



GUIDELINES for Teaching about Genocide

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/teaching-about-genocide

The term “genocide” did not exist before 1944. It is a very specific term, referring to violent crimes committed against a group with the intent to destroy the existence of the group. The Museum strongly encourages teachers to discuss with their students the concept of genocide and its development since World War II to provide background and a foundation for their investigation of individual or multiple genocidal events. For more information, visit the section Confront Genocide on the museum website at www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide.

■ Define the term “genocide.”

The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

1. Killing members of the group;
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

■ Investigate the context and dynamics that have led to genocide.

A study of genocide should consider what the steps toward genocide in a society have been or could be. Analyze the factors and patterns that may play a role in the early stages: political considerations, economic difficulties, local history and context, etc. How are targeted groups defined, dehumanized, marginalized, and/or segregated before mass killing begins? As students learn of the early phases of a genocide, ask them to consider how steps and causal conditions may have been deflected or minimized. Ask them to think about scope, intent, and tactics. Be mindful that there is no one set pattern or list of preliminary steps that always lead to mass murder.

■ Be wary of simplistic parallels to other genocides.

Each genocide has its own unique characteristics of time, place, people, and methods. Students are likely to try to make facile comparisons to other genocides, particularly the Holocaust; however, it

is up to the teacher to redirect students to the specifics of a particular community at a particular time and place. Some parallels do indeed exist between the Holocaust and other genocides: the use of trains to transport victims, camps for detention and killing, etc. However, genocide has also occurred without these two tactics. Thus, you could make careful comparisons between the tactics or procedures used by oppressors to destroy communities, but you should avoid comparing the pain and suffering of individuals.

■ Analyze American and world response.

The world community is very different and far more complicated in the aftermath of the Holocaust. An important goal in studying all aspects of genocide is to learn from mistakes and apply these lessons to the future. To do this, students must strive to understand not only what was done, or not done, in the past but also why action was or was not taken. As with any historical event, it is important to present the facts. Students need to be aware of the various choices that the global community had available before, during, and after the mass killing. It is important to begin at home, with the choices available to the United States. It is also important to discuss all of the stakeholders involved—political leaders, religious leaders, and private citizens. Next, it is critical to discuss the range of choices seemingly available to the rest of the global community. How did international and regional authorities respond? What is the role of nongovernmental organizations? When is diplomacy, negotiation, isolation, or military involvement appropriate or effective?

Students may become frustrated when they learn of governmental inaction in the face of genocide. While there are certainly cynical reasons for not intervening, teachers can lead students to understand the complexity of responding to

genocide—that it is usually not a simple matter to step into another country and tell one group to stop killing another group. In addressing what might cause genocide and how to prevent it, consider these questions:

- When does a nation (the United States, for example) have the political will to take all necessary steps to stop genocide?
- How much international cooperation can be mustered? How much is needed?
- What are the possible ramifications of intervention?
- Is a nation willing to absorb casualties and death to stop a genocide?

■ **Illustrate positive actions taken by individuals and nations in the face of genocide.**

One reason that genocide occurs is the complicity of bystanders within the nation and around the world. However, in each genocide, there have been

individuals—both persons at risk inside the country as well as external observers or stakeholders—who have spoken out against the oppressive regime and/or rescued threatened people. There are always a few who stand up to face evil with tremendous acts of courage—and sometimes very small acts of courage, of no less importance. Teachers should discuss these responses without exaggerating their numbers or their frequency.

When teaching and learning about genocide, individuals may fall prey to helplessness or acceptance of inevitability because the event is imminent or in progress. The magnitude of the event and seeming inertia in the world community and its policymakers can be daunting, but actions of any size have potential impact. Numerous episodes from the Holocaust and other genocides illustrate this point.

CASES

www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/cases

- **Bosnia-Herzegovina.** During the conflict in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, an estimated 100,000 people were killed, 80 percent of whom were Bosnian Muslims—known as Bosniaks. In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces killed as many as 8,000 Bosniaks from Srebrenica. It was the largest massacre in Europe since the Holocaust.
- **Burma.** Long considered one of the world’s most persecuted peoples, the Muslim Rohingya have no legal status in Burma and face severe discrimination, abuse, and escalating violence.
- **Cambodia.** Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge subjected the country’s citizens to forced labor, persecution, and execution in the name of the regime’s ruthless agrarian ideology. Almost two million Cambodians—approximately one third of the population—died in the “Killing Fields.”
- **Central African Republic.** What began in 2013 as political violence initiated by rebel groups opposing the government of the Central African Republic has taken on a religious dimension, and groups and individuals are now being targeted because of their Christian or Muslim identity.
- **Democratic Republic of the Congo.** Over the last two decades, more than five million civilians have died in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in a succession of complex wars and conflicts. Most have died from preventable diseases as a result of the collapse of infrastructure, lack of food and health care, and displacement.
- **Rwanda.** In just 100 days, from April to July 1994, between 500,000 and one million Rwandans, predominantly Tutsis, were massacred when a Hutu extremist-led government launched a plan to wipe out the country’s entire Tutsi minority and any others who opposed their policies.
- **South Sudan.** In July 2011, South Sudan became the world’s newest country after its citizens voted for independence from Sudan. The country faces great challenges as it seeks to build its democratic institutions, overcome a history of internal conflict based on ethnicity, and resolve ongoing tensions with Sudan over the region’s oil resources.
- **Sudan.** Since the 1950s, the Arab-dominated government of Sudan has tried to impose its control on African minorities on the country’s periphery. More than 2.5 million civilians have been killed in a succession of brutal conflicts—between north and south, in Darfur in the west, and in other regions.
- **Syria.** Since its outbreak in April 2011, the conflict in Syria has cost the lives of more than 200,000 Syrians, displaced millions more, and involved numerous atrocities and crimes against humanity.