



TEACHING ABOUT GENOCIDE

“All humans are human. There are no humans more human than others. That's it.”

—ROMÉO DALLAIRE, FORCE COMMANDER OF UNAMIR (UNITED NATIONS ASSISTANCE MISSION FOR RWANDA)

PREPARING TO TEACH THIS UNIT

Below is information to keep in mind when teaching the content in this unit. This material is intended to help teachers consider the concept of genocide, how to foster empathy with the victims who were persecuted, how to better understand the mechanisms used and the process of the escalation of hate that can lead to genocide, and how the legacies of genocides are created, memorialized, and remembered.

- 1** Genocide has been called the greatest crime for many reasons. It ruptures history, creating a barrier between the past and the future. It eliminates culture, eradicating traditions and sacred places that may have existed for centuries. It destroys continuity, eliminating familial generations and the connections of ancestors of the past. And it challenges us in meaningful and heartfelt ways to assess our lives as interconnected with friends, neighbors, and leaders.
- 2** This unit focuses on four specific genocides that occurred in the 20th century: the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, and the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda. This by no means signifies that these genocides are more important or more devastating. In fact, it is vitally important to avoid any comparison of pain, destruction, or any other ranking attempt. Each genocide is a unique and horrible event and it is important to understand each one individually as well as to seek to better understand the concept of genocide by noticing similarities and differences between each occurrence.
- 3** In teaching this unit, there will most likely be attempts by students to make connections to other actions of injustice, especially examples from United States history, including indigenous genocides and slavery. Teachers are encouraged to exercise caution in these discussions, allowing students to make these important connections when it is appropriate, for example when discussing the effect of propaganda to dehumanize a group, and to block any attempts to compare or rank the injustice, loss, or pain caused by those actions.
- 4** Teaching about genocide provides an opportunity to engage students in deep reflection about choices made by individuals, leaders, governments, and larger society at different points in time. Embrace and encourage complexity throughout this unit, inserting nuance and pushing students to ponder the deep existential questions that a study of genocide elicits. Lastly, it is important to ensure a supportive learning environment as these topics are difficult, require sensitivity, and include examples of hate speech and overt violence.

ABOUT THIS UNIT

INTRODUCTION

This unit is shaped by four fundamental questions that have shaped each lesson: What is genocide? Who were the people before they became victims? How did genocide occur? How do we remember a genocide? In asking these questions about four genocides of the 20th century, the purpose of this unit is to encourage critical thinking in students to explore the concept of genocide and analyze some of the common themes seen across multiple genocides. This unit challenges students to find value and meaningful lessons in the study of genocide and how memory and the understanding of genocides of the past can empower them to act against hatred today.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What is genocide? Why do we study about it? Why should we study it?
- Was the Holocaust an example of genocide? What are some of the parallels between the genocides studied in this unit and how are they different from the Holocaust?
- Who were the victims of the genocides in the 20th century studied in this unit? Why is it important to learn about the victims of genocide as they were, before they became victims?
- How does a society ostracize a group and make it acceptable to commit atrocities against them? How does media, propaganda, and fear capitalize on long roots of preexisting hatred and enmity to contribute to creating conditions where genocide can occur?
- How do documentation, including testimony, the law, and remembrance of genocide benefit human civilization?
- How does the term “genocide” fail, or succeed, in capturing the tremendous tragedy and loss of human life, especially against the backdrop of other human rights violations and mass atrocities? Since every genocide is different, what is the importance of having one word to use as an umbrella term?

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Examine the creation of the term “genocide” by Raphael Lemkin, its importance, and how it was codified by the United Nations in response to the Holocaust.
- Learn about unique cultures, traditions, and peoples that have been targeted for destruction, including the Armenians, the Cambodians, the Tutsis in Rwanda, and the Jews during the Holocaust.
- Analyze the techniques and power of propaganda to better understand how it fans the flames to create extreme marginalization of a group.
- Investigate multiple genocides and be empowered to activate their knowledge to raise awareness, educate, and help prevent current and future atrocities.
- Reflect on the human impact of these events through the use of visual history testimony from survivors of the genocides discussed here.
- Evaluate why it is important to study genocides.