

Armenian Genocide

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can personal testimonies inform our understanding of historical events?
- How and why do people classify themselves and others into us vs. them subgroups?
- What role does political rhetoric play in promoting “us vs. them” classification?

Overview

In this activity, students examine the concept of “us vs. them” and conduct an inquiry that helps them answer the question: What role does political rhetoric play in promoting us vs. them classification? By considering the historical consequences of us vs. them in the context of the Armenian Genocide, students will examine how us vs. them thinking impacts contemporary society and their own lives.

Target Audience

Middle School Social Studies

Activity Duration

Two 45 to 60-minute class periods

Enduring Understandings

- Eyewitness accounts are critical to a deeper understanding of historical events.
- Throughout history, classification—placing people into “us vs. them” categories—has contributed to fear, hatred, and conflict.
- Political rhetoric influences the ways groups classify themselves and others.

Background Information/Links

Classification

Classification, or an “us” vs “them” mentality, has been evident in human societies throughout history. Consciously and unconsciously, people today draw distinctions between themselves and members of other genders, ethnic and racial groups, religions, and political parties. Why do we do this?

MATERIALS

- Computer with Internet connection and a projector
- If available, devices with Internet access, one per student or student pair
- Handouts, one copy per student:
 - *“Us” vs. “Them” Classification*
 - *Ottoman Society and Turkification*
 - *Understanding Divisions in Ottoman Society*
 - *Analyzing Political Rhetoric*
 - *Biographies of Survivors and Scholars*
- Ideally, the teacher will have placed necessary video clips in a location accessible to students prior to the lesson.

Sometimes classification can render both societal and individual benefits. Even when our basic needs are met, we find security and comfort in feeling that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Membership in a group makes us feel less alone and can inspire us to act on behalf of others.

However, classification can have significant societal and individual costs when it is used to exclude individuals or groups or to take away their rights, status, or independence. The negative aspects of classification are often fueled by competition for scarce resources or the perception of a common threat. When taken to its extreme, this harmful side of classification can lead to discrimination, violence, and genocide.

Ottoman Society & Turkification

The Ottoman Empire lasted from 1300 to 1922. It was ruled by Muslim Turks and governed according to Islamic law. With the conquest of Armenia and Cilicia in the early part of the 16th century, the majority of the Armenian population of the Middle East and Anatolia were absorbed into Ottoman Turkey. Armenians historically have lived on and around the area of the Armenian plateau for over 3,000 years, (making up a majority of the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire). Around 301 CE, they became the first nation to accept the Christian faith as a state religion.

As a Christian minority group in a majority Muslim state, Armenians were oppressed and denied basic civil and human rights, due to their status as second-class citizens. They were required to pay discriminatory taxes and denied the right to participate in government. Despite their status, many Armenians prospered economically, in areas of manufacturing, trade, architecture, and the arts.

Through interaction with Europe as well as American Protestant missionaries, working and upper-class Armenians began to dream of greater freedom. In the mid-19th century, as Europeans were demanding greater political participation, interested Armenians followed suit, seeking justice and equality in the Ottoman Empire. However, Sultan Abdul Hamid II had no desire to establish an egalitarian society, and the Armenians' demands were met with increased oppression and victimization.

European powers tried to impose sanctions and reforms on the Ottoman Empire advocating on behalf of the Armenians, but this external pressure only hardened the Empire's resolve. Between 1894



and 1896, more than 100,000 Armenians were massacred. Armenians who survived suffered severe economic losses, and many were forced to convert to Islam. Some Armenians armed themselves in self-defense, which heightened the Sultan's fears that they might attempt to violently break away from the Ottoman Empire.

Yet, Armenian leaders did not seek independence. Rather, they sought reforms that would allow them some degree of equality in Ottoman society. They wanted their harassment and persecution to end, and they wanted the right to vote. When a group of Turkish nationalists called the "Young Turks" rose to power in 1908, many Armenians were hopeful that they might finally experience greater equality and democracy. However, their hopes were crushed a year later when between 20,000 and 30,000 Armenians were massacred in the Southern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Efforts were made to investigate these massacres and to discover who the aggressors were, yet there was no final prosecution. However, suspicions point to either the Young Turks or the followers of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, in an attempt to seek revenge on the Young Turks.

In the early part of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire was crumbling as a result of financial debt and land loss due to the invasion of Libya by the Italians in 1911, the Balkan countries' breaking away in 1912–13, and military encroachment from Russia. Territorial losses gave rise to a radical nationalist faction within the Young Turk movement, which took control in 1913 and established an ultra-nationalist ideology, called Pan-Turkism. This ideology would eventually lead to the policy of Turkification throughout the Empire. with the slogan "Turkey for the Turks."

The new ruling party resented Armenians who rose in their economic status, resented their religious beliefs, and feared their potential for revolution. Members of the new party were also emboldened by the defeat of the Allies in World War I and their strong alliance with the Germans, which they felt gave them a free hand in the destruction of the entire Christian Armenian people. As a result of these various factors, they set about displacing and murdering Armenians throughout the Empire, in a campaign to seize their lands and purge them from Ottoman society. Between 1915 and 1923, as many as 1,500,000 Armenians were stripped of their ancestral homeland through forced deportations and killed through massacres, starvation, disease and exposure.

Teaching with Testimony

Middle School Activity | Us vs. Them



Sources:

- <https://iwitness.usc.edu/sfi/Documents/Promise/ThePromise.pdf>
- <https://www.armenian-genocide.org/ottoman.html>
- <https://genocideeducation.org/background/brief-history/>
- <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-1915%E2%88%921916-armenian-genocide-an-ideology-course-and-consequences/5454679>
- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-armenian-genocide-1915-16-overview>

Procedure

Ask

- 1 Introduce the topic by providing students copies of the *Us vs. Them Classification* handout that includes a T chart labeled Us and Them. Begin by providing some examples to show students how to complete the chart. For instance, the teacher might name the school and a rival school or the town and a neighboring community. The handout will encourage students to create their own labels, following the example set by the teacher (e.g., favorite sports teams vs. their rivals, kids vs. adults, girls vs. boys).
- 2 Students can then share their charts in pairs prior to calling on volunteers to share their ideas with the full class. It may be helpful to write down students' ideas on a large T chart on the board or a piece of chart paper to help capture ideas.
- 3 Next, ask students why they believe people create us vs. them categories. For more support it may be helpful to reference the prompts below:
 - *Why do you think people create us vs. them categories?*
 - *What are the benefits of classification? How does it feel to be included in a group?*
 - *What are the costs of classification? How does it feel to be excluded from a group?*
- 4 Explain that people have classified themselves and others throughout history. S/he may choose to include information about classification from the background section to help provide more context.



Analyze

- 1 To help students dig deeper into the historical background, distribute copies of the *Ottoman Society and Turkification* handout and separate students into pairs. Students will read through the handout with their partners.
- 2 Following the reading, help students process what they have learned by leading a discussion using the following questions. These questions will help build understanding of the Armenian Genocide and the creation of an us vs. them mentality.

 - *Who were the Armenians?*
 - *How and why were the Armenians discriminated against within the Ottoman Empire?*
 - *What impact did the Turkification have on Armenians?*
- 3 After discussing the background questions, introduce to students that they are going to view eyewitness testimony from survivors and scholars of the Armenian Genocide to understand the causes and consequences of classification. These testimonies are primary and secondary accounts of how the Armenian Genocide led to a tremendous loss of life and impacted millions. He or she will distribute the *Understanding Divisions in Ottoman Society* handout to help students take notes and organize their ideas. After each clip, provide students with the opportunity to review information and help students make connections to the testimony and the impact of classification on the Armenian people.
- 4 Before viewing, remind students to pay close attention to how the different testimonies are shared. Provide students with the *Survivor and Scholar Biographies* handout and read each biography. As students read the biographies, ask students to consider their age and background. Provide students with the opportunity to consider what events stuck with the speaker or why they may have become scholars on the Armenian Genocide. To help students use the testimonies to build understanding, ask students to keep the following considerations in mind.

 - *Pay attention to speaker's tone of voice and body language*
 - *Consider the context and perspective of the witness*

Teaching with Testimony



Middle School Activity | Us vs. Them

- Focus on the personal story of the testimony as opposed to facts and figures
- Contemplate possible connections to their own lives and personal experiences

Clips of Testimony

- **Haroutune Aivazian on Forced Conversion:** Aivazian remembers his grandmother's reaction to a Turkish neighbor who proposed that his family should convert to Islam to avoid deportation in the Armenian Genocide.
- **Marie Jernazian on dehumanizing Armenians:** Marie discusses how Armenians were portrayed as inferior by the Turks to create divisions in society.
- **Haig Baronian on Armenian Assimilation:** Baronian describes meeting a young Armenian woman and discovering that she and her father had survived by pretending to be Turks.
- **Richard Hovannisian on Social Darwinism:** Hovannisian explains how social Darwinism informed the genocidal practices of the Turkish regime during the Armenian Genocide.
- **Aurora Mardiganian on Anti-Christian Sentiment:** Mardiganian explains that the Turks wanted to massacre the Armenians for two reasons: they wanted their land and they wanted to wipe out Christianity.

- 5 After viewing the testimonies, provide students with the opportunity to reflect on what they saw and heard from the videos, as well as, what they read from the biographies. As students make connections, ask them to share their notes and ideas in small groups prior to sharing with the whole class. Some discussion starters may include:

- How did the speaker appear in the video?
- Did the speaker's tone or cadence change during the testimony?
- How did body language impact the testimony?
- What impact has the Armenian Genocide had on the speaker.

Teaching with Testimony

Middle School Activity | Us vs. Them



- 6 As students finish sharing, bring the class together and fill out a chart on the board or chart paper to list causes and consequences of classification on Armenian society.

Apply

- 1 Help students connect newly learned information by explaining that the divisions like those within Ottoman society are not unique. He or she will explain that Americans and contemporary society can often be sharply divided along political, ethnic, and racial lines.
- 2 The teacher will introduce the focus of the essential question, "What role does political rhetoric play in promoting us vs. them classification?"
- 3 The teacher will ask students to make a list of sources they believe people rely on for news and information. He or she will call on volunteers and use students' answers to compile a class list. (Note to Teacher: Since many middle-schoolers likely get news and information from parents, you may want to have students ask parents where they believe people get their news and bring the information to class prior to the start of this lesson.)
- 4 Remind students that political rhetoric is a way to construct persuasive arguments in political debate. Rhetoric can be used to encourage and uplift, though it can also be used to create divisions by perpetuating fears and stereotypes.
- 5 The teacher will organize the students into small groups and provide each group with copies of the *Analyzing Political Rhetoric handout*, which they will use to analyze political rhetoric around a specific social issue by examining a variety of news sources. To support students in this activity, teachers should consider providing a list of approved sites to visit or prepared articles on topics where rhetoric may be evident but not hurtful. As students analyze the sources, ask students to consider connections to how political rhetoric can impact the perception of the issue from different segments of society.

Teaching with Testimony

Middle School Activity | Us vs. Them



Act

- 1 The teacher will introduce the final activity: To design a project that helps students counter us vs. them messaging. Explain that the project can be a public art project or a piece of writing to be shared with others via the media, including social media if deemed appropriate by the teacher or family members.
- 2 The teacher will organize students into small groups and provide time for them to work on their projects. Student should be encouraged to consider what they learned from the testimonies of the Armenian Genocide and the role political rhetoric plays in impacting society today. Questions students may consider include:
 - *What issues divide society today?*
 - *How is political rhetoric impacting how we view these issues?*
 - *What are ways to combat dangerous political rhetoric?*
 - *What lessons can we learn from past examples of political rhetoric and their impact on contemporary society?*
- 3 Once students have designed their projects, they will share them with the class. They will also be encouraged to share them with their families and the broader community.

Extend

Using feature films can be an important tool to help students make connections to the past. *The Promise* is a historical fiction film that conveys a multi-perspective history of the Armenian Genocide. As the plot of *The Promise* unfolds in the Ottoman Empire during 1914, on the brink of its entrance into the First World War and the Armenian Genocide, viewers discover the symbolic love between friends, family, and one's national identity. *The Promise* shares the story of Ottoman Armenian people and the brave men and women who risked their lives to help save them from complete annihilation.

The Promise can help students further investigate the consequences of classification. Clips are available at <https://iwitness.usc.edu/sfi/Sites/Promise/Clips.aspx>. "Deleted Scene: Dr. Nazim" (1:56) highlights Turkish leaders' plans to relocate and extinguish Armenians. "Arrival at

Constantinople” (1:14) provides an example of a Turkish vendor’s prejudice against Armenians. The opening scene of the film (01:01–02:37) can also be used to illustrate peaceful relations between Armenians and Turks prior to World War I. The film is available to rent or buy on various streaming services.

Connections

Connect to Student Lives	Connect to Contemporary Events	Connect to the Future
Students will consider how classification affects them personally as well as other members of the community.	Students will investigate how political rhetoric around current events contributes to classification.	Students will develop projects to help counter classification in their school or local community.

“Us” vs. “Them” Classification



Classification is the systematic arrangement of people into groups or categories according to shared characteristics. Throughout our history, humans have classified individuals into “us” and “them” groups.

Directions: Complete the T chart below by identifying groups in which you consider yourself a member (“us”) and groups in which you are not a member (“them”). An example has been provided.

Us	Them
Young people	Grown-ups



What Was the Ottoman Empire?

The Ottoman Empire was a state that controlled much of Southeast Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa between the 14th and early 20th centuries. It was ruled by Muslim Turks and governed according to Islamic law. With the conquest of Armenia and Cilicia in the early part of the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire absorbed the majority of the Armenian population of the Middle East.

Who Were the Armenians and What Was Their Status?

Armenians are an indigenous people who lived for over 3,000 years on the great highland plateau that made up the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Around 301 A.D., they became the first nation on earth to accept the Christian faith as a state religion. As a Christian minority in a majority Muslim state, Armenians were oppressed and denied basic civil and human rights. They were required to pay discriminatory taxes and denied the right to participate in government.

Despite their oppression, the great size of the Ottoman Empire created economic opportunities for Armenians. Many prospered in manufacturing, architecture, the arts, and trade, where they played the role of intermediaries in European trade with the East. The Armenians also possessed valuable lands that the Turks wanted. Their wealth and ties to Europe engendered resentment.

Who Were the Young Turks?

In the early 1900s, working and upper-class Armenians sought reforms that would allow them to gain justice and equality in the Ottoman Empire. They wanted the right to vote and protection from harassment and persecution. However, Sultan Abdul Hamid II had no desire to establish an egalitarian society—a society that gives everyone equal rights, and the Armenians' demands were met with increased oppression and victimization.

When a group of reform-minded Turkish nationalists called the “Young Turks” rose to power in 1908, many Armenians were hopeful that they might finally experience greater equality and democracy. However, the Ottoman Empire was crumbling due to financial debt and loss of lands, resulting from the invasion of Libya by the Italians in 1911 and the Balkan countries' breaking away in 1912-13. A radical nationalist faction within the Young Turk movement took control in 1913 and established an ultra-nationalist policy of Turkification, also called Pan-Turkism, with the slogan “Turkey for the Turks.”

What Was the Armenian Genocide?

The new ultra-nationalist Young Turk rulers set about displacing Armenians in a campaign to seize their lands and murdering them to eliminate non-Muslims from the Ottoman society. Between 1915 and 1923, as many as 1,500,000 Armenians were stripped of their ancestral homeland through forced deportations and killed through massacres, starvation, disease, and exposure.

Vocabulary

Engendered: To cause, give rise to, or create

Egalitarian: A society that gives everyone equal rights

Radical Nationalist Faction: A smaller more radical group of a political party organization that has extreme devotion to a nation

Ultra-Nationalist: Extreme devotion to one's own nation

Understanding Divisions in Ottoman Society



Witness or Scholar: <i>Identify and describe the witness or scholar</i>	How is this individual connected to Ottoman society and the Armenian Genocide?	What can this testimony teach us about divisions in Ottoman society?
Haroutune Aivazian		
Marie Jernazian		
Haiastan Terzian		
Haig Baronian		
Richard G. Hovannisian		
Aurora Mardiganian		

Analyzing Political Rhetoric



Directions: Identify a current social or political issue to focus on. Find three editorials or opinion pieces about your issue from different sources. Provide a complete citation for each source below. Then, use the chart to analyze the language used in each article and its intended impact.

***Reminder:** *Political Rhetoric is a way to construct persuasive arguments in political debate. Rhetoric can be used to encourage and uplift, though it can also be used to create divisions by perpetuating fears and stereotypes.*

Issue:

Sources:

Source	Examples of language used to describe the issue	Effects of the language used to describe the issue

Survivor and Scholar Biographies



STUDENT HANDOUT

Haroutune Aivazian was born in Marash (Kahramanmaraş, Turkey) in 1905 and was named after his grandfather who was a victim of the Hamidian Massacres (killed in 1895). His father was a soldier in the Ottoman Turkish Army and was not present in Marash in 1915. Upon hearing notice of the deportation in 1915, Haroutune's mother went to a local Turkish muleteer to buy a mule and supplies. This muleteer warned her that this deportation would lead to death. Shortly after, Haroutune's mother placed Haroutune and his brother in the Marash German orphanage, Beit Shalom "House of Peace," and sent his two sisters to the Bethel Orphanage for their protection. Haroutune remained there for the duration of World War I. Haroutune's father returned to Marash after the war ended. Haroutune was interviewed on May 12, 1993, in London, England.

Marie Jernazian was born in 1896 in Elâziğ (Elâziğ, Turkey). As young woman, Marie and her family were deported from their home to live in Urfa. During the forced relocation, Marie and her mother were made to dispose of bodies of those who did not make the journey. While in Urfa, Marie witnessed the armed resistance to the Turks and was forced more relocations. Marie was interviewed on March 23, 1975 in Los Angeles California.

Haig Baronian was just 7 years old when he witnessed the destruction of his entire family. His father and uncles were arrested and executed by the Turks. He and his mother, four sisters, baby brother, and grandmother were sent on a death march. They were forced to walk for weeks and were tortured and beaten along the way. Haig was the only one of his family to survive. He was forcibly adopted by Turks but was soon sent away by government decree with thousands of other children to die. Haig was rescued by American Missionaries and emigrated to the U.S. He graduated from Cornell University at the age of 23 and went on to marry, have a son, and own and run his own interior design business. He was interviewed on November 30, 1984.

Richard G. Hovannisian was born on November 9, 1932, in Tulare, California, and is a descendant of an Armenian Genocide survivor. Dr. Hovannisian is one of the leading experts on Armenian History and has written dozens of books, scholarly articles, and journals on Armenia and Near Eastern history. He founded the Armenian Studies program at UCLA in the 1960s and created one of his most remarkable courses—a seminar in which students recorded and conducted interviews with Armenian Genocide survivors. Today, these audio-recorded interviews are in the process of being integrated into the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Dr. Hovannisian was interviewed twice, once on March 31, 1975, and again on March 21, 2002, in Los Angeles, California.

Aurora Mardiganian was born on January 12, 1901, in Chmshgatsak (Çemişgezek, Turkey). When Aurora was 14 years old, some Ottoman Turks killed her family members and forced her to march over 1,400 miles. On the march, Aurora was kidnapped and sold to a slave market. She eventually escaped to Tiflis (modern Tbilisi, Georgia), hiding in caves with animals for 18 months, before traveling to St. Petersburg. From there, Aurora traveled to Oslo, before finally migrating to New York City. Once Aurora arrived in New York, she met Harvey Gates, a young screenwriter who helped her write and publish her 1918 memoir, *Ravished Armenia*. This book was the basis for *Auction of Souls* (1919), a silent film about the genocide, in which Aurora played herself. The film was the first film ever produced about the Armenian Genocide and was very successful. Its profits benefited the Near East Relief, an American charity organization founded with the goal of helping Armenians in need. Aurora was interviewed twice, once on March 3, 1975, and then again on December 14, 1980, in New York, New York.

National Standards

College, Career & Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards

- D2.Civ.7.6-8 Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school and community settings.
- D2.Civ.10.6-8 Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- D2.His.4.6-8. Analyze multiple factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- D4.2.6-8 Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.
- D.4.4.6-8 Draw on multiple disciplinary lenses to analyze how a specific problem can manifest itself at local, regional, and global levels over time, identifying its characteristics and causes and the challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address the problem.
- D.4.7.6-8 Assess individual and collective capabilities to take action to address local, regional, and global problems, taking into account a range of possible levers of power, strategies, and potential outcomes.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

- RI.8.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
- SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- SL.8.2 Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.
- SL.8.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.
- W.8.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.
- W.8.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.