



This project was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The contents of this blog are the responsibility of the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem.

# **GPN** GENOCIDE PREVENTION NOW

A Holocaust and Genocide Review on the Internet for all people  
taking the side of protecting all human life  
[www.genocidepreventionnow.org](http://www.genocidepreventionnow.org)

Executive Director: Prof. Israel W. Charny, Ph.D. Director of WORLD GENOCIDE SITUATION ROOM: Prof. Elihu D. Richter, M.D., M.P.H.  
Director of HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE REVIEW: Marc I Sherman, M.L.S.

## **Teaching Genocide in United States Secondary Education**

**Special Folio: GPN Genocide 2010 Year in Review    GPN Original**

Sara Cohan, Education Director, *The Genocide Education Project* and Marty Sleeper, *Facing History and Ourselves*

“Holocaust simulation! Live out your dreams!” In March, an email with this title was circulated to the faculty of a Minnesota middle school. The teacher who issued it was planning a Holocaust simulation activity for her classes. The email went on to state the simulation would be “a day of sheer pleasure for the staff being themselves as Nazi Officers and becoming Adolfs...because staff need the stress relief and entertainment.” The sheer insensitivity of this email is appalling. For over thirty years, there has been a concerted effort to responsibly incorporate Holocaust education in schools across the U.S. The mere fact that teachers are still capable of this level of malfeasance is stunning especially in a state that mandates genocide studies. Yet, at the same time this incident is a testament to the importance that U.S. educators care about Holocaust education. How? The email was immediately forwarded to the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota who offered their services to revise this ill devised lesson. The educator was redirected to use primary sources and a solid lesson plan that would allow students to learn about the Holocaust in a more appropriate manner. Poorly trained teachers are out there, but the good news is that when an incident like this occurs, there are organizations that are able to respond and stop such incidents.

It is a “push and pull” in America’s classrooms. Due to the mandating of Holocaust and genocide studies in over thirty states, educators are teaching about these delicate and important incidents in world history. Since the state sponsored mandates rarely include funding for teacher education, the results are mixed. The recent incident in Minnesota is a terrible scenario, but the positive growth is astounding. The National Council for the Social Studies is the premier professional organization for social studies teachers in the U.S. Ten years ago; one might have found one or two workshops offered at their annual conference, which a few thousand teachers regularly attend, about the Holocaust. In 2008, there was more than ten sessions dedicated to, not only the Holocaust, but also

to genocide studies, Darfur and the Armenian Genocide.<sup>1</sup> Teachers filled the sessions to capacity.

The Genocide Education Project has led sessions at the NCSS annual conference for several years. This year their session was attended by over sixty educators. The “traffic” at their booth in the well travel exhibit hall was encouraging. Executive Director, Raffi Momjian, noted “teachers from across the country—from small towns in Texas to New York City---stopped by to share stories about teaching about genocide in their classrooms.” He continued, “teachers were most engaged with the desire to teach about genocide and were moving away from individual case studies.” One comment that seemed universal from educators was the need for more support and resources in teaching genocide education.

### **The Movement from Holocaust Education to Genocide Education**

The stimulus for the surge in teaching about genocide has certainly been affected by the genocide in Darfur. The genocide in Darfur continues after six years and educators, as well as students, are outraged. Together they have formed activist organizations in high schools similar to STAND (Students Taking Action Now Darfur). Like with the media response to the Armenian Genocide in 1915, one result of the prolonged genocide of Darfur is that youth and educators have mobilized and responded to this human rights tragedy.

For over three decades, Facing History and Ourselves has been providing a model of educational intervention and professional development that helps teachers and their students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives. Through in-depth study of cases of mass atrocity and genocide, Facing History engage teachers and students in a critical exploration of the steps that led to full scale violence and destruction, as well as strategies for prevention and positive participation to sustain democracy.

Its core resource text, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* embodies a sequence of study that begins with identity—first individual identity and then group and national identities with their definitions of membership. From there the materials examine the failure of democracy in Germany and the steps leading to the Holocaust—the most documented case of twentieth-century indifference, de-humanization, hatred, racism, antisemitism, and mass murder. It goes on to explore difficult questions of judgment, memory, and legacy, and the necessity for responsible civic participation to prevent injustice and protect democracy in the present and future.

Facing History and Ourselves, like the Choices Program at Brown University, and The Genocide Education Project, are consistently moral organizations. They are not compromised by the efforts to deny any genocide and take strong positions

against any form of prejudice or discrimination.

### **Politics and Genocide Education**

There are political factors that mar the teaching of genocide education. The most fundamental issue is a lack of funding. As stated early, states across the nation have mandated the teaching of genocide and yet many of these mandates lack any funding for support. On the national level, the Department of Education does not appropriate any grants specifically focused on genocide education. The last eight years has devastated the social studies in general.

The introduction of high stakes testing—implemented in a few states in the mid 90's and then gaining federal force with Bush's election in 2000 and his adoption of NCLB or No Child Left Behind Act has limited the teaching of history in public schools. This shift in pedagogy essentially means that while the approach of lobbying for states to adopt mandates may still have some political importance the real focus of how to get the genocide studies taught in American schools needs to change.

David McCullough, a well known historian, stated that:

Because of the No Child Left Behind program, sadly, history is being put on the back burner or being taken off the stove altogether. While the law focuses on math and reading, there's no reason well-written historical books can't be on reading lists to give students an appreciation of the nation's history.<sup>2</sup>

Social Studies educators and organizations have been fighting to save the teaching of history in American schools. Regardless of current educational politics, advocates of teaching genocide studies must persist and look for creative and inventive venues for preserving this important new focus in education.

### **Genocide Denial and the Educational World**

Another political pitfall in the teaching of genocide studies is a result of the denial of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish government. Their skilled efforts in systematically denying the Armenian genocide have a direct on U.S. schools. Educators are exposed to non-credible sources distributed by Turkish lobbying groups without censorship through the U.S. For example, *Who are the Turks?* is a publication of the American Forum for Global Education in New York. The book of lesson plans was written in corporation with Justin McCarthy, a well-known denier of the Armenian genocide and was in part funded by the Chamber of Commerce of Istanbul. The book is available online at no cost and easily accessible to educators. The American Forum promotes its work at events around the country and receives funding from the U.S. government for many of their workshops for teachers. The active teaching of genocide denial is extremely destructive as it inhibits a fair analysis of history and condemns the victims.

Battles over recognition of the Armenian Genocide are a powerful reminder that history matters. In 2005, a high school senior and two teachers with the financial support of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations (ATAA) filed a lawsuit against the Massachusetts Department of Education claiming that the history of the Armenian genocide is contestable and the official Turkish perspective should be represented in the resources offered to teachers in the state. Massachusetts mandated the teaching of genocide, including the Armenian case, in 1998.<sup>3</sup> The lawsuit was dismissed in June, 2009. The Chief Judge, Mark Wolf, dismissed the case stating the plaintiffs “are not entitled to relief in federal court.” The dismissal at this early stage of the proceedings is viewed in legal circles as indicating that the case lacked even minimal merit. Even with such a positive result, such lawsuits send a terrifying message to educators to tread lightly when teaching about the Armenian genocide unless they want to end up in court. Despite the verdict, teachers react to such tactics by self censorship because lawsuits and other tactics of genocide denial often still succeed in branding a topic “controversial,” leading some teachers to avoid teaching the subject. Indeed, some topics demand more widespread teaching; they cry out for teachers with the courage to confirm historical truth in the classroom, and for the support of school administrators and the community at large.

The Armenian Case is even further complicated because educators today rarely encountered the subject themselves as students. Without formal training on the subject it becomes an even more difficult task for them to teach it and defend themselves against Turkish lobbying efforts in the U.S. The Genocide Education Project and Facing History and Ourselves regularly conduct workshops for educators on the Armenian case. It is with absolute regularity that participants are apt to challenge the presenters with denialist perspectives. A board member of The Genocide Education Project, Roxanne Makajian, notes: “Despite the documented research and despite the statements of the International Association of Genocide Scholars we have to always be prepared to confront deniers in the workshops we offer. It is unfortunate that we regularly have to deconstruct denial arguments, instead of being able to freely use our limited time with educators to teach this important history.”

Unfortunately, some of the most esteemed organizations like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum are still struggling with genocide denial. The museum includes information that both affirms and denies the Armenian Genocide. The inconsistent messages regarding the Armenian Genocide throughout the museum exhibits (permanent, temporary) and supplemental materials creates a level of confusion for educators that allows space for denial. For example, a new temporary exhibit was launched at the USHMM called From Memory to Action: Meeting the Challenge of Genocide, the exhibit includes a description of Raphael Lemkin’s work and does not include his study of the Armenian Case. In fact, Lemkin studied the Armenian Case and it was a fundamental part of his research as he constructed the term “genocide.”

The USHMM did include a section on their website about Lemkin and in this section they cast serious doubt on whether or not the Armenian Case was genocide. They state: "his [Lemkin's] memoirs detail early exposure to the history of Ottoman attacks against Armenians (which most scholars believe constitute genocide), antisemitic pogroms, and other histories of group-targeted violence as key to forming his beliefs about the need for legal protection of groups ."

As more comparative approaches to genocide education became more accepted, the existence of such disparities should begin to disappear. To compile with more demand from educators for materials that are based on a truly holistic approach to genocide studies, the Holocaust-centric focus of the 1980's and 90's should begin to dissipate.

Teaching the history of the Armenian Genocide allows students a perspective on many challenges that are still with us, including: the challenges facing minorities as they advocate for social change in an unequal society, the danger of politicized religion, the politics of balancing national interests and global humanitarian concerns, the challenges involved in transitions between traditional to modern societies, the possibilities and limitations of humanitarian intervention, and maybe most importantly, the pressures that can lead to the erosion of tolerance.

Nearly a century after the Armenian Genocide, we have more legal tools with which to respond to genocide, but there is still too little emphasis on prevention. The genocide in Darfur, for example, continues after six years. Outraged educators and students have formed activist organizations in high schools, like STAND (Students Taking Action Now Darfur). Rigorous, historically-grounded education for coexistence in multi-religious and multiethnic societies is vital for our future. Schools must prepare students to live in a world where international borders have become porous. Events in places that seem far away can have a strong impact here at home.

## **Conclusion**

We are now nearly a decade into a century already marked by events of incredible violence and horror, where racism, anti-Semitism and genocide are on a frightening increase. The impact of extremist and absolutist thinking, dogma and state-sanctioned hatred has been made painfully tragic and clear. The echoes of the history embodied in genocide studies continue to resound in the ongoing inclination of leaders and followers to define groups that are different as "the other," making them vulnerable to prejudice, de-humanization, hatred and violence.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century provided extraordinary evidence of how leaders could use ancient myths and misinformation in conjunction with propaganda techniques to

unleash ethnic hatred and cause neighbor to turn against neighbor and to see "difference" as alien and threatening. Its legacies - humiliation, dehumanization, discrimination, and mass murder, fuel confrontations among people all over the world; just as other pieces of those legacies, embodying courage, compassion, dissent and resilience, offer hope for cooperation and understanding. As we look ahead to the 20<sup>st</sup> century, we need to move beyond memory and legacy and ask how those perspectives can lead to prevention. This is the challenge for genocide education.

To meet that challenge today, teachers need more variety and more background information written for the grade levels they instruct. Overall, the caliber of instructional materials is excellent and provides educators the opportunity to teach this difficult subject with more ease. The downside of the growth in materials available is that many which are highlighted by those untrained in the field, yield less than optimum results regarding student comprehension of the subject. Films and print publications that over-simplify genocide are plentiful. Without proper training, it is often difficult for educators to discern such disingenuous products. If genocide education in secondary schools is to be effective in training young people to become informed citizens, resources that accurately portray the scope and consequences of genocide are essential.

Moral outrage for what is occurring now in Darfur, state mandates and expanded services to educators have caused genocide studies to flourish in U.S. public schools. Yet, there is a lack of public funding to properly prepare educators to teach this tremendously complex subject and there is little oversight to whether it is taught in a reasonable and effective manner. Trends in genocide education like the use of films such as "Paperclips" or even worse—lawsuits waged at educators who are simply teaching the historical facts of the Armenian genocide—are incredibly dangerous to the responsible teaching of genocide. We are at a precarious time, genocide education is too important to see fall from curricula in U.S. schools, yet the needs of educators must be met through more training and providing them with better resources, if quality instruction will be achieved and maintained.

See the current edition of the basic text of *Facing History and Ourselves*. The original precedent-making edition in 1982 was *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

**Sara Cohan** is the Education Director of The Genocide Education Project. Having earned her Master of Science degree in Social Science Education from Florida State University and her Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology/Sociology from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, Cohan has taught secondary education in Florida, including in an International Baccalaureate program.

*Cohan received the George Washington Medal of Honor from the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, for the service-learning projects she implemented, including a comprehensive project with Nobel Peace Laureate, Betty Williams. During her tenure as a teacher, she was also selected as a Justice Teaching Fellow by the Supreme Court of Florida and received a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship to study Islam and Europe. She was a Fulbright-Hays scholar in Mexico, where she studied education and culture.*

*She is very familiar with genocide education, both from her professional experience and her family history, being a descendant of Armenian Genocide and having lost extended family in the Holocaust. As a research fellow for Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center she published her first piece on the Armenian Genocide.*

*Sara Cohan has written articles for journals and magazines, and created educational materials for a variety of organizations, including The Genocide Education Project, the National Council for the Social Studies, POV (a production of American Documentary, Inc.), and the ACLU. Recently, she authored an essay entitled "My Grandfather's Testimony" which is included in the book *Evoking Genocide: Scholars and Activists Describe the Works that Shaped their Lives* edited by Adam Jones.*

**Martin Sleeper** is Associate Executive Director at Facing History and Ourselves. His undergraduate degree is from Willams College in History and he holds masters' and doctoral degrees in teaching and curriculum development from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. He has extensive experience in teaching at the secondary and college levels as well as curriculum design and museum education. From 1979 – 2000 he was Principal of the John D. Runkle School in Brookline, Massachusetts. He is the author of numerous articles on history education and adolescent development.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup> Keller, Bess and Manzo, Kathleen Kennedy, Genocide claiming a larger place in middle and high school lessons. *Education Week*, Vol. 27, Issue 09, Pages 1, 15.

<sup>2</sup> National Council for the Social Studies (2005). Historian and author David McCollough slams NCLB for history shortfalls (Legislative Update). National Council for the Social Studies Web site, July 27).

<sup>3</sup> Murphy, Shelley. Suit challenges how Armenian Genocide is taught. *Boston Globe*, October 28.