

HISTORY 600 (001): GENOCIDE, WAR CRIMES TRIALS, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY



Defendants in the Dock at the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal

Course Information

Instructor:	Prof. Brandon Bloch (bjbloch@wisc.edu)
Office Hours:	Mon. 1:30-4:30 p.m. or by appointment (Levy Hall 2219 or online)
Semester:	Fall 2026
Meeting Time:	Wed. 1:20-3:15 p.m.
Location:	Education 151
Modality:	In-person
Credits:	3
Requisites:	HISTORY 201 or HIST SCI 211
Course Designations:	Breadth – Either Humanities or Social Science Level – Advanced L&S Credit – Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S Honors – Accelerated Honors
Canvas site:	TBD

Course Description

Why do genocides happen, and how should the international community respond? What motivates the states that target minority or indigenous groups for annihilation, and the perpetrators who carry out murder, deportation, and torture? What should happen to the perpetrators in the aftermath of genocide: Should they be summarily executed? Put on trial (by whom)? Allowed to quietly reintegrate into society? Why are certain acts of state violence defined as “genocide” or “crimes against humanity,” and others as legitimate military operations? How can egregious violations of international law be prosecuted given the unequal distribution of power in the international state system?

These questions provoked contentious debate across the twentieth century and remain urgent in our own time. Genocide—the targeted destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group—can be traced back to the earliest recorded history. Yet technological advancements, the centralization of state power, and new ideologies of racial purification meant that genocide remained prevalent in the twentieth-century world. At the same time, this century saw the first coordinated attempts to prevent genocide and bring the perpetrators to justice. New instruments of international law defined the crime of genocide; international tribunals handed down convictions for genocide and crimes against humanity; the Rome Statute of 1998 formed an International Criminal Court to try “the gravest crimes of concern to the international community.”

This seminar examines five twentieth-century genocides and the international tribunals created in their wake: the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge, the Rwanda genocide, and the mass killings during the Yugoslav wars. We will investigate how international criminal tribunals shaped ideas about human rights and humanitarian intervention, and why they so often proved controversial. We will also address the concept of a “right of return” as a response to forced population displacements, especially in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. We conclude by discussing the International Criminal Court, as well as the legacies of twentieth-century genocides and war crimes tribunals today. Our sources include first-person testimonies of genocide, accounts by journalists and observers, international legal documents, opinion essays, and historical scholarship. The culminating assignment is an original research paper building on one of the cases studied in class.

Learning Outcomes

As a research seminar, this course focuses as much on historical content as on skills of historical thinking, research, and writing. We will devote significant class time to practicing these skills, which you will bring together to craft your final paper.

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Identify the principal causes of several twentieth-century genocides and how the international community responded
- Explain how “war crimes,” “crimes against humanity,” “genocide,” and the “right of return” are defined in international law and how these definitions have shifted over time
- Compare survivor narratives and legal documents as sources of knowledge about genocide, and assess the challenges of working with each
- Analyze the political stakes and impacts of international war crimes tribunals
- Balance empathy and critical distance in discussing and writing about historical traumas
- Develop an original, persuasive, and evidence-based historical argument through research in primary sources

Course Books

Slavenka Drakulić, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly: War Criminals on Trial in the Hague* (New York: Penguin, 2004). ISBN: 9780143035428.

Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998). ISBN: 9780374286972.

Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge* (New York: Norton, 2000). ISBN: 9780393322101.

Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999). ISBN: 9780618001903.

These books are available for purchase at the University Book Store or online. Drakulić and Hochschild are available as e-books through the library catalog, but can only be read by two (Drakulić) or three (Hochschild) users at a time. The books are also placed on reserve at College Library in Helen C. White Hall.

Course Requirements

*Further details on all assignments, including guidelines and rubrics, will be available on Canvas.

1. Discussion Participation (35%)

Because this is a discussion-based seminar, your regular attendance and engaged participation are crucial to the seminar's success. The most productive discussions happen when classmates engage respectfully and constructively with one another's ideas, and I will structure discussions to facilitate this dialogue. Keep in mind that the quality of your contributions to discussions is as important as the quantity, and that asking a well-informed question counts as participation. I recognize that participation may come more easily to some than others, and I am happy to meet if you would like to discuss strategies for speaking in class.

Discussion participation will be evaluated holistically at the end of the semester according to the rubric on p. 14. You will also receive a provisional participation grade midway through the semester.

If you need to miss class due to religious observance, illness, or personal or family emergency, please let me know in advance. If you are absent more than once due to these circumstances, you will be asked to submit an additional reading response paper of 500-600 words to make up for each missed class.

2. Reading Response Essay (10%)

You will be asked to write an essay of 4-5 double-spaced pages on one week's readings between weeks 2-7. Reading questions will be distributed each week; you can choose one to address in your essay. Essays should be submitted by the beginning of class, and may address that week's or the previous week's readings. The earliest opportunity for submitting the essay is Sept. 16 (week 3); the final deadline is Oct. 14 (week 7). You are encouraged to use the reading response essay as an opportunity to explore possible themes for the research paper.

3. Research Paper (15% preparatory assignments; 40% final paper)

The culminating project is an original research paper of at least 15 double-spaced pages (excluding bibliography) related to one of the genocides and/or war crimes tribunals we are studying. You will have wide latitude in selecting a topic. Because twentieth-century war crimes tribunals produced rich troves of readily accessible, English-language documentation, one option is to choose the trial of a particular defendant as the launching point for your research. However, other framings are also possible. For instance, you might explore the development of a legal principle over time (such as “conspiracy” or “crimes against humanity”); analyze the international politics behind the creation of one of the tribunals; or examine the memorialization of genocide beyond trials in museums, survivor testimonies, or educational projects. The final paper is due on Dec. 16 at 11:59 p.m.

We will discuss expectations for this assignment at length in class. There are multiple intermediate assignments designed to keep you on track and provide you with ongoing feedback:

- Draft research question (due in class, Oct. 14)
- Draft research proposal and annotated bibliography (due in class, Oct. 21)
- Revised research proposal and annotated bibliography (due in class, Oct. 28)
- Outline (due in class, Nov. 4)
- Partial draft, at least 6 pp. double-spaced (due in class, Nov. 18)
- In-class presentation, 5-6 mins. (Dec. 2 or Dec. 9)

The intermediate assignments will count for 10% of your course grade; the presentation will count for 5%; and the final paper will count for 40%.

Grading:

A: 93-100

AB: 88-92

B: 83-87

BC: 78-82

C: 70-77

D: 60-69

F: Below 60

Credit Hours:

The credit standard for this 3-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course’s learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit, or 9

hours per week). This includes regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, group work, individual consultations with the instructor, and other student work as described in the syllabus. Since we meet for 2 hours of direct instruction per week, you should plan to allot an average of 7 hours per week outside of class for course-related activities. In addition, each student is expected to sign up for two 30-minute meetings with Prof. Bloch: one to discuss their research proposal (Oct. 22-23) and one to discuss their draft (Nov. 23-24).

Late Work:

If you are unable to meet an assignment deadline, please let me know as soon as possible and we can work out a plan for you to get caught up. The schedule of assignments is designed to allow you to choose in advance which weeks will require more work. Keeping this in mind as you plan your semester can help you stay on track. In cases of unexcused late work, I reserve the right to apply a deduction to late assignments out of fairness to other members of the class. Typically this deduction will be 3 points (out of 100) per day late.

Please note that I am not able to accept any written work for this course after Thurs. Dec. 17, the last day of the exam period. Incomplete grades can only be granted to students who are unable to complete the final paper due to “illness or other unusual and substantiated cause beyond their control.” For the university policy, see: <https://registrar.wisc.edu/incompletes/>.

Academic Integrity

The exchange of ideas is at the core of academic inquiry, and you are welcome to discuss the course material with your classmates. However, all work that you submit for a grade should reflect your own thinking and writing, and adhere to proper citation practices in the discipline of history. Passing off another person’s words or ideas as your own is not only unfair to your peers; it is also theft of the original author’s work, shutting out their voice from the academic conversation.

In my experience, plagiarism tends to result from either lack of knowledge about how to cite sources and/or trouble meeting a deadline. The course is designed to mitigate both of these factors. We will have ongoing discussions about how to cite sources; if you’re unsure in a particular case, don’t hesitate to ask. I have also implemented scaffolding in the assignment structure, with preliminary assignments guiding you toward the final paper. If you are worried about not finishing an assignment as a deadline approaches, please email me! We can always work out solutions to help improve your organization, and it’s much better to accept a late penalty (or turn in less than perfect work) than to cheat. If you plagiarize, then I have to address

the case as a disciplinary infraction rather than a learning opportunity. Serious academic misconduct may be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards.

Generative AI Policy

You are permitted to use generative AI to help you brainstorm ideas and outline your essays. If you utilize AI in this capacity, you will be asked to append a note to your final paper explaining how you used the AI tool—including the prompts you submitted—and whether you found it helpful. However, you are not permitted to directly import text generated by AI into a final paper, or to submit a paper that is merely a revised version of a draft written by AI. I am implementing this policy for two reasons: a) AI does not function as a “source” (for reasons we will discuss in class); and b) the purpose of History 600 is to foster your skills as an independent thinker, researcher, and writer (which will allow you to use AI more thoughtfully in the future). Submitting text generated by AI in the reading response essay or the research paper will be considered as an academic integrity violation.

Technology

Please come prepared to class with a laptop or other device that will allow you to access the Internet. We will occasionally incorporate technology into class discussions, including online discussion boards and shared google docs. Of course, I ask that you refrain from email or social media during class and use laptops for course purposes only. If you face challenges accessing the technology necessary to succeed in this course, please reach out as soon as possible.

Accessibility

I am committed to ensuring that all students receive equal access to the course materials and equitable opportunities to achieve the course learning goals. I have designed the course with the principles of accessibility and inclusion in mind. If you experience or anticipate any challenges related to the format, materials, or requirements of this course, please let me know as soon as possible. I am happy to explore a range of options for removing barriers to your learning. If you have a disability, or think you might have a disability, you may also wish to work with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>). All communications regarding accessibility will remain confidential.

A Note on Sources

It goes without saying that this course addresses graphic material. In class discussions, it is crucial that we remain respectful of one another's viewpoints and the wide range of backgrounds and experiences represented in the classroom. During the first seminar meeting, we will establish collective discussion norms that will guide us over the semester. In general, if you disagree with a classmate (and debate and disagreement are encouraged!), then be sure to direct your comments at the idea, not the person. It is often helpful to summarize a peer's idea before disagreeing, to ensure you have really understood it. Please do not hesitate to meet with me if you have concerns about any aspect of the course content.

Additional Resources

UW-Madison and the History Department make available a wide range of resources to foster your academic success and personal wellbeing. It's a good idea to familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with the following:

University Writing Center

<http://www.writing.wisc.edu/>

Individual consultations, workshops, and online guides on all aspects of academic writing.

History Lab

<http://go.wisc.edu/hlab>

A resource center for undergraduates in history courses staffed by experienced graduate students, who are available to assist you with writing history papers. You can sign up online for an individual consultation at any stage of the writing process.

Greater University Tutoring Services

<https://guts.wisc.edu/>

Study skills support and peer tutoring across academic subjects.

McBurney Disability Resource Center

<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

Contact the McBurney Center if you have or think you may have a disability to discuss a range of possible accommodations.

Mental Health Services

<https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/mental-health/>

Resources on Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

UW-Madison is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment and offers a variety of resources for students impacted by sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, domestic violence, and stalking. The Office of Student Assistance and Support has compiled a comprehensive guide to resources on and off campus, including both confidential resources and options for reporting: <https://osas.wisc.edu/report-an-issue/sexual-assault-dating-and-domestic-violence/>.

Course Schedule

Readings and assignments are due by the beginning of class. Prior to class in weeks 2-7 and 9, you will also be asked to listen to a brief prerecorded lecture (approximately 30 mins.) introducing the historical context for the week's readings. Guidelines and rubrics for all assignments will be posted on Canvas. All readings, except the course books, will be available on Canvas. See the "Modules" tab for week-by-week links.

Week 1 (Sept. 2): Introduction: Defining the Terms

Reading:

- Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide," in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (1944)
- Ai Weiwei, "Capitalism and 'Culturecide,'" *New York Times*, January 13, 2020

Week 2 (Sept. 9): Genocide and Colonialism

Reading:

- Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, intro., chs. 6-8, 10-12, 14-16, 19
- Nicolas Afolembe, "Oral History regarding Conditions in the Equateur District" (ca. 1885-1908)

Week 3 (Sept. 16): The Armenian Genocide and Western Responses

Reading:

- Karnig Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide* (2015), chs. 2-5
- Gary Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance: The Politics of War Crimes Tribunals* (2000), chap. 4
- "Judgment from the Military Tribunal on the Bayburt Deportation" (1920)

Assignment:

- First opportunity for submitting reading response essay

Week 4 (Sept. 23): The Holocaust and the Politics of Post-Nazi Justice

Reading:

- “Charter of the International Military Tribunal” (1945)
- Excerpts from the opening statements of Robert Jackson, Hartley Shawcross, and Roman Rudenko at the International Military Tribunal
- UN Genocide Convention (1948)
- Bass, *Stay the Hand of Vengeance*, chap. 5

Week 5 (Sept. 30): The Cambodian Genocide and Khmer Rouge Perpetrators on Trial

Reading:

- Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, preface, chs. 4-6, 9-14
- FILM: Rithy Panh, dir., “Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell” (2012)

Week 6 (Oct. 7): Nuremberg Redux? Genocide and “Victors’ Justice” at The Hague

Reading:

- Drakulić, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*, intro., chs. 1, 5-8, 12
- UN Security Council Resolutions 808, 827 (1993)
- Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Art. 1-10 (1993)

Week 7 (Oct. 14): Postcolonial Genocide: The Case of Rwanda

Reading:

- Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, pp. 47-144, 242-255, 342-353
- Stephen Wertheim, “A Solution from Hell: The United States and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism, 1991-2003” (2010)

Assignment:

- Bring draft research question to class (no submission)
- Final opportunity for submitting reading response essay

Week 8 (Oct. 21): Writing Workshop (I): Research Proposals

Assignment:

- Draft research proposal and annotated bibliography
- Individual meetings with Prof. Bloch to discuss research proposal (Oct. 22 or 23)

Week 9 (Oct. 28): Contesting the Right of Return

Reading:

- Rashid Khalidi, “Observations on the Right of Return” (1992)
- Yaffa Zilbershats, “International Law and the Palestinian Right of Return to the State of Israel” (2007)

Assignment:

- Revised research proposal and annotated bibliography

Week 10 (Nov. 4): Writing Workshop (II): Outlines

Assignment:

- Outline of research paper

Week 11 (Nov. 11): The International Criminal Court and the U.S. in the Post-9/11 Era

Reading:

- Marc Grossmann, “American Foreign Policy and the International Criminal Court” (2002)
- Aurelia Frick, “Why the ICC is Worth Defending” (2018)
- Awol K. Allo, “The ICC’s Problem is Not Overt Racism, but Eurocentrism” (2018)
- International Criminal Court, Rome Statute, Art. 5-7

Week 12 (Nov. 18): Writing Workshop (III): Introductions

Assignment:

- Partial draft (at least 6 pp.)

Week 13 (Nov. 25): Research Meetings

Class will not meet in person this week due to the Thanksgiving Break. Individual meetings will be set up with Prof. Bloch on Nov. 23-24 to discuss your drafts in progress.

Week 14 (Dec. 2): Research Presentations

Assignment:

- In-class presentation on research paper, 5-6 mins.

Week 14 (Dec. 9): Research Presentations and Conclusions

Assignment:

- In-class presentation on research paper, 5-6 mins.

***Final paper due Wed. Dec. 16 at 11:59 p.m.**

HISTORY 600 (001) Discussion Participation Rubric

A-range (90-100)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular attendance • Consistent, insightful contributions to both small group and full class discussions, as well as peer review exercises • Discussion contributions engage with classmates’ comments and move the conversation forward • Abides by the group agreement established in the first week of class
B-range (80-89)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular attendance • Participates actively in small-group discussions, with more limited contributions to full-class discussions and debates • Abides by the group agreement established in the first week of class
C-range (70-79)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular attendance • Limited contributions to both small-group and full-class discussions • Demonstrates gaps in knowledge of the readings; offers mainly facts rather than interpretation • Contributes when called upon but not actively engaged
D-range (60-69)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent unexcused absences • Demonstrates little or no knowledge of the readings
F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarely or never attends class • No contributions to discussion