

# Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

## Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala (FAFG)

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

### Overview

One of the main organizations driving efforts to locate, recover, and identify the remains of victims and disappeared persons during the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide is FAFG (in Spanish, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala). Founded in 1997, the “FAFG has developed a locally-based, family centered approach that is grounded in the trust of the families and values their active participation throughout the forensic process.”

### Learning Objectives

1. Students will understand the basics of forensic anthropology.
2. Students will examine how FAFG contributes to post-civil war and genocide peace and society.
3. Students will evaluate the role of forensic anthropology in transitional justice efforts.

### 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

### What is Forensic Anthropology?

Forensic Anthropology is a subfield of physical anthropology, which is the study of human remains. Forensic anthropology involves analyzing skeletal remains to solve criminal cases. To do so, forensic anthropologists establish a biological profile of the victim – age, sex, stature, and any other individualizing features present on the remains – and the cause of death, if possible.

For FAFG staff, the goal is to locate and identify the victims of the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide and to return their remains to their family members. The surviving family can consequently learn the truth of what happened to their loved one, bury them with dignity and according to their cultural and ceremonial protocols, and open potential avenues for justice and reparations. Sometimes, FAFG staff are named as forensic experts by Guatemala’s Prosecutor’s Office. That enables FAFG to conduct the investigation, exhumation, analysis, and identification of remains. Other times, FAFG conducts investigations and then submits their findings to the Prosecutor’s Office to initiate a court case or contribute to an ongoing court case, with FAFG staff often serving as technical witnesses at the trials. These efforts in turn help contribute to local justice and accountability processes in Guatemala.



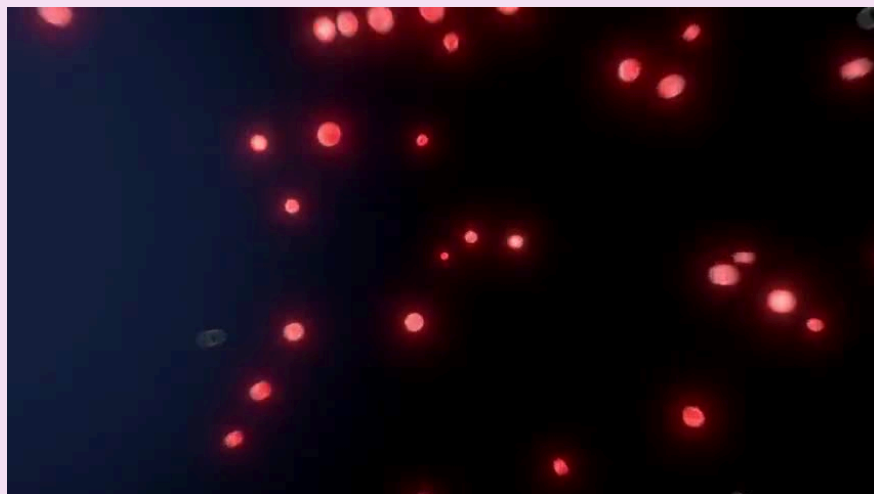



Sometimes family members know where to look for their disappeared loved ones, but in many instances, FAFG identifies and exhumes a mass grave but does not have any theories about whose remains they are exhuming. In both instances, the identification of remains hinges on the ability to extract a usable genetic profile from the degraded skeletal samples. This is a very complex process, and when remains are brought to FAFG's Forensic Anthropology lab, strict protocol is enacted to ensure the best possible chances for a positive identification. Upon arrival in the lab, all remains are x-rayed and photographed to search for fragments, coloration, fracture patterns, and indications of torture, scarring, and bruising. The bones are cleaned and analyzed in detail and, when possible, DNA is extracted at FAFG's laboratory. The remains are then photographed again in detail, and a report is written to document all findings. FAFG is at the forefront of these practices, often pushing boundaries and integrating modern technologies to provide relatives with the most scientifically advanced possibilities to help identify their disappeared loved ones.

If remains are positively identified, FAFG will notify any surviving family and then coordinate with the family for the dignified return of the body and burial on their desired date. FAFG finalizes all necessary processes with the National Persons Registry and Prosecutor's Office to ensure it is legally viable to return the remains to the family, as well as a death certificate. On the decided date, the inhumation (or burial) assistants deliver the remains to the family, carefully assembling the remains anatomically in the casket, often in new clothing and with offerings. For the family, the return and burial of their loved one's remains is "an important moment in the collective history of the family and community. Families have the right to give their loved one a dignified burial according to their cultural and religious practices. These events do not signify an end or a closure, but an important mark in the family's long journey for truth, justice, and respect. Although inhumations are often very intimate for the family, they instigate a ripple effect through to the larger society to clarify history, mark the truth, and uphold justice."

## Watch Fredy Peccerelli - Forensic Anthropologist

[https://www.ted.com/talks/fredy\\_peccerelli\\_a\\_forensic\\_anthropologist\\_who\\_brings\\_closure\\_for\\_the\\_disappeared/up-next](https://www.ted.com/talks/fredy_peccerelli_a_forensic_anthropologist_who_brings_closure_for_the_disappeared/up-next)





Not everyone appreciates the importance of FAFG's work. There are some in the government, the military, and broader society who do not want the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide to be documented in detail. In multiple rulings, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that the state of Guatemala must provide round-the-clock police protection to FAFG offices and certain FAFG personnel who had been threatened. Still, FAFG continues its efforts. Over more than two decades, the FAFG has conducted over 1,900 forensic investigations and recovered over 8,000 victims. More than 6,600 families have provided over 16,355 individual family reference samples to trust the FAFG in the search for 9,462 victims. The Genetic Database is populated with these family member samples as well as the genetic samples of more than 4,700 victims (skeletal samples). As of December 2024, the FAFG has identified 3,989 victims of the war and genocide.

In addition, the FAFG's forensic evidence, forensic experts, and expert reports have been included in national efforts to seek justice for crimes against humanity committed during the war and genocide. Forensic evidence corroborates the testimonies of survivors who have raised their voices for justice. Only in the last decade, FAFG experts have testified in symbolic court cases and the forensic evidence they supply has contributed to the development and prosecution of other important cases.

## Reflection Questions

1. What are your first impressions of FAFG's work? How did you feel after hearing from Fredy Peccerelli about the efforts of FAFG?
2. What challenges might FAFG face in their work?
3. Does FAFG contribute to transitional justice? Why or why not?
4. Imagine you are speaking with someone who has never heard of FAFG. How would you summarize the work of this organization? What stands out most to you?

# Additional Images



# Additional Content

## Learn More About FAFG

Assisting families since 1997 in the search and identification of their Disappeared loved ones

[LEARN MORE](#) [SUPPORT OUR WORK](#)

## Learn More About Forensic Anthropology



## National Geographic Article



## New York Times Magazine Article



## Steven Spielberg Documentary



# Glossary: Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala

## **Antemortem Interview**

An interview conducted with the family members of a disappeared person to gather detailed information about the individual, including physical characteristics, family genealogy, and potential identifiers.

## **DNA Sample**

A biological sample, often a small amount of blood, collected from family members to compare with genetic profiles extracted from unidentified human remains.

## **Exhumation**

The process of digging up and recovering human remains from graves or mass graves for analysis and identification.

## **FAFG (Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala)**

A Guatemalan organization founded in 1997 dedicated to locating, analyzing, and identifying the remains of those who disappeared during the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide.

## **Forensic Anthropology**

A branch of physical anthropology that involves the study and analysis of human skeletal remains to determine identity and cause of death, often used in legal contexts.

## **Genetic Database**

A collection of genetic information from both victims and their relatives used to match and identify remains.

## **Identification**

The process of determining the identity of a deceased individual, often through forensic and genetic evidence.

## **Inhumation**

The act of burying a body, often performed ceremonially with respect and according to cultural or religious traditions.

## **Mass Grave**

A burial site containing multiple sets of human remains, often associated with war, genocide, or other acts of mass violence.

## **Physical Anthropology**

The scientific study of humans from a biological and evolutionary perspective, including the study of bones and other physical traits.

## **Transitional Justice**

A set of practices and mechanisms, including trials, memorials, and truth commissions, aimed at addressing past human rights abuses and fostering reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

## **Witness Testimony**

Firsthand accounts provided by individuals, often survivors or experts, used in legal settings or historical documentation to establish facts about past events.