

WE CHARGE GENOCIDE: RECKONING WITH RACIAL VIOLENCE IN THE U.S.

In this activity, students examine an historic 1951 petition to the United Nations which charged the United States government with the genocide of Black people. Through a close reading of the petition and a class discussion, students will draw connections from the past to current headlines about racial violence and police brutality in the United States.

Procedure:

1. Provide students with **background information** on Civil Rights Congress's 1951 petition to the United Nations.

In December 1951, a Detroit-based civil rights organization, the **Civil Rights Congress**, delivered a petition to the United Nations: *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*.

The goal of the petition was to demonstrate that the U.S. government was in violation of the UN Charter and the **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide**. According to the United Nations,

“Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The petition refers to 152 documented killings and hundreds of other human rights abuses from 1945-1951, while also acknowledging that thousands of others certainly went undocumented. It describes incidents of police brutality and violence at the hands of lynch mobs. It also outlines the profound structural and institutional violence against the Black community: inequities in health care, environmental conditions, housing, employment, and education – all means to deliberately inflict conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction.

2. Instruct students to read the following excerpt from the introduction of *We Charge Genocide*, highlighting ideas that resonate and words they do not understand. After they have finished reading, students will work in partners to write a short summary of the excerpt.
3. Debrief as a class. Check for understanding and discuss the follow questions:
 - a. What are the main arguments of this excerpt?
 - b. What connections can we make between the petition and current events such as the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Steven Taylor?
 - c. If you were to write a petition to the United Nations about racial violence in the United States today, what would you demand?

EXCERPT FROM “WE CHARGE GENOCIDE”

To the General Assembly of the United Nations:

The responsibility of being the first in history to charge the government of the United States of America with the crime of genocide is not one your petitioners take lightly. The responsibility is particularly grave when citizens must charge their own government with mass murder of its own nationals, with institutionalized oppression and persistent slaughter of the Negro people in the United States on a basis of “race,” a crime abhorred by mankind and prohibited by the conscience of the world as expressed in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1948.

Genocide Leads to Fascism and to War

If our duty is unpleasant it is historically necessary both for the welfare of the American people and for the peace of the world. [...]

But if the responsibility of your petitioners is great, it is dwarfed by the responsibility of those guilty of the crime we charge. Seldom in human annals has so iniquitous a conspiracy been so gilded with the trappings of respectability. Seldom has mass murder on the score of “race” been so sanctified by law, so justified by those who demand free elections abroad even as they kill their fellow citizens who demand free elections at home. Never have so many individuals been so ruthlessly destroyed amid many tributes to the sacredness of the individual. [...]

The genocide of which we complain is as much a fact as gravity. The whole world knows of it. The proof is in every day’s newspapers, in every one’s sight and hearing in these United States. In one form or another it has been practiced for more than three hundred years although never with such sinister implications for the welfare and peace of the world as at present. Its very familiarity disguises its horror. [...]

Killing Members of the Group

Your petitioners will prove that the crime of which we complain is in fact genocide within the terms and meaning of the United Nations Convention providing for the prevention and punishment of this crime. We shall submit evidence, tragically voluminous, of “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethical, racial or religious group as such,” – in this case the 15,000,000 Negro people of the United States.

We shall submit evidence proving “killing members of the group,” in violation of Article II of the Convention. We cite killings by police, killings by incited gangs, killings at night by masked men, killings always on the basis of “race,” killings by the Ku Klux Klan [...]

Our evidence concerns the thousands of Negroes who over the years have been beaten to death on chain gangs and in the back rooms of sheriff’s offices, in the cells of county jails, in precinct police stations and on city streets, who have been framed and murdered by sham legal forms and by a legal bureaucracy. It concerns those Negroes who have been killed, allegedly for failure to say “sir” or tip their hats or move aside quickly enough, or, more often, on trumped up charges of “rape,” but in reality for trying to vote or otherwise demanding the legal and inalienable rights and privileges of United States citizenship formally guaranteed them by the Constitution of the United States [...]

Economic Genocide

We shall offer proof of economic genocide, or in the words of the Convention, proof of “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its destruction in whole or in part.” We shall prove that such conditions so swell the infant and maternal death rate and the death rate from disease, that the American Negro is deprived, when compared with the remainder of the population of the United States, of eight years of life on the average.

Further we shall show a deliberate national oppression of these 15,000,000 Negro Americans on the basis of “race” to perpetuate these “conditions of life.” Negroes are the last hired and the first fired. They are forced into city ghettos or their rural equivalents. They are segregated legally or through sanctioned violence into filthy, disease-bearing housing, and deprived by law of adequate medical care and education. From birth to death, Negro Americans are humiliated and persecuted, in violation of the Charter and Convention. They are forced by threat of violence and imprisonment into inferior, segregated accommodations, into jim crow buses, jim crow trains, jim crow hospitals, jim crow schools, jim crow theaters, jim crow restaurants, jim crow housing, and finally into jim crow cemeteries.

We shall prove that the object of this genocide, as of all genocide, is the perpetuation of economic and political power by the few through the destruction of political protest by the many.

Source:

Civil Rights Congress, William L. Patterson, ed., *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People* (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1953), 3-5.

VOCABULARY

abhor: regard with hatred and disgust.

fascism: a political movement or regime that lifts up the nation or race above the individual and that suppresses all opposition; a tendency toward dictatorship or autocracy.

genocide: According to the United Nations, genocide is any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
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- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

inalienable: unable to be taken away.

iniquitous: very unfair and morally wrong.

oppression: cruel or unjust treatment or control.