

Guidelines for Genocide Education

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) has written guidelines for teaching about genocide. The USHMM has conducted extensive pedagogical research into creating these guidelines. As such, Holocaust Museum Houston also recommends the guidelines listed below.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has outlined five guidelines for teaching about genocide. The complete text for these guidelines can be found at <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/guideline/>.

Five Guidelines for Teaching about Genocide

Teachers are strongly encouraged to review the 10 Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust (these can be found on the Holocaust Resources page at www.hmh.org). That commentary provides excellent teaching suggestions for the Holocaust and all historical periods. The guidelines below are five additional recommendations for teaching about genocide generally.

The term "genocide" did not exist before 1944. It is a very specific term, referring to violent crimes committed against groups with the intent to destroy the existence of the group. Teachers are strongly encouraged to discuss the concept of genocide and its development since World War II as a background and foundation for their investigation of individual or multiple genocidal events. For more information on these topics, visit the USHMM's Web site at <http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/history/>.

1. **Define genocide.** "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: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."¹
2. **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. Analysis should be made of various factors and patterns which 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, have them consider how steps and causal conditions may have been deflected or minimized. Have students think about scope, intent and tactics. Be mindful that there is no one set pattern or list of preliminary steps that always leads to mass murder.
3. **Be wary of simplistic parallels to other genocides.** Each genocide has its own unique characteristics of time, place, people and methods employed. 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 focus on the pain

and 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, careful comparisons could be made in the "tactics" or procedures utilized by oppressors to destroy the communities, but one should avoid comparing the pain and suffering of individuals.

4. **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 for future action. 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, particularly genocide, 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 likewise pertinent 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 do international and regional authorities respond? What is the role of non-governmental 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 across the world 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?

5. **Illustrate positive actions taken by individuals and nations in the face of genocide.** One reason that genocide occurs could be the complicity of bystanders within the nation and around the world. However, in each genocide, there have been individuals who have spoken out against the oppressive regime and/or rescued threatened people. These have been persons at risk inside the country as well as external observers or stakeholders. 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.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide