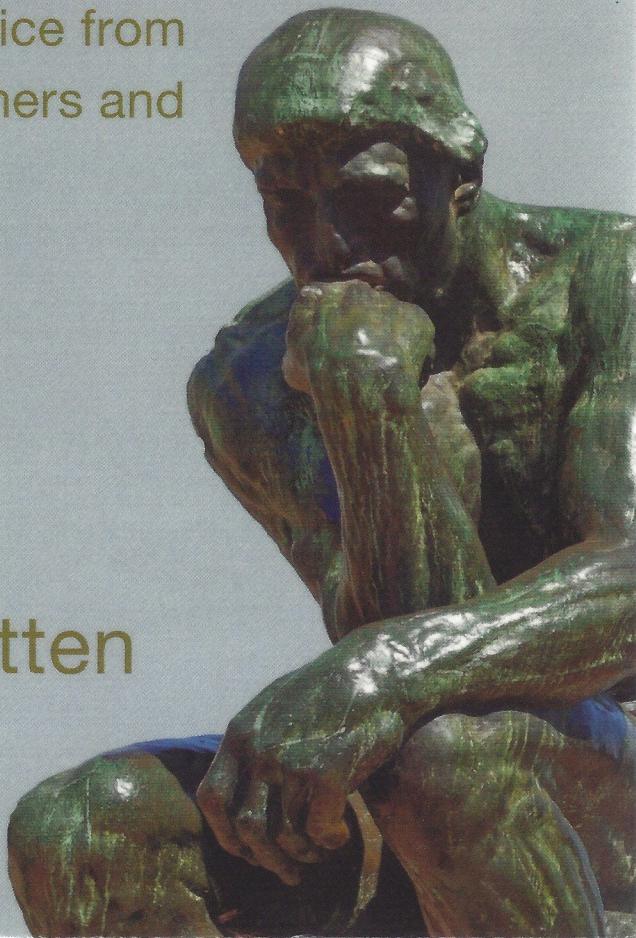


Teaching about Genocide

Insights and Advice from
Secondary Teachers and
Professors

VOLUME 2

Samuel Totten



Teaching about Genocide

Three Major Pedagogical Issues Worthy of Serious Consideration by Teachers

Rubina Peroomian, Research Associate, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles

As a member of the Armenian National Committee Western Region in the United States, I was actively involved in the campaign to convince the California Board of Education to include the teaching of the Armenian Genocide in its K-12 Social Science/History Framework as part and parcel of the wording therein mandating the teaching about genocides and gross violations of human rights. That was in early 1980s, when high school students were, for the most part, introduced to the Holocaust but no other genocides.

The campaign was successful, but the big question that remained hanging in the air unresolved was: What should be taught and how should it be taught? From that point forward, crafting responses to those two questions has been a preoccupation for me, and has largely paralleled my work in academia. That has involved, for example, developing teachers' guides, lesson plans, and teaching strategies, and learning activities, not to mention teacher training workshops.

During this long journey, I have not only encountered resentment on the part of teachers who are now expected to undertake the difficult and emotionally draining task of teaching this grueling subject, but aloofness and reluctance on the part of students to learn about such a distressing page in history, full of horrors and ostensibly irrelevant to their everyday lives.

The two aforementioned situations drove me to search for solutions to such concerns and dilemmas, which leads me to suggest herein what I perceive as the first of three major pedagogical issues worthy of seri-

ous consideration by teachers: MOTIVATION. It is, of course, a teacher's job to motivate her/his students to learn about this history.

For those who teach history or literature of a period and a place and, for whatever reason, circumvent the sufferings and pain of the civilians subjected to genocidal acts by their own government or the aggressor tyrants, to my way of thinking, these teachers are nothing more than ignorant and indifferent bystanders on whose stance oppressors rely.

In his Introduction to a special issue on educating about genocide in the *Social Science Record*, Samuel Totten (1987) quotes Thomas Hammarberg, a former Secretary General of Amnesty International, as stating that the oppressors are relying on *ignorance and indifference* among the citizens in their countries and public opinion abroad (p. 1). To counter the actions of human rights violators, including those who commit genocide, Hammarberg (1983) asserts that a difference maker is “*education about human rights violations*” (cited in Totten, 1987, p. 1).¹

The sad fact is, though, some thirty years after the California Board of Education began focusing attention in their state curriculum on the issue of human rights, we continue to face bumps in the road of genocide education. In this day and age that should not be the case.

To move students toward caring and thinking about the issue of international human rights, teachers need to help their students come to understand that even those genocides perpetrated long ago have a life of their own that affects human life today. Over and above that, students need to understand that the issue of genocide is not simply something that happened long ago but continues to plague humanity today. Genocide is the ultimate culmination of gross injustice—and injustice is a concept quite tangible for a student in any age group.²

Many students care about injustice, are sensitive to it, and not a few have certainly experienced it. By framing human rights violations, and genocide, as major injustices, which they certainly are, versus teaching those issues as dry and possibly inert facts, teachers can draw students to care about the issues, to learn about the magnitude of them, and to begin to attempt to understand the horrific suffering caused by them.

Inviting a survivor to the class before taking up the actual teaching of the material, or showing them a clip of survivor testimony, is, I believe, an outstanding and effective way in which to stoke student

interest in these issues and to help them become engaged in a study of such. An outstanding source of videos of survivors is the IWitness project launched by the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California. It is a repository with holdings of videos of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, and the 1994 genocide perpetrated in Rwanda by extremist Hutus against Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The project also has available for use by teachers: guidelines, background information, questions, and issues that can be raised in class as students view the videos.³

The second pedagogical issue I wish to address is that of **ENGAGING AND SOLID INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESSES**. Curriculum planners and instructors need not and, indeed, should not, wait until high school or college to teach about genocide. The issue and the concomitant concepts can be introduced as soon as later middle school and junior high (grades six or seven).

Genocidal acts past and present are pages of the history of mankind that are usually taught in history classes with a heavy dosage of facts, statistics, and documents. Facts, statistics and the use of primary documents are important when teaching history; however, to leave a study of genocide to that is to miss important opportunities. Ultimately, facts and figures frequently fail to reflect the ultimate pain and the shattered fate of an entire nation or a group of people who are victimized for upholding their identity; that is, more often than not they fail to kindle empathy in students, let alone a commitment to counter such horrors.

What does delve into the pain that individuals and groups have suffered and helps to induce empathy are eyewitness accounts, memoirs, and even novels and poetry. Such resources are more likely than not to rouse the students' interest. After all, when one thinks about it, what helped to promote knowledge and public opinion about the Jewish Holocaust was none other than the thoughts and experiences of a young girl as expressed in *Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl*, and, still later, the extremely moving memoir of Elie Wiesel, *Night*.

For advanced classes, another major consideration is the **COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GENOCIDE**. Vahakn Dadrian, a noted scholar of the Armenian Genocide, was the first genocide scholar to accomplish a comparative study of the Jewish Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, where he stresses both parallels and contrasts. Leo Kuper, who

has been described as the doyen of genocide studies, also left a legacy in this domain. And, of course, others have followed in their footsteps and added to the richness of the field.⁴

As for my own contribution to this effort—instead of facts, figures, and documents—I have focused on artistic expression; that is, the Armenian and Jewish literary responses to catastrophes throughout the history of these two peoples studded by persecutions and national disasters. Such literary responses—and through them, the reactions of the victimized masses—demonstrate the universality of human suffering when confronted with extreme historical circumstances while also demonstrating the uniqueness of each group’s experience during such circumstances as well as how they assimilated their tragic experience into art.⁵

Teaching and learning about genocide should not be limited to the event in its time and space, but should also stress the reverberations of the particular genocide under study—its continuation, or its after-effects, effects that remain etched in the memory of the survivors. These effects are transgenerational and play a key role in the shaping of outlook, worldview, philosophy of life, and identity of future generations.

Knowledge is prevention, we educators like to believe.⁶ Yet, we witness the continuing occurrences of genocidal acts throughout the world; they remain unpunished and many are gradually effaced from the collective memory of mankind. Persistence and perseverance is the key. Teaching about genocide (not only the Holocaust, but the Armenian Genocide, the Cambodian genocide, the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Darfur genocide, to mention but a few) is not easy, but it is a must.

Earlier generations of committed educators in the 1980s and 1990s opened an unexplored field, paved the way, created curricula, produced curricular resources, suggested useful methodology and teaching strategies. The torch is now being passed to younger educators, whose endeavors are facilitated by a plethora of material and teaching tools⁷ and dependable support organizations.

Finally, in continuation of Samuel Totten’s ongoing efforts in the teaching of genocide, I wish to propose that educators seriously consider establishing an online network of instructors who teach about genocide, something like a listserv in order to connect and share experiences and ideas on an ongoing basis.

REFERENCES

GPN (Genocide Prevention Now), online journal www.genocidepreventionnow.org provides a comprehensive list of dependable organizations and the type of material they offer.

NOTES

1. In a groundbreaking collection of articles and suggestions by expert teachers published as a special issue of *Social Science Record*, the *Journal of New York State Council for the Social Studies* (Vol. 24, Issue 2, Fall, 1987), titled “Genocide, Issues, Approaches, Resources,” Samuel Totten, the journal’s guest editor, quotes Thomas Hammarberg, a former Secretary General of Amnesty International: “the oppressors are relying on *ignorance and indifference*—among the citizens in their countries and public opinion abroad.” He, thus, stresses the importance of “*education and information*” (“Introduction: Teaching about Genocide,” pp. 2–3). This impressive and thoughtful compilation has been my guiding light during all these years. And now I have been asked to speak of my own experience in that battlefield.
2. There are many others issues, of course, such as the perils of prejudice and discrimination; intolerance of diversity—race, religion, language, and culture; the price of freedom; and the meaning of rights and responsibilities.
3. In an online document by the USC Shoah Foundation, titled “Using Testimony-in-Classroom,” educators are introduced to testimony-based lessons, activities and resources, and are shown the effectiveness of teaching with testimony from the Visual History Archive (iwitness.usc.edu) which can: “Provide a human face to the past”; “Engage students to critically think about universal themes of tolerance, diversity and justice from an individual perspective”; and “Sensitize students to the value of story as a valuable source of knowledge.”
4. See Vahakn N. Dadrian, “Methodological Components of the Study of Genocide as a Sociological Problem,” *Recent Studies in Modern Armenian History* (Cambridge, MA: National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, 1972), pp. 83–103. The latter article, elaborated and expanded, appears in Part IX of a subsequent volume by the author, *The History of the Armenian Genocide* (Providence, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), and is titled “A Review of the Armenian Genocide in a Comparative Perspective,” pp. 375–419. See also, Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

5. See Rubina Peroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, issued under the auspices of the G. E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993).

6. Leo Kuper, Israel Charny, and Samuel Totten are among the first genocide scholars who have initiated the concept and worked diligently to devise methods of prevention by developing early warning signs and alerting the world citizenry when they appear, in the hope of stopping the violence before it reaches the genocidal magnitude.

7. Instructors and their students searching cyberspace for material or support organizations should be vigilant not to land on denialist sites and inadvertently make use of dreck. This is particularly true in the cases of the Armenian Genocide and the Turkish denialist literature distorting the facts and presenting an entirely contradictory picture, and the Holocaust and the manufacture of lies about it. Ironically, but not surprisingly, we also witnessed the spread of negation and trivialization of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.