

Student Handout 4.1—Summary of Seven Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Genocides

As we remember the holocaust against Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and Slavs during the Third Reich in World War II, we may also remember the legacy of these victims. Our mandate is one of vigilance to prevent such atrocities from happening in our time. Yet, similar atrocities have happened before and since World War II. Below is a chronicle of some acts of genocide in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

- In each case, what other facts can you add?
- What other genocidal acts might you add to this tragic chronicle of seven?

1. Armenia - 1915

During World War I, the Ottoman empire embarked on a policy of genocide against its Armenian population. Armenians have long commemorated April 24, 1915 as the date on which the Ottoman authorities first rounded up and liquidated Armenian intellectuals. In total, about 1.5 million men, women, and children were murdered. The atrocities were photographed by Armand Wegner, a German photojournalist. The Ottoman state was allied with Germany in World War I. It is noteworthy that later, when Wegner's pictures were shown to Hitler, he remarked, "Nobody remembers."

2. Nanjing, China - 1937

The Rape of Nanjing (Nanking) refers to the unjustified and inhumane atrocities that Japanese soldiers committed during Japan's invasion of China. These atrocities included looting, rape, and killing of Chinese civilians in Nanjing after the city had already surrendered to Japan on December 13, 1937. Remembered as the most brutal event of the Japanese invasion, some 300,000 civilians were reported murdered and 20,000 women raped and murdered in this urban area alone. Victims included children as young as seven and elderly women in their seventies. The crimes were sometimes committed in front of spouses or other family members. The controversy flared up anew in 1982 when the Japanese Ministry of Education censored any mention of the Nanjing Massacre in Japanese textbooks. Japan and China continue to dispute the way Japanese textbooks describe the invasion and massacre.

3. Cambodia - 1975

In 1975, during the Vietnam War, Cambodia was plunged into chaos when the Khmer Rouge, a Communist party led by Pol Pot, took over the country. The Khmer Rouge's ultimate goal was to create a primitive society of peasants with an economy based on agriculture and barter. In the four years of its rule, the regime killed almost two million people, including government officials and influential persons who opposed the new rulers. In 1979, the Vietnamese army drove the Khmer Rouge out of Cambodia. But the expelled regime retreated to the countryside and resurfaced to fight a civil war that lasted until 1998. Hun Sen, the prime minister of Cambodia, said that "we should dig a hole and bury the past." Today in Cambodia, the victims of the genocide still live side-by-side with the unpunished perpetrators. Pol Pot's legacy still lives on.

Some families visit his grave to pray for good fortune. Other families have struggled to recover from the sudden transition to farming that the Khmer Rouge forced upon them. The people of Cambodia and the world should not and cannot simply bury the past when it still affects the present. One genocide survivor protested the reluctance to acknowledge the brutality of the past and cries: "I beg you not to forget the atrocities and to remember vividly this history."

4. Iraqi Kurds - 1983

The Kurds, who speak the Kurdish language and practice Sunni Islam, are the world's largest group of people without a nation to call their own. They were promised Kurdistan by the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, but their dream never came to fruition. Allies who backed the treaty pulled out after fears arose of destabilizing Iraq and Syria. Throughout the years, the Kurdish population was divided, parts of it living in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Saddam Hussein came to power in 1968 (he became president in 1979), promising the Kurds a lasting solution to their predicament. His promise was quickly broken when the Ba'ath party evicted Kurdish farmers from their lands in order to tap oil wells. In the summer of 1983, Iraqi troops broke into a Kurdish village of the Barzani tribe and swiftly took 8,000 men from their homes and put them into concentration camps designed for testing chemical agents. All 8,000 men are now presumed dead. This was only a precursor, however, to the atrocities that occurred during the Anfal campaigns in 1988. Between February 23 and September 6 of that year, 200,000 Iraqi troops detained thousands of Kurdish males between the ages of 15 and 70 for interrogation and ultimate execution. Women and children were later trucked off to resettlement camps where they, too, were brutally murdered. The estimated death toll of the holocaust was between 60,000 and 110,000. As one Iraqi soldier told a survivor of the attack on Qaranaw village, "Your men have gone to hell."

5. Bosnia – 1992-95

In 1990, Bosnia was made up of three major ethnic groups: it was 44 percent Bosnian, 33 percent Serbian, and 17 percent Croat. Bosnians have been Muslim from the time when Bosnia was part of the Ottoman empire. Bosnian Muslims, however, speak Serbo-Croatian, the same language that Serbs and Croats speak. Serbians are traditionally Orthodox Catholics, and Croats are traditionally Roman Catholic. When Yugoslavia was divided by the European Community into Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia, Bosnia was partitioned and became independent. The Serbs responded violently. They created in Bosnia "ethnically pure" territories free of Muslims and Croats. Twenty thousand Muslim once lived in Banja Luka, the second largest city. By the end of the "ethnic cleansing," only 4,000 were reported to have survived. Serb militiamen killed 7-8,000 Bosnian men in Srebrenica in July 1995. Finally, western nations charged the Serbs with genocide. Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Serbia, went on trial in The Hague, Netherlands, for crimes against humanity, but he died in 2006 before the trial ended. Bosnia is currently occupied by NATO forces of France, the United States, and Britain to prevent further atrocities.

6. Rwanda - 1994

The mass genocide that took place in Rwanda during the mid-1990s was partly a consequence of the ignorance and unjust segregating of a foreign power. Belgium, the colonial power in Rwanda from the late nineteenth century, encouraged ethnic division between the two groups known as the Hutu and the Tutsi. The Tutsi were a cattle-herding people who began arriving in central Africa from Ethiopia around 1600. They became the politically dominant class. The Hutu were

predominantly farmers who lived in large family units. The Belgians believed the Tutsi to be superior and thus ratified their position as a Tutsi upper class, while the Hutu remained peasants. The demotion of the Hutu to a lower position planted the seed for what later became a violent overthrow of the Tutsi. The hate war exploded when, on April 6, 1994, the president, Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, was shot down in his airplane. Rumors spread that Tutsis ordered the assassination. These rumors expanded into Hutu violence against Tutsi. The violence spilled into the streets as Hutu went on a three-month blitzkrieg of massacre. The Tutsi were horrified at the speed at which the incident escalated. By the end of just three months, over 800,000 Tutsi were reported dead.

The Rwandan genocide was widely ignored by the international community. The United Nations deployed troops, but after ten casualties, they rapidly withdrew from the conflict, waiting until there was a clear victor in sight, which became the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front). The United States, Belgium, France, and the United Nations all had knowledge, prior to the genocide, of the events about to unfold; however, those nations took no action. Alison Des Forges, a scholar on Rwanda, has written: “The Americans were interested in saving money, the Belgians were interested in saving face, and the French were interested in saving their ally, the genocidal government.”

7. Darfur 2003

Though the conflict has no definitive beginning, the modern Darfur genocide erupted in early 2003. The conflict centers on the ethnic differences between Arabic-speaking Muslims and Muslim farmers and herders who speak other languages and live in Darfur, the region of southwestern Sudan. Recent estimates have reported that 338,000 civilians have died and 1.5 million people have been displaced into the neighboring countries such as Chad, Libya, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The local African tribes are suppressed by government-backed militia groups known generally as the Janjaweed, even though the government constituted these militias to protect the people of the region from the warring rebel groups. The two largest rebel groups against the government are the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement. The Janjaweed have turned against the people, perpetrating mass killings, rapes, and destruction of towns and villages. Though the UN and many nations have pressured the Sudanese government to stop the atrocities, war and mass flight continue as of late 2006.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Edmund Burke, British statesman and orator (1729-1797)

“At what point do you and I become members of the world community and stand up and speak?”

Mr. Charles Beach, January 21, 2005