Use the “Historians Toolbox Graphic Organizer” below to assemble your historical evidence and develop claims about the causes of repatriation.

After you’ve filled out the graphic organizer, write a short essay that **1.** explains what repatriation was, and **2.** provides specific details that explain why repatriation happened during the 1930s

**Historian’s Toolbox: Organizing Evidence to Write**

**Inquiry Question:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Source Citation** | **Summary:**  What is the information presented in the source? | **Evidence:**  What are some specific quotes or information from the source that allows you to answer the question? | **Analysis:**  This means that…  This shows that…  This source is important to our understanding because… | **Claim:**  Explain how this source answers the inquiry question. |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |

1. Examine the **Claim** column and create one claim that unifies the ideas you present. For example, instead of having three sentences about different causes for an event, create one sentence with all of the causes of an event.

Write your **Claim** here:

1. Organize your evidence. Do you want to present the evidence in chronological order or another way? List how you will organize your evidence here:
2. How does the evidence support your claim? Give some specific analysis explaining why you think this evidence is important to answer the inquiry question.

**You are ready to write!** Use the outline below to develop a paragraph:

Introduce the topic (time period, location, major historical figures)

Claim

Evidence #1 and analysis

Evidence #2 and analysis

Evidence #3 and analysis

Concluding sentence restating your claim