

GENOCIDE PREVENTION & HUMAN RIGHTS UNIT

Examining the 20th–21st Centuries

Grades 9–12 | 3 Weeks | 15 Lesson Plans

Featuring Gregory Stanton's 10 Stages of Genocide

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UNIT OVERVIEW

Course Description

This 3-week unit examines the phenomenon of genocide in the 20th and 21st centuries. Through the rigorous study of six historical case studies—Armenia, the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur—students will utilize Gregory Stanton's 10 Stages of Genocide framework to identify patterns, recognize early warning signs, and understand the societal conditions that allow mass atrocities to occur. The unit culminates in a genocide prevention advocacy project, empowering students to move from historical awareness to active global citizenship.

Essential Questions

- What are the predictable stages of genocide, and how do they escalate from discrimination to mass violence?
- How have international communities failed or succeeded in preventing and responding to genocide?
- What is the role of individual and collective responsibility in preventing human rights violations?
- How does the study of difficult history serve as a tool for shaping a more just future?

Learning Objectives

- Analyze the 10 Stages of Genocide framework and apply it to historical and contemporary case studies.
- Evaluate the social, political, and economic conditions that precede genocidal violence.
- Critically examine primary and secondary sources related to 20th and 21st-century genocides.
- Synthesize knowledge of historical patterns to identify early warning signs of mass atrocities today.
- Design and present an evidence-based advocacy project aimed at genocide prevention and human rights protection.

Sensitivity & Trauma-Informed Teaching Note

This unit deals with deeply disturbing and traumatic historical events. It is imperative that educators establish a safe, respectful classroom environment prior to beginning. Establish clear guidelines for discussions, provide content warnings, allow students to step away if needed, and focus on the dignity of victims and the importance of bearing witness, rather than gratuitous details of violence. Encourage emotional check-ins and provide resources for school counselors.

THE 10 STAGES OF GENOCIDE

Framework by Gregory H. Stanton, President, Genocide Watch

1. CLASSIFICATION	Us vs. Them. People are categorized into distinct groups based on ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality.
2. SYMBOLIZATION	Names or symbols are forced upon groups. Symbolization does not necessarily result in genocide unless combined with hatred.
3. DISCRIMINATION	A dominant group uses law, custom, and political power to deny the rights of other groups. Civil rights are stripped away.
4. DEHUMANIZATION	One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members are equated with animals, vermin, or diseases using propaganda.
5. ORGANIZATION	Genocide is always organized, often by the state. Militias or terror groups are formed, armed, and trained.
6. POLARIZATION	Extremists drive the groups apart. Moderates are silenced or assassinated. Propaganda incites fear of the 'other'.
7. PREPARATION	Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity. Death lists are drawn up; weapons are stockpiled.
8. PERSECUTION	Victims are segregated into ghettos, deported, or confined to famine zones. Property is confiscated; cultural monuments are destroyed.
9. EXTERMINATION	The mass killing legally called 'genocide' begins. It is 'extermination' to the killers because they do not believe the victims are fully human.
10. DENIAL	The perpetrators dig up mass graves, burn bodies, intimidate witnesses, and deny crimes. Denial is the surest indicator of further genocidal massacres.

Intervention: Genocide is preventable if these stages are recognized and counter-measures are taken at each stage. Later stages must be preceded by earlier stages, though earlier stages may continue to operate concurrently.

CASE STUDY 1: THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Dates: 1915–1918 | Location: Ottoman Empire | Target Group: Armenians

Historical Context

The Armenian people, a Christian minority within the Muslim-dominated Ottoman Empire, had faced periodic persecution for decades. As the Ottoman Empire declined and lost territory, a nationalist movement known as the Young Turks seized power in 1908. When the Ottoman Empire entered World War I on the side of the Central Powers, military defeats were blamed on internal 'traitors.' Armenians were falsely accused of collaborating with the enemy, providing the Ottoman government a pretext to enact a premeditated plan of annihilation.

The 10 Stages Applied

Classification & Symbolization: Armenians were officially classified as a distinct, inferior group. They were forced to wear identifying symbols, such as red arm bands or special hats.

Discrimination & Dehumanization: Armenians were subjected to severe legal restrictions, stripping them of civil rights. Ottoman propaganda dehumanized them, labeling them as 'infidels' and 'treacherous vermin.'

Organization & Polarization: The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) formed the 'Special Organization' (Teshkilat-i Mahsusa), consisting of released convicts, to carry out mass killings. Moderate Ottoman officials who opposed the actions were replaced or assassinated.

Preparation & Persecution: On April 24, 1915, known as Red Sunday, the Ottoman government arrested and deported over 250 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople, decapitating the community's leadership. Armenians were disarmed; weapons were sought as 'proof' of rebellion.

Extermination: Armenian men were rounded up and massacred. Women, children, and the elderly were forced on brutal death marches into the Syrian desert without food or water, subjected to rape, kidnapping, and systematic slaughter. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians perished.

Denial: The modern Republic of Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, officially denies that a genocide occurred, characterizing the deaths as a tragic byproduct of war rather than a deliberate, systematic annihilation.

Discussion Questions

- How did the geopolitical climate of World War I provide cover for the Ottoman Empire's actions?
- Why is the arrest of community leaders often a critical step in the persecution stage of genocide?
- What role does state denial play in the long-term trauma of a victimized population?

CASE STUDY 2: THE HOLOCAUST

Dates: 1933–1945 | Location: Nazi-Occupied Europe | Target Group: Jews, Roma, Disabled, Political Dissidents, LGBTQ+

Historical Context

Following Germany's defeat in World War I and the severe economic hardships of the Weimar Republic, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power on a platform of extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism, and racial purity. The Nazis promoted a twisted ideology of a 'Master Race' (Aryan) and viewed Jews as an existential, biological threat. The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews, along with millions of others deemed 'undesirable.'

The 10 Stages Applied

Classification & Symbolization: The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 legally classified individuals based on their grandparents' religion, defining who was Jewish. Jews were forced to wear the Yellow Star, and Roma were later forced to wear a brown or black triangle.

Discrimination: The Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of German citizenship, prohibited marriage between Jews and Germans, and barred Jews from schools, professions, and public spaces (Kristallnacht, 1938, escalated this to open violence).

Dehumanization: Nazi propaganda, led by Joseph Goebbels, relentlessly dehumanized Jews through films, posters, and newspapers, depicting them as rats, parasites, and carriers of disease. This desensitized the German public to their suffering.

Organization & Preparation: The SS (Schutzstaffel) organized the genocide. Initially, mobile killing units (Einsatzgruppen) shot over a million Jews in the East. At the Wannsee Conference (1942), the 'Final Solution' was formalized: the shift to industrialized mass murder using extermination camps.

Persecution & Extermination: Victims were forced into overcrowded ghettos (e.g., Warsaw) before being deported by rail to camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, and Sobibor. Upon arrival, they were 'selected'—the able-bodied sent to forced labor, while women, children, the elderly, and the weak were sent directly to gas chambers. Six million Jews were murdered.

Denial: Despite overwhelming documentation, Holocaust denial remains a persistent form of anti-Semitism. Deniers claim the genocide is a hoax, exaggerating the death toll of other groups to obscure the uniquely targeted annihilation of European Jewry.

Discussion Questions

- How did the Nuremberg Laws lay the legal groundwork for the subsequent extermination of Jews?
- What was the psychological impact of forcing victims to wear symbols, both on the victims and the perpetrators?
- How did the industrialization of murder (ghettos, railways, gas chambers) differentiate the Holocaust from previous mass atrocities?

WEEK 3: LATE 20TH CENTURY, ADVOCACY & ACTION

Focus: Bosnia, Darfur, Expert Testimony, and the Advocacy Project

Lesson 11: Case Study 5 – The Bosnian Genocide (Ethnic Cleansing & Safe Areas)

Objective: Students will analyze the concept of 'ethnic cleansing' and evaluate the failure of international peacekeeping in the UN Safe Areas.

Materials: Case Study Packet 5: The Bosnian Genocide

Mini-Lesson (15 min): Context on the fragmentation of Yugoslavia. Define 'ethnic cleansing' and discuss how it serves as a euphemism for the Persecution and Extermination stages. Introduce the UN's establishment of 'Safe Areas.'

Activity (25 min): Students read Case Study Packet 5, focusing on the Siege of Sarajevo and the fall of Srebrenica. They map the 10 stages, paying close attention to how the VRS organized the separation of men and boys (Preparation/Extermination).

Closure (10 min): Discussion: How did the international community's refusal to use the word 'genocide' during the conflict paralyze their response?

Lesson 12: Case Study 6 – The Darfur Genocide (The First Genocide of the 21st Century)

Objective: Students will examine how environmental degradation and government-sponsored militias drive genocide in the modern era.

Materials: Case Study Packet 6: The Darfur Genocide

Mini-Lesson (10 min): Context on Sudan's civil wars, the Darfur rebellion, and the Khartoum government's strategy of arming the Janjaweed.

Activity (25 min): Students read the packet, mapping the stages. Focus discussion on the scorched-earth tactics (destroying wells, crops) as a form of Extermination via Persecution. Analyze the role of the ICC in issuing warrants for al-Bashir.

Closure (15 min): Synthesis discussion: Across all 6 case studies, what is the one early warning sign (Stages 1-5) that is most consistently present before violence erupts?

Lesson 13: Bearing Witness – Expert Speaker / Testimony Analysis

Objective: Students will listen to and analyze firsthand accounts of genocide to understand the human impact beyond the historical facts.

Materials: Expert Speaker Preparation Guide (from Part 3)

Mini-Lesson (5 min): Review the 'During the Visit' etiquette from the Expert Speaker Preparation Guide. Remind students of the emotional weight of testimony.

Activity (40 min): *Option A (Guest Speaker):* Host a survivor, descendant, or human rights advocate. Students ask questions generated from their Prep Guide. *Option B (Testimony Analysis):* View recorded testimonies (e.g., USC Shoah Foundation, Yad Vashem). Students take notes on how the victim's experience reflects specific stages of genocide.

Closure (5 min): Silent reflection. Students write down one thought they want to carry with them from the testimony.

Lesson 14: Advocacy Project Work Day (Research & Strategy)

Objective: Students will synthesize their knowledge to design an actionable advocacy campaign targeting a contemporary crisis.

Materials: Genocide Prevention Advocacy Project Guide, Early Warning Signs Analysis Activity, devices for research

Mini-Lesson (10 min): Review the Advocacy Project Guide. Emphasize the difference between 'raising awareness' (passive) and 'advocating for intervention' (active). Model how to write a strong 'Interruption Strategy' linked to a specific stage.

Activity (35 min): Independent/Partner work time. Students select their contemporary crisis, map the early warning signs, and begin drafting their intervention strategy and deliverable. Teacher circulates to provide feedback and approve topics.

Closure (5 min): Status check. Students write their campaign title and target audience on a sticky note and post it on the board.

Lesson 15: Advocacy Project Presentations & Unit Synthesis

Objective: Students will present their advocacy campaigns, demonstrating their understanding of genocide prevention, and reflect on the unit's essential questions.

Materials: Advocacy Project Rubric, student presentations

Activity (40 min): Student Presentations. Each student/group delivers their 3–5 minute pitch. Peers evaluate one another using the Advocacy Rubric, focusing on the feasibility of the intervention strategy.

Closure (10 min): Final Unit Reflection. Return to the unit's essential questions. Discuss: How does studying difficult history change our responsibility to the present? What is one actionable step you will take this year to combat hatred in your own community?

THANK YOU FOR TEACHING DIFFICULT HISTORY.

Your dedication to guiding students through challenging and essential content makes a profound impact. By equipping students with the frameworks to recognize injustice and the tools to advocate for human rights, you are shaping informed, empathetic global citizens.

How did this resource work in your classroom?

Your feedback is invaluable! If this unit met your expectations and supported your students' learning, please consider leaving a review on Teachers Pay Teachers. Your insights help us create even better, rigorously crafted resources for the educators who need them.

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