

HIS 2358
Fall 2008

Genocide in Historical Context

Instructor: Anton Weiss-Wendt

The objective of the course was to explain the root causes of genocide. Embedded in the comparative method, the course assessed the long-term consequences of genocide and the possibilities for redress. By analyzing the differences among genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and gross violations of human rights, students learned how to recognize genocide. As a desired outcome, students should be able to distinguish the different stages of genocide and to identify the patterns of destruction. In addition to historical method, the course made use of sociological, anthropological, and legal theories relevant to the study of genocide.

The course was taught over the period of thirteen weeks between August and November 2008. As qualifying exams, students had to write a mid-term in-class exam and to present as a group. Due to the large enrolment – twenty-seven students – the class was divided into four groups, which presented on a certain topic at the end of the semester. In addition, students were obliged to attend two research seminars at the Center for the Study of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (September 3: Jean-Damascène Gasanabo, “History Textbooks and the Construction of Exclusive Identities: The Case of Rwanda between 1962 and 1994”; October 1: Nancy Adler, “The Communist Within Narratives of Gulag Prisoner Loyalty to the Party”). All the students successfully passed the mid-term exam.

I had a pleasure teaching a very diverse group of students who came from seven different countries. Some international students told me that HIS 2358 was the only class in history they have taken that semester. Norwegian students on the other hand told me that the course, among other things, enabled them to interact directly with the international students, which at times feel isolated. The group assignment, when students were asked to prepare a 30-minute oral presentation, has been designed specifically to break the barriers. Among students predominated history-majors; the rest majored in African and Asian studies, political science, international relations, and media studies. As an instructor, I was very happy with the students, their analytical, oral, and writing skills. Half of the students, including some Norwegian students, choose to write their exams in English. I may add that I have taught in the United States and the United Kingdom; the papers of the University of Oslo students were by the far the best I have read! The only thing I would make different, if I were to offer this course again, is allocating more time for class discussion.