

# Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

## Timeline of the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide

| Time: 60 minutes | Audience: 10-12<sup>th</sup> grade |

### Overview

Genocides do not happen overnight. Instead, they are the result of years of decisions, events, and policies that coalesce into risk factors that eventually shape what unfolds. In this activity, students will work collaboratively to construct a timeline of the key events tied to the civil war and genocide in Guatemala. Each group will research a specific event, evaluate its significance, and contribute to a collective class timeline.

### Learning Objectives

1. Students will research key historical events related to the war and genocide in Guatemala.
2. Students will analyze how processes of war and genocide unfold in relation to risk factors.
3. Students will assess how some events that transpired in Guatemala meet the criteria for the definition of the term genocide, while other events are better classified as other atrocity crimes.

### Content Standards

HSS-10.10, 1, 2, and 3    HSS-11.9  
HSS-10.4, 1,2, and 3    HSS-11.9.1  
HSS-10.9.3    HSS-PoAD.12.9.5  
HSS-10.9.8    HSS-PoAD.12.9.8

### Guatemala's Civil War and Genocide

Guatemala, a country located in the heart of Central America, was once home to the thriving Mayan civilization known for its incredible achievements in art, science, and architecture. Despite their enduring influence, the indigenous Mayan population faced significant discrimination following colonialism, which eventually led to growing conflicts with the government and contributed to the violence of the Guatemalan genocide.

The Guatemalan genocide took place during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), with violence peaking during the late 1970s and 1980s. This violence involved the deliberate and systemic targeting of indigenous Mayan communities by government forces and death squads. With over 200,000 civilians (mostly of Mayan origin) killed, this genocide was not an isolated eruption of violence, but the culmination of deep-rooted inequalities and struggles for power over many decades.



# Instructions

## 1. Divide into Groups

Each group will research one (or more) of the events in the timeline below using the sources listed below

- 1821** End of Spanish Colonialism in Guatemala
- 1944** Guatemalan Revolution
- 1954** US-Backed Coup Against President Jacobo Arbenz
- 1960** Beginning of the Guatemalan Civil War
- 1978** Panzós Massacre
- 1982** Unification of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Party (URNG)
- 1982** General Efraín Ríos Montt's Coup and Operation Sofia
- 1996** The Guatemalan Peace Accords Signed
- 1999** Commission for Historical Clarification Report is Released
- 2013** Ríos Montt's First Trial

## 2. Research the Event

Using reliable sources, research the event. Suggested sources can be found in Appendix A. Be sure to take notes on the following key points as you conduct your research:

- Date and location(s) of the event
- Brief overview of what transpired
- Key individuals or groups involved
- Causes and consequences of the event
- Whether this event elevated or reduced the risk of future violence
- What common risk factors of genocide are tied to this event
- Sources used for your research

## 3. Create a Visual Representation

Create an infographic that represents the event you researched, including elements such as photos and maps.

## 4. Present to the Class

Each groups will present their findings in chronological order and answer questions from classmates



Mural near Comalapa, Guatemala, depicting violence during the civil war and genocide

## Reflection Questions for Journaling or Class Discussion

- What patterns or themes emerged across the timeline?
  - Did you notice anything relating to social, political, economic, or cultural dimensions?
- What did you learn from the timeline about factors that impacted the beginning of the genocide?
- What surprised you as you learned about the history of the genocide?

## Extension Activity

**After learning about what happened in Guatemala, it is important to consider why some of these events meet the criteria for genocide.**

**The crime of genocide is defined in an international treaty, or agreement between state governments, as follows:**

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; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948).

**Consider how the violence in Guatemala meets the qualifications of genocide. Specifically:**

1. Who was the victim group in Guatemala? What type of group are they (e.g., national, ethnic, racial, or religious?)
2. Do you think there was an intent to destroy this group? How do you identify intent?
3. What actions were committed against the group that constitute genocidal acts?
4. How is genocide different than civil war?



Peace Memorial, Guatemala City



Guatemala Flag

## Appendix A

This appendix lists the primary archives and sources consulted for research related to genocide documentation and historical analysis.

### Archival Sources and Databases:

#### United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)

<https://www.ushmm.org/>

#### USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive

<https://vha.usc.edu/home>

#### Holocaust Memorial Houston

<https://hnh.org/library/research/genocide-in-guatemala-guide/>

#### Sanford Guatemalan Genocide Databases at Yale

<https://macmillan.yale.edu/gsp/sanford-guatemalan-genocide-databases>

#### International Justice Monitor

<https://www.ijmonitor.org/guatemala-trials-timeline/>

#### PBS's Special on Guatemala and the Commission for Historical Clarification Report

<https://hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/CEHreport-english.pdf>



# Glossary: Mapping the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide

**Arbenz, Jacobo:**

President of Guatemala (1951–1954) whose land reform efforts threatened U.S. business interests. He was removed in a U.S.-backed coup in 1954.

**Coup (Coup d'état):**

A sudden, often violent, overthrow of a government by a small group, often the military.

**Civil War:**

A conflict between groups within the same country. In Guatemala, this lasted from 1960 to 1996 between the government and various leftist rebel groups.

**Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH):**

A truth commission established after the war to investigate human rights abuses and atrocities, including acts of genocide.

**Genocide:**

Actions taken with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

**Guatemalan Revolution (1944–1954):**

A period of democratic reform following the end of a military dictatorship, which was later reversed by the 1954 coup.

**Indigenous (Mayan) Peoples:**

The original inhabitants of Guatemala, descended from the ancient Mayan civilization. Many were targeted during the genocide.

**Military Junta:**

A government led by military leaders after taking power by force. Guatemala experienced several during the civil war.

**Operation Sofia:**

A military campaign under General Ríos Montt's leadership targeting Mayan communities; considered a central part of the genocide.

**Panzós Massacre (1978):**

A deadly attack by Guatemalan soldiers on peaceful Indigenous protesters in the town of Panzós, marking a turning point in the violence.

**Peace Accords (1996):**

Agreements that officially ended the Guatemalan Civil War, including commitments to human rights and Indigenous recognition.

**Ríos Montt, Efraín:**

A Guatemalan general and dictator who ruled during the bloodiest years of the genocide (1982–1983); later put on trial for crimes against humanity.

**Systemic Discrimination:**

Long-term and widespread unfair treatment of a group by laws, policies, or cultural attitudes—often contributing to conflict and violence.

**Truth Commission:**

An official group established to investigate and report on human rights violations after a period of conflict or repression.

**U.S. Involvement:**

Refers to the U.S. government's role in supporting the 1954 coup and later military regimes, largely out of Cold War interests.