

Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

The Disappeared

| Time: 60 minutes | Audience: 10-12th grade |

Overview

This activity will introduce students to the concept of desaparecidos, or the disappeared. Many genocides, including the Guatemalan genocide, have involved police and other agents of the state kidnapping targeted individuals who were never seen again and often are presumed to have been murdered in unknown locations. The secretive nature of such disappearances often causes immense grief and distress for the families and loved ones of disappeared people and creates a sense of fear and uncertainty within communities. These crimes of enforced disappearances have now been recognized in international law, and this activity encourages students to reflect on why they happen and on their lasting impacts.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will analyze the history of the crime of enforced disappearances, generally and in Guatemala.
2. Students will consider the causes and consequences of enforced disappearances.
3. Students will analyze testimony and assess the impacts of enforced disappearances on Guatemalans.

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

Before Beginning the Activity

Before students begin the activity, ask students to reflect upon and journal responses to these three questions.

1. Think about the term “the disappeared.” What does this phrase make you wonder?
2. Why would a government want to make certain people disappear?
3. What do you think is the connection between enforced disappearances and genocide?



The Right Not to be Disappeared

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance is an international human rights treaty—or agreement between countries—that addresses the right to not be disappeared. This treaty defines enforced disappearance as the arrest, detention, or abduction by state agents or by individuals acting with state support. When this occurs, the perpetrators deny any knowledge of the person’s fate or whereabouts, meaning that their family and loved ones are often left with little evidence of where to find them. Put another way, enforced disappearance occurs when police, military, or other people who are acting on behalf of the government kidnap someone but refuse to admit it.

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance establishes enforced disappearance as an international crime. It also asks countries to investigate enforced disappearances, to hold perpetrators responsible, and to work to prevent future enforced disappearances. The treaty also suggests that families of victims should be protected and indicates that families have the right to justice in the aftermath of the enforced disappearances of their loved ones.

Enforced Disappearances in Guatemala

The treaty became effective in 2010, decades after several conflicts in Latin America became notorious for the practice of enforced disappearances. One of these conflicts was the Guatemalan genocide. During this time, the Spanish verb *desaparecer* (“to disappear”) came to refer to a common practice by the Guatemalan state police to illegally detain and execute innocent people and leave their bodies in unmarked graves or hidden cemeteries, so that their families could not find them or know of their fate. In total, over 40,000 Guatemalans were forcibly disappeared by the government and its security forces. This included many indigenous people as well as union leaders, rights activists, students, and journalists, among others. The goal of the perpetrators was to spread fear and terror among the population as a method of discouraging dissent against the government or support for insurgent groups.

Impacts of Enforced Disappearances

Juana Calach Caal was born in 1968 in rural Guatemala. When she was 13, Guatemalan soldiers kidnapped her father, and she never saw him again. Below, she speaks with an interviewer about his disappearance. Read the excerpt, and then consider the questions afterward.



Interviewer: So, Juana, how old were you when they took your father?

Juana: I was around thirteen. Yes, around thirteen.

Interviewer: And before they took your father, had you seen, or had you heard that something was happening?

Juana: No. Like I say, just that my father, like I tell you, that he would leave his work for home. And he would bring the sugar cane juice (agua de caña) to my grandmama, and the coffee, and we knew it was him.

Interviewer: The sugar cane juice.

Juana: Yes, the sugar cane juice, and my grandmother would say, that's good son, that's my boy. As my grandmother already was accustomed to knowing what her son was like, she would put mole (a stew with salsa) on the rock, and when they were relaxed, they would take their coffee, and my grandmother would say, 'My son, eat. Take a rest.' 'Hey,' my dad would say. We would eat, they would start discussing, with my grandmother, and you didn't know what they were talking about.

And we would sleep, because, tomorrow is another day to work. And like that. He didn't go around anywhere, he didn't like to get mixed up in problems. One we would visit was my aunt. He really liked to visit his sisters because, they were friendly, right? And the other who was, well, I don't know her name, but they would call her 'Doña Fabiana.' That was the other sister. So there, yeah, we would go. Together with my sister.....

Interviewer: Who took him away?

Juana: I don't know who it is. The soldiers arrived and took him, without me knowing why. It's like I tell you. One doesn't know why they took my brother and my dad, and I ask myself why, because they, they weren't coming from anywhere. They were leaving their work to go home. They were leaving their work to go home. And on Sundays, there were times, like I say, there were times they came to [unclear], other times no.

Interviewer: Do you remember the day it was when they took your dad?

Juana: Yes. I remember it all. I remember that it was in 1982.

Interviewer: The day and the month, you don't remember?

Juana: I remember them all. June second. It was in June they took him away.

Discussion Questions

In Juana's description of her father's daily routine and her interactions with him, what do you learn about her relationship with him?

Juana's memory of the day her father was taken (June 2, 1982) remains vivid. Why do you think this memory stayed with her for so long?

How might the experience of not knowing why her father and brother were taken, or who took them, have affected Juana?

Juana notes that her father and brother "weren't coming from anywhere," adding that her dad did not like to get "mixed up in problems." What do you think she is trying to convey, and why is this important to her?

What do you think are the broader impacts of enforced disappearances on families and communities?

What rights should Juana and her family have under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance?

Representation of Disappeared People from the House of Memory



Extension Activity: Photo of Desaparecidos in Guatemala



Posters of disappeared people along a wall at Comalapa Memorial in Guatemala.

See - Think - Wonder

See: What do you notice in the picture? What commonalities do you see amongst the people in the photos?

Think: Why do you think people create these kinds of posters? What do you think is the meaning of putting these photos on a wall at a memorial?

Wonder: What do you wonder about the people in the posters? What about who sees them?

Glossary: Enforced Disappearances and the Guatemalan Genocide

Desaparecidos (The Disappeared)

A Spanish term meaning 'the disappeared.' Refers to people who were abducted, often by state forces, and never seen again. Their fate remains unknown, and their families often receive no information or justice.

Enforced Disappearance

A crime under international law where a person is secretly abducted or imprisoned by a state or with state support, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the person's fate or whereabouts, effectively placing them outside the protection of the law.

Genocide

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

Human Rights

Basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world. These include the right to life, freedom from torture, freedom of expression, and the right not to be disappeared.

Impunity

When individuals or institutions are not held accountable for their crimes or abuses. Enforced disappearances often occur in societies where impunity is common.

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

A human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations that defines and criminalizes enforced disappearances. It calls on countries to investigate these crimes, punish those responsible, and support victims and their families.

Justice

The pursuit of accountability, truth, and reparation for victims of human rights abuses. For victims of enforced disappearances, justice often includes knowing the truth about what happened to their loved ones.

Memory and Remembrance

The act of recalling and honoring the victims of violence and atrocities. Remembering events like the Guatemalan genocide is vital for healing, justice, and preventing future atrocities.

State Forces

Government-controlled military, police, or intelligence agencies. In the context of Guatemala, these forces were responsible for many of the enforced disappearances during the civil conflict.

Testimony

A personal account or statement given by a witness or survivor. In this activity, Juana Calach Caal provides testimony about her father's disappearance, offering a deeply personal insight into the lasting trauma of such events.