

Genocide Awareness Month

Micro Lessons

Genocide Awareness Month is commemorated in April. The month was chosen because April contains many significant dates in the history of genocide. These include the beginnings of the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the Armenian Genocide, and the Anfal campaign against Iraqi Kurds. The goal of Genocide Awareness Month is to share knowledge about what genocide is, about genocides that have happened in the past, and about the continuing scourge of genocide today.

The below micro lessons are designed to be presented in ten minutes or less and are an ideal way to start your class during Genocide Awareness Month or to introduce the concept of genocide. Handouts can be found at the end of the packet.

These lessons are recommended for high school students. We do not recommend covering genocide with students younger than ninth grade.

For full-length lessons and to dig deeper into the subject, visit our website: <https://hmh.org/education/lesson-plans/>. Holocaust Museum Houston also offers virtual tours and opportunities to bring a museum educator to your class virtually (for free): <https://hmh.org/education/programs-and-curriculum/educator-in-motion/>.

Whenever you teach about genocide, keep in mind the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's guidelines for teaching about genocide: <https://thgc.texas.gov/learning/best-practices/guidelines-for-teaching-about-genocides>.

1. Starting the Conversation

Objective: Start students thinking about remembering and studying acts of mass violence and why it is important to do so.

Background: During the Holocaust, the Nazis created a vast network of concentration camps and killing centers where Jewish people and other groups (including Poles, gay men, Soviet prisoners of war, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of non-Nazi political parties, and people from across Europe who resisted) seen as enemies by the Nazis were murdered or forced to work as slaves. One of the largest of these camps was Auschwitz in Poland. An Italian-Jewish man, Primo Levi, survived Auschwitz and wrote extensively about life in the camp, including the poem "Shemà" (sheh-ma). "Shemà" means to hear or to listen in Hebrew. It is also the name of one of the most important Jewish prayers.

After you discuss the background, have students read the poem "Shemà" by Primo Levi (Reading 1 below). This can be done individually or as a group. Use the discussion questions to have a class discussion or ask for written responses.

Discussion questions:

1. What does the author want the reader to remember?
2. Why do you think the author wants the reader to remember this?
3. What does the author mean when he asks “Consider whether this is a man/woman?”
4. Why do we learn about sad parts of history like the Holocaust?

2. Defining Genocide

Objective: Provide an understanding that genocide includes many different acts beyond mass murder.

Without mentioning the term genocide, present students with this list of actions:

- Taking away people’s access to food and water
- Preventing people from having children
- Taking away people’s children
- Torturing people
- Killing people

Have a class discussion or have students write answers to the following questions:

1. What do all of these actions have in common?
2. What makes them different?
3. What would it mean to a community if this was happening to them?
4. What would it mean to target an entire group of people with these actions?
5. Can you name examples of one or more of these actions targeting groups of people today or in history?

Tell students that these actions make up genocide. A simple way to define genocide is: “attempting to destroy a group of people because of who they are.” Based on the definition and the actions listed, what does it mean to “destroy” a group? Why does genocide include actions besides murder? You can pass out Handout 1 (below), which contains the official legal definition of genocide.

3. How Genocides Begin

Objective: Demonstrate some of the ways the groundwork is laid for genocide.

Background: Starting in April of 1994, there was a genocide in the central African country of Rwanda that lasted about 100 days. The instigators were an extremist faction of Hutu, who targeted everyone who was Tutsi and anyone who didn’t agree with them. Hutu and Tutsi are ethnic groups in Rwanda. Kigali is the capital of Rwanda. The video will mention RTLM, which was an extremist radio station that spread propoganda and during the killing broadcast instructions for the genocide around the country. Despite international calls to block the radio station’s broadcasts, it stayed on the air during the genocide. We will be watching the testimony given by a Tutsi survivor of the genocide at the United Nations in 2014.

Provide your students with the background. Then show the video of Eugenie Mukeshimana's testimony before the United Nations: <http://webtv.un.org/watch/testimony-by-eugenie-mukeshimana-a-survivor-of-the-1994-genocide-in-rwanda/3390149875001/?term=>. The full video is a little under 10 minutes long. It is recommended that you watch from the beginning to 4:15, but if you have the time you can watch the entire video. Discuss some or all of the discussion questions or have your students provide written responses.

Discussion questions:

1. How do you think it made Eugenie feel to be called a “cockroach” and a “snake?”
2. Do you think it felt different to hear these names from fellow students versus soldiers? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Eugenie's classmates were so willing to bully her for being Tutsi?
4. How can you tell if something is propaganda?
5. Eugenie asks if anyone stopped to ask “is this right?” Have you ever found yourself asking if something is right? What did you do?
6. Eugenie says “more could have been done.” What do you think could have been done to counter propaganda and bullying?
7. If something had been done to counter the early stages of propaganda and bullying, do you think the genocide would still have occurred?

4. What else is destroyed?

Objective: For students to think more deeply about what it means to destroy a group and what genocide means beyond mass murder.

Start by asking students: what is the purpose of a graveyard/cemetery?

Show students Handout 2 either on a screen or as handouts. Read or have the students read the captions for each set of photos. Have a discussion on the following questions or ask students to provide written responses:

As you look at each set of pictures:

1. How was the cemetery targeted?
2. Why do you think the cemetery was targeted?
3. What impact will this have on the community whose families are buried in the cemetery?
4. What impact will this have on the broader community in the area?

After you have looked at all three sets of pictures:

5. What is similar about the way these cemeteries were targeted? What is different?
6. What do these attacks have to do with genocide?

Extension:

Have your students read (or read together) this article about the destruction of African American cemeteries in the United States: <https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/african-american->

[cemeteries-destruction/](#). What similarities do you see to the cases discussed? What is different? How does the destruction of cemeteries impact communities?

5. Denial

Objective: Use a case study to understand how most genocide denial camouflages itself.

Based on what students have learned about genocide, have them fill out a Venn diagram (Handout 3 below). On the left side they should list all the features of genocide they can think of. On the right, they should list all the features of war they can think of. In the middle, they should list features that apply to both war and genocide. If the students need a refresher, provide Handout 1, the legal definition of genocide.

While the students still have their Venn diagrams, watch the first part of the video “From Guatemalan Soil, Scientists Unearth Signs of Genocide” from the PBS NewsHour: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/from-guatemalan-soil-scientists-unearth-signs-of-genocide>. The full video is 13 minutes. The most important part to play is from the beginning to 3:33. We recommend watching the video from the beginning to 5:34.

**Content warning: the early parts of the video contain descriptions of massacres. Starting at 9:02 the video contains images of dead bodies. From 10:25 to the end of the video contains descriptions of rape.*

In the video (from 3:08-3:33), Zury Rios Montt, the daughter of the man on trial for genocide, says that there was no genocide. Instead, she says, “in Guatemala, there was confrontation. In Guatemala, there was war.”

Have students look back at their Venn diagrams and, based on what they saw in the video, evaluate this claim. Where would events in Guatemala fit on their Venn diagrams? Have students share out and discuss why they chose their answer.

Tell the students that genocide denial takes many forms, including dismissing genocide as war. While war and genocide share many features (and genocide often occurs during wars/civil wars), they are not the same. Genocide tends to involve a power disparity and targets noncombatants. Other forms of genocide denial include claiming nothing took place, blaming the victims for events, or downplaying the number of victims. All of the genocides committed in the 20th and 21st centuries (including the Holocaust) are denied by some people. What do you think it means for a community to have someone deny a genocide that targeted them?

Reading 1: Shemà

Shemà

By Primo Levi

Translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann

You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labors in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

10 January 1946

From: *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, edited by Carolyn Forché (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993).

Handout 1: The United Nations Definition of Genocide

Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948 Article II

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Source: United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Project,
<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

Handout 2: Attacked Cemeteries

Photo Set 1

The Jewish cemetery in Salonika, Greece in 1939 before WWII (left) and 1942 after the Nazi takeover (right). The tombstones were later used as building materials.



Photo sources: (left) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of American Jewish University (<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1181556>) and (right) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York (<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/destroyed-jewish-cemetery-in-salonika>).

Photo Set 2

The exterior wall of the Jewish cemetery at Oswiecim, Poland (the location of the Auschwitz concentration camp) defaced with Nazi symbols on January 10, 2021 (right) and after being cleaned (left).



Photo sources: Auschwitz Memorial's Twitter via NBC News, "Jewish cemetery near Auschwitz vandalized with Nazi symbols," January 11, 2021

(<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/jewish-cemetery-near-auschwitz-vandalized-nazi-symbols-n1253689>) and

(https://twitter.com/AuschwitzMuseum/status/1348345699625279494?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1348345699625279494%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_%26ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nbcnews.com%2Fnews%2Fworld%2Fjewish-cemetery-near-auschwitz-vandalized-nazi-symbols-n1253689)

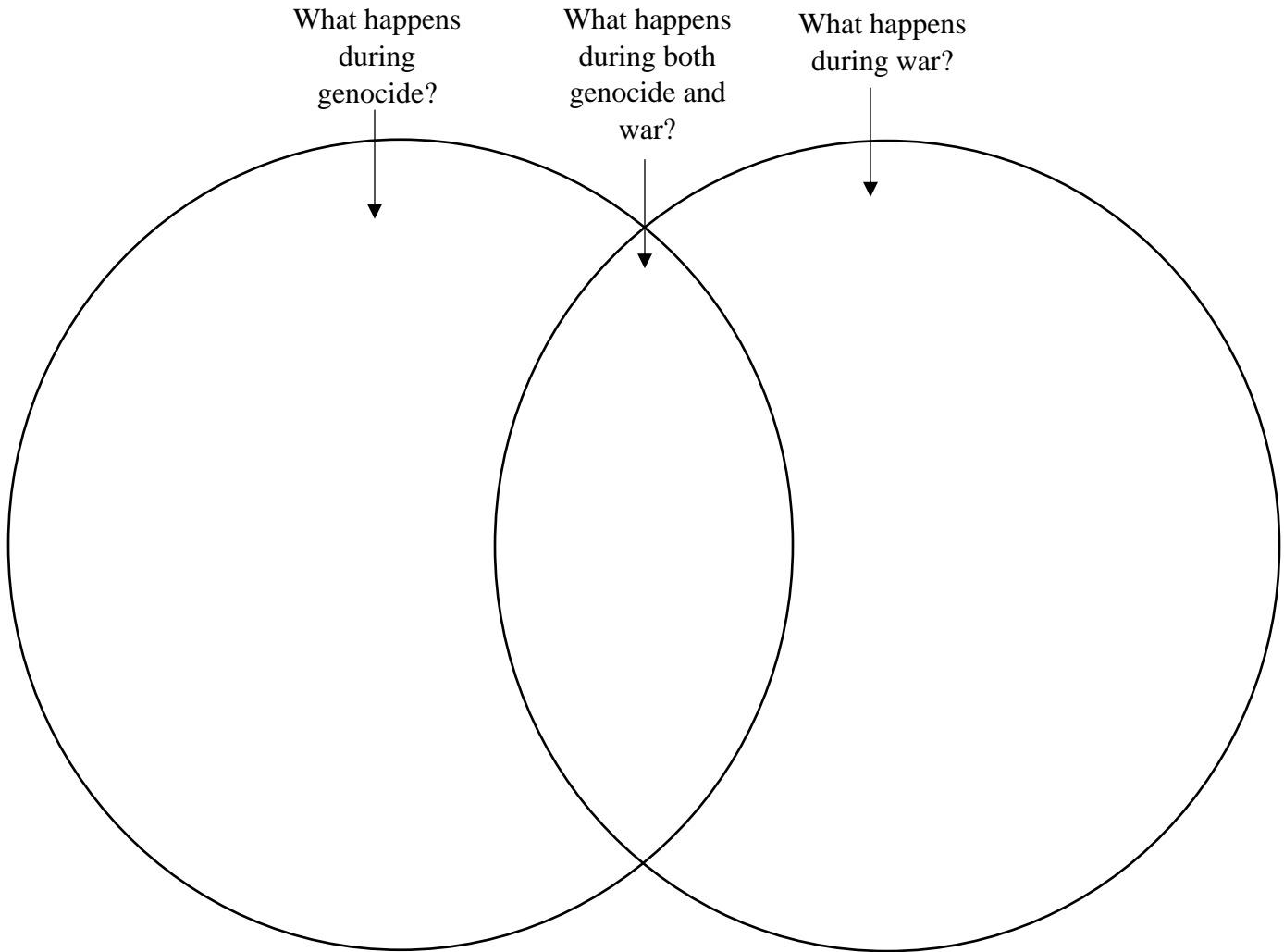
Photo Set 3

The Sultanim Cemetery, a Muslim cemetery in the center of Hotan City in Xinjiang, China in 2017 (top) and after being demolished by the Chinese government between January to March 2019 (bottom).



Photo source: CNN, “More than 100 Uyghur graveyards demolished by Chinese authorities, satellite images show,” January 2, 2020 (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/02/asia/xinjiang-uyghur-graveyards-china-intl-hnk/index.html>).

Handout 3: Genocide and War Venn Diagram



Instructions: In the left circle, fill out what you know happens during genocide. In the right circle, fill out what you know happens during war. In the middle, list anything that happens during both genocide and war.