

12.10 Eyewitnesses to Genocide

Instructions: Our goal is to discover similarities and differences in accounts written by eyewitnesses and survivors of different genocides. The passages are edited from primary sources.

Questions

1. What are some of the common themes and images?
2. In your opinion, why do the passages seem so similar?

A. Armenian Genocide. Dr. Martin Piege, a teacher at the German Technical School in Aleppo, Turkey, September 1915 (http://www.cilicia.com/armo10b_niepage.html). Out of convoys which, when they left their homes on the Armenian plateau, numbered from two to three thousand men, women and children, only two or three hundred survivors arrive here in the south. The men are slaughtered on the way. The women and girls, with the exception of the old, the ugly, and those who are still children, have been abused by Turkish soldiers and officers and then carried away to Turkish and Kurdish villages, where they have to accept Islam. They try to destroy the remnant of the convoys by hunger and thirst. Even when they are fording rivers, they do not allow those dying of thirst to drink. All the nourishment they receive is a daily ration of a little meal sprinkled over their hands, which they lick off greedily, and its only effect is to protract their starvation.

B. European Holocaust. Rivka Yosselevscka, Poland, 1942 (<http://www.datasync.com/~davidg59/einsatz.html>). There were those who fell — we were not allowed to help them rise. They were shot wherever they fell. Finally my turn came and then the SS man, the real messenger of the Devil and the Angel of Death, turned my head and shot me. I was praying for another bullet to put an end to my suffering. I felt bodies pulling at me, not all of them dead. In their last sufferings children crying “Mother,” “Father.” I was naked, covered with blood, dirty from the other bodies, with the excrement from other bodies that was poured onto me. I have a scar to this day from the shot by the Germans; and yet, somehow I did come out of the grave.

C. Rwandan Genocide. “Valentina,” Rwanda, 1994. (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/reports/refuse.html>). First they asked people to hand over their money, saying they would spare those who paid. But after taking the money they killed them anyway. Then they started to throw grenades. I saw a man blown up in the air, in pieces, by a grenade. The leader said that we were snakes and that to kill snakes you had to smash their heads. The killers moved into the terrified crowd of men, women and children, hacking and clubbing as they went. If they found someone alive they would smash their heads with stones. I saw them take little children and smash their heads together until they were dead. I prayed that I would die because I could not see a future life.

D. Cambodia. Tonle Sap Lake Massacre, 1977 (<http://cybercambodia.com/dachs/stories/ronnie.html>). A group of armed Khmer Rouge cadres herded what left of my family and neighbors to an unknown destination. There were thousands and thousands of people working, digging a huge canal project. It was not long after we arrived at Tasource Hill before they put everyone, including small children, to work among other people. We were forced to work all day and almost all night for five agonizing days by a new batch of soldiers. The new guards were cruel and have no mercy. Many died in front of me from heat stroke, sickness, exhaustion and starvation. But most died from beatings they received from the soldiers. And many were quietly taken away in the cover of the night to almost a certain destination, death. All that time I was wondering when our turn would come.

E. Bosnia. Hasan Nuhanovic, 1995 (Srebrenica Massacre) (http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/bosnia502/interviews_hasan.html). In 1993, the United Nations sent the first peacekeeping unit of Canadians. They were supposed to protect us from the Serbs. What happened in July 1995 was the final episode of genocide, of mass killing, of mass murder. The only thing I did not expect was that the U.N. peacekeepers were going to hand over people to the Serbs, like my family. Everyone wanted to remain inside the base, but the Dutch decided to actually throw them out. They gave me a megaphone and said, “Tell the people to start leaving the base in groups of five.” Some of the people, when they reached the gate, saw the Serb soldiers standing there, pushing the men and the boys away from their sisters, wives, children – there was a separation taking place right there at the gate. People realized at that very moment that something is wrong, thinking, “I’m not going to any safe place. The Serbs are going to take me.” My parents told me, “Hasan, stay. You can stay. Your brother will be with us; he will be OK.” I was walking behind them, screaming and saying, “I am coming with you.” But my brother turned around, and he started screaming right at my face: “You are not coming with me, you are going to stay inside because you can stay.” And that was the last time I saw my family.