

War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity, and Genocide

How Do We Define Mass Violence?

Overview

This lesson will guide students through understanding the similarities and differences between war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. These types of crimes are collectively known as atrocity crimes, and they are each under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which is the world's first and only global standing court. These terms are also complicated, especially when applied to actual scenarios. In this lesson, students will learn the definitions of each of these types of crimes. They will also begin to consider the complexities in labeling violence as atrocity crime.

Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze the benefits and challenges of the concepts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.
- Students will examine the relationships, similarities, and differences between the concepts of war crime, crimes against humanity, and genocide.
- Students will apply these terms to scenarios.

Content Standards

HSS-10.10.1, 2, and 3 HSS-10.4.1 HSS-10.4.3 Acc.MA:Cn11 HSS-11.9.1 HSS-PoAD.12.9.5 HSS-PoAD.12.9.8

Lesson Plan

Teachers should lead students through the following activities as outlined in the associated [PowerPoint](#).

1. Guide students through a warmup (think, pair, share). Ask students to write their answer to the following question: "What do you think distinguishes "war crimes," "crimes against humanity," and "genocide"?" Provide a few minutes for them to free write, then have them pair up to discuss the question, and then have the whole class discuss what might differentiate these terms.
2. Guide students through the essential questions.

Start of Lecture

3. Introduce students to the three different types of atrocity crimes.



War Crimes

- **Explain the basic characteristics of war crimes.** They occur during armed conflict (domestic or international); include suffering and attacks against civilians and prisoners of war; and can be done to one individual or many.



- **Video:** What are the rules of war? (4:42)
- **International Humanitarian Law:** How are civilians protected during war?
- **Provide examples of war crimes.** This will help students grasp what kinds of behaviors and actions illustrate war crimes.
- **Student Engagement:** Give students an opportunity to read the excerpt of “war crime” from the Rome Statute.
 - **Ask students to analyze:** What is included? What questions do you have?

Crimes Against Humanity

- **Explain the basic characteristics of crimes against humanity.** They can occur either during armed conflict or outside of conflict; they involve a widespread or systematic attack against civilians; and that they attack groupings of civilians, not just an individual.
- **Video:** [War Crimes Explained](#) (minutes 3:40-4:20 cover crimes against humanity)



- **Student Engagement:** Give students an opportunity to read the excerpt of “[crimes against humanity](#)” from the Rome Statute.
 - **Ask students to analyze:** What is included? What questions do you have?



Crimes Against Humanity | MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale

A Crime Against Humanity has been defined as “a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian...”

 yale.edu

Genocide

- **Explain the basic characteristics of genocide.** They can occur either during armed conflict or outside of conflict; they involve an intentional targeting and attempt to destroy a grouping of people, normally a minority (national, ethnic, racial, or religious). Intent is particularly important to the definition, and genocide can involve many forms of violence, including but not limited to killing, forced transfer of children, or removing conditions necessary to sustain life.
- **Video:** [What is Genocide Prevention \(3:22\)](#)



- **Student Engagement:** Give students an opportunity to read the excerpt about “genocide” from the United Nations Genocide Convention.
 - **Ask students to analyze:** What is included? What questions do you have?

Case Studies

- Provide students with the included write-up “scenarios” on current crises around the world. Students should be placed in groups of 3-5 students. Students will engage with these various (fictional) write-ups and explain whether they see evidence of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, or a combination of these different crimes. They should explain why using rationale.
 - Option to put each scenario on the walls so students can vote with post-it notes
 - See Scenarios 1-6 below
 - Answers: Scenario 1 is war crimes, 2 is crimes against humanity, 3 is genocide, 4 is war crimes & crimes against humanity, 5 is crimes against humanity & genocide, 6 is all three.
- If time allows, have each group present a scenario and explain why they chose the atrocity type that they did. This will allow students to check their understanding.

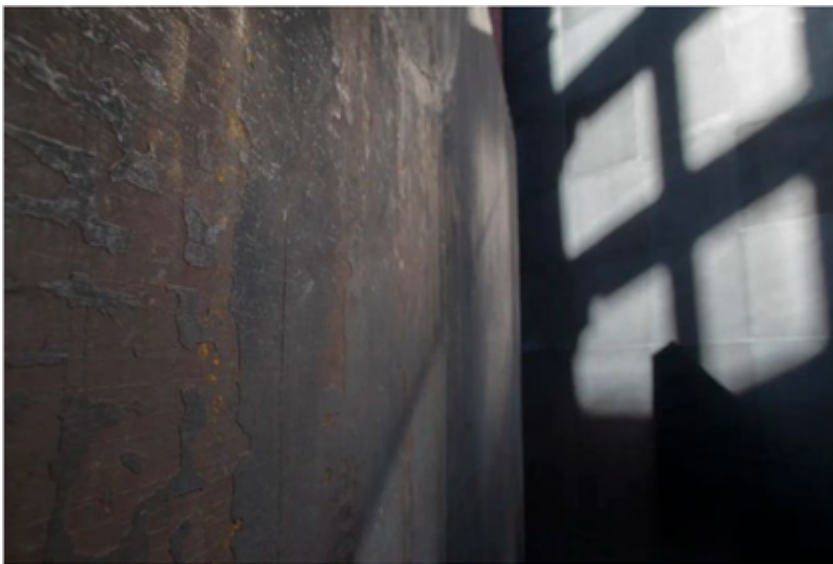
Helpful Resources for Teachers:



Defining the Four Mass Atrocity Crimes

During the 2005 United Nations World Summit, heads of state and government accepted the responsibility of every...

G Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect /



Definitions: Types of Mass Atrocities - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Learn more about the serious, violent crimes that do not fall under the specific definition of genocide.

 holocaustmuseum

Scenario 1

During the third year of an international armed conflict between Panem and Goldland, intense fighting breaks out near the contested border city of Karsin. After a two-day battle, a mechanized unit from Panem captures approximately forty soldiers from Goldland. The captured soldiers are in uniform, have surrendered, and are visibly disarmed. Several are wounded and receive basic first aid from Panem's medics at the site of capture.

The prisoners are photographed kneeling beside the road with their hands bound. Video footage later recovered from soldiers' phones shows the prisoners being loaded onto military trucks. According to military logs, the convoy was scheduled to transport the prisoners to a recognized detention facility where prisoners of war are typically processed.

Instead, the convoy diverts from its route and stops in a remote ravine several kilometers away. No combat is taking place in the area. Satellite imagery later confirms no enemy forces were nearby at the time. Witness testimony from a driver assigned to the convoy indicates that a commanding officer ordered the trucks to stop and instructed soldiers to "finish the problem here."

The prisoners are forced out of the trucks, lined up, and shot at close range. Their bodies are left at the site. Within hours, images of the dead soldiers appear on social media accounts linked to members of the unit, accompanied by captions celebrating revenge for earlier battlefield losses.

When international journalists begin asking questions, Panem's government releases a brief statement claiming that the prisoners attempted to escape during transport and were killed in a "security incident." No internal investigation is announced.

Scenario 2

After decades of single-party rule, Dalia experiences widespread protests following a disputed national election. Demonstrations erupt in major cities, led by students, journalists, labor leaders, and opposition politicians. Although the protests are largely peaceful, the government declares a nationwide state of emergency, suspends constitutional protections, and authorizes security forces to restore “public order by all necessary means.”

Within weeks, security forces begin arresting individuals identified as protest organizers or critics of the government. Arrests often take place late at night. Witnesses report masked officers arriving in unmarked vehicles, presenting no warrants. Detainees are taken to unknown locations, and families receive no official acknowledgment of the arrests.

As months pass, hundreds of people remain missing. Lawyers attempting to file habeas corpus petitions are told there is no record of the detainees. Former prisoners who are later released describe being held in secret detention centers where they were blindfolded, interrogated, beaten, and threatened. Some report hearing other detainees being tortured nearby.

The disappearances continue even after public protests decline. International human rights organizations conclude that the arrests are not isolated incidents but part of a coordinated campaign to eliminate political opposition. Government officials consistently deny wrongdoing, claiming the missing individuals voluntarily fled the country or joined extremist groups abroad.

Scenario 3

The Lurani are a distinct ethnic and religious minority who have lived in the northern provinces of Gobaha for centuries. Following a nationalist shift in government, political leaders begin portraying the Lurani as disloyal and dangerous. State-controlled media repeatedly describes them as a “biological threat” and a “cancer within the nation.”

New laws strip Lurani residents of citizenship, bar them from public employment, and restrict their movement. Within a year, security forces begin mass deportations. Entire Lurani communities are loaded onto buses and transported to remote desert regions. Families are separated during transport, with men often taken to different facilities.

The deportation camps are surrounded by fencing and guard towers. Lurani detainees are prohibited from leaving, practicing their religion, or teaching their language to their children. Food rations are minimal, medical care is nearly nonexistent, and deaths from disease and malnutrition are common. Births are monitored, and women report forced sterilizations.

Government officials insist the policy is temporary resettlement for security reasons. However, internal documents later leaked to journalists suggest a different goal: the permanent elimination of the Lurani as a distinct group.

Scenario 4

Nianew has been embroiled in a civil war for over five years, with government forces fighting multiple rebel factions. The Southern District of the capital city has long been known as a working-class neighborhood with a history of political opposition to the ruling regime. While rebel fighters are believed to have supporters in the area, they operate on the outskirts of the district. The district is home to more than 300,000 civilians and contains schools, hospitals, markets, and apartment complexes.

Following a series of rebel attacks elsewhere in the city, the government announces a major military operation to “restore order” in the Southern District. Checkpoints are established on surrounding roads, restricting civilian movement. Journalists and international observers are denied access to the area for “security reasons.”

Over the next six weeks, government artillery and air forces bombard the district repeatedly. Shelling occurs at all hours, including late at night, striking residential buildings, public transportation hubs, and markets during peak hours. Hospitals report overwhelming numbers of civilian casualties, with doctors noting that many victims are women, children, and the elderly. Several medical facilities are damaged or destroyed, forcing patients to be treated in makeshift clinics.

Although rebel fighters are present in parts of the district, independent observers note that many attacks occur far from known rebel positions. Humanitarian organizations send multiple warnings to the government, stating that the bombardment appears indiscriminate and disproportionate and may violate international humanitarian law. Despite these warnings, the attacks continue.

Government officials argue that rebels deliberately embed themselves among civilians and use civilian infrastructure to hide weapons, but have not produced documentation or evidence to support these claims. Military spokespeople insist that any civilian deaths are the responsibility of the rebels and describe the campaign as essential to national security.

As the bombardment drags on, tens of thousands of civilians flee the district, while others remain trapped due to blocked exits or fear of being targeted while escaping.

Scenario 5

In Fushia, an indigenous ethnic group known as the Nari has lived in the central highlands for centuries, maintaining a distinct language, religion, and cultural traditions. For much of the country's history, the Nari were marginalized but tolerated. This changes after a new government comes to power on a platform of national unity and cultural homogeneity.

State media begins portraying the Nari as backward, disloyal, and resistant to progress. New laws restrict the use of the Nari language in public spaces and criminalize certain religious practices. Cultural festivals are banned, and prominent Nari intellectuals and religious leaders are arrested for "extremism."

Soon after, authorities announce the creation of "rehabilitation and integration centers." Thousands of Nari are detained without trial and transported to these facilities, often located far from their home regions. Inside the centers, detainees are subjected to forced labor, political indoctrination, and pressure to renounce their ethnic identity. Speaking the Nari language or practicing traditional customs results in punishment.

Children are removed from Nari families and placed in state-run boarding schools, where they are taught the national language and curriculum and discouraged from contact with their parents. Former detainees describe overcrowding, malnutrition, and deaths from untreated illnesses. Bodies are returned to families without explanation or not returned at all.

Government officials deny accusations of genocide, insisting that the policy is aimed at education and economic development. Critics argue that the campaign seeks to eliminate the Nari as a distinct group, even if mass killings are not occurring.

Scenario 6

The Eastern Region of Gaminia has long been home to the Meren people, an ethnic minority with distinct cultural and religious practices. When an armed separatist movement emerges in the region, the government responds with a large-scale military operation described as an anti-terrorism campaign.

Military forces surround the region, sealing off roads and preventing food, water, and medical aid from entering. Communication networks are shut down. Villages suspected of harboring separatists are raided, and homes are burned. Men of fighting age are detained en masse at checkpoints and transported to unknown locations. Families receive no information about their whereabouts.

As the operation continues, women, children, and the elderly are forcibly deported to camps in other parts of the country. These camps are overcrowded and heavily guarded. Meren detainees are prohibited from leaving, practicing their religion, or educating their children in their language. Deaths from disease and malnutrition are reported.

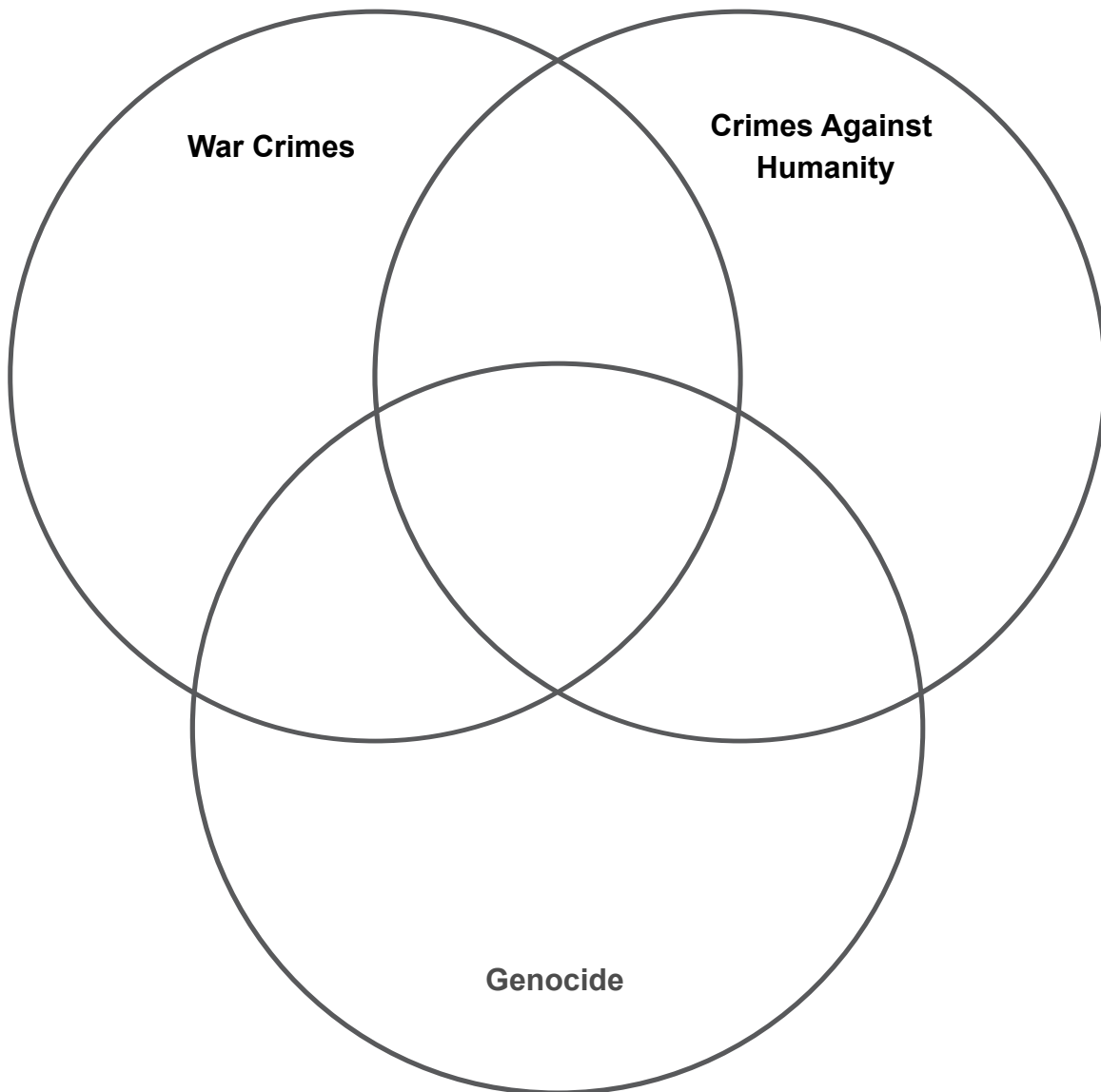
Government officials insist that the operation targets only terrorists and that civilians are being relocated for their own safety. However, leaked military communications suggest broader goals. Entire Meren villages are erased from maps, and new settlements for the majority population are planned in the region.

International observers describe the campaign as coordinated, systematic, and aimed at permanently removing the Meren presence from the Eastern Region.

Exit Ticket

Exit Ticket Exercise. Students should be given the Venn Diagram that looks at comparing and contrasting war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (See below and see separate document for just the Venn Diagram).

Instructions: Fill out of the Venn Diagram highlighting at least two distinguishable differences between war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide along with at least one similarity that connects these different atrocity types.



Glossary

Atrocity Crimes: Serious crimes that involve large-scale violence against civilians. This includes genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Genocide: Acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. These acts can include killing members of the group, causing serious harm, or preventing births, among other types of violence.

War Crimes: Serious violations of the laws and customs of war that occur during armed conflict. These include targeting civilians, mistreating prisoners of war, or using prohibited weapons.

Crimes Against Humanity: Widespread or systematic attacks directed against civilians. These acts (such as murder, torture, or enslavement) can occur during war or peacetime and are carried out as part of a larger pattern.

Intent: A person's purpose or goal in carrying out an action. In genocide, intent to destroy a group is a key requirement.

Armed Conflict: A situation involving organized violence between states or groups. War crimes must occur within this context.

Civilian: A person who is not a member of the military or armed groups and is not participating in fighting.

Systematic: Organized and patterned actions that are planned and repeated.

International Criminal Court (ICC): A global court that prosecutes individuals for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Rome Statute: The international treaty that established the ICC and defines the crimes it can prosecute.

Classification of Violence: The process of labeling acts as genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity. This can be complex and sometimes debated.