

Topic 7.8: Mass Atrocities After 1900

Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Historical Thinking Skill(s)	Standards Alignment
Social Interactions and Organization (SIO)	Explain the various causes and consequences of mass atrocities in the period from 1900 to the present	KC-6.2.III.C	Causation, Comparison, Contextualization, Sourcing	AP World History: Modern Unit 7

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify major causes of mass atrocities after 1900, including extremist ideology, war, state power, and dehumanization.
- Explain how governments and extremist groups used propaganda, law, and violence to target specific populations.
- Analyze primary sources by evaluating point of view, purpose, audience, and historical situation.
- Evaluate similarities and differences among cases of genocide, ethnic violence, and mass atrocity in a DBQ-style argument.

Lesson Overview

Mass atrocities after 1900 were not random acts of violence. They often emerged when governments or extremist movements used ideology, fear, and state power to define certain groups as enemies, threats, or obstacles to national or revolutionary goals. In some cases, such as the Holocaust, mass killing was driven by racial ideology and bureaucratic state planning. In others, such as the Armenian Genocide, Rwandan Genocide, or Cambodian genocide, wartime crisis, ethnic tension, or revolutionary ideology helped justify organized violence against civilians. These atrocities were often enabled by propaganda, the collapse of legal protections, and the willingness of leaders to treat entire populations as expendable.

In this lesson, you will analyze a set of AP-style documents that show how different governments and movements justified violence, how victims and observers described its effects, and how the international community later tried to respond. As in a DBQ, you will need to go beyond summary. You will identify sourcing, connect the documents to broader historical developments, group them by argument, and use them to explain both causes and consequences. The goal is not only to understand what happened, but

also to analyze how mass atrocities became possible and why they continued after 1900.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Genocide:** The deliberate attempt to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.
- **Dehumanization:** The portrayal of a group as less than human, dangerous, diseased, or unworthy of protection.
- **Ethnic Violence:** Large-scale violence directed at a group defined by ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or identity.
- **Perpetrator State:** A government that organizes, directs, enables, or participates in mass violence against targeted populations.
- **Impunity:** Freedom from punishment or accountability, often allowing atrocities to continue.

Background Reading

Mass atrocities after 1900 often developed through a process rather than through one sudden event. Leaders or movements first identified a target group as dangerous, disloyal, impure, or hostile to the nation or revolution. Propaganda then spread fear and hatred, making discrimination appear necessary. Governments or militias next used laws, forced relocation, imprisonment, confiscation of property, or segregation to isolate victims. In some cases, especially during war, these policies escalated into deportation, starvation, forced labor, and mass killing. Outside evidence such as the Nuremberg Laws, ghettos, deportation networks, or radio broadcasts in Rwanda can help students show how atrocity developed step by step.

The Holocaust remains the most well-known example of twentieth-century genocide. Nazi Germany used racial ideology to depict Jews as a biological threat to the German nation and also persecuted Roma, disabled people, Slavs, political dissidents, and others. During World War II, Nazi policy escalated from exclusion and dispossession to ghettoization, mass shootings, extermination camps, and industrialized murder. The Holocaust shows how modern states could use bureaucracy, rail systems, record keeping, and legal authority to destroy targeted populations. Outside evidence such as Auschwitz, the Wannsee Conference, Einsatzgruppen, or Kristallnacht is especially useful in DBQ writing because it shows both ideological and administrative dimensions.

War often made mass atrocities easier to carry out. During World War I, Ottoman authorities claimed that Armenians posed a security threat and used wartime emergency to justify deportation and mass death. During World War II, Nazi expansion and occupation created the conditions for mass killing across Europe. War weakens oversight, intensifies fear, and allows governments to frame entire populations as

internal enemies. Students should be able to explain that war is often not the only cause, but it can create the conditions in which extremist policies become easier to implement.

Mass atrocities also occurred outside Europe and beyond World War II. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge sought to build a revolutionary agrarian society and treated urban residents, intellectuals, religious groups, and suspected opponents as enemies of the revolution. In Rwanda in 1994, extremist leaders used propaganda, identity-based politics, and organized militias to incite mass killing against Tutsi civilians and moderate Hutu. These examples show that mass atrocities can emerge from very different ideological settings, including racial nationalism, revolutionary extremism, and ethnic hatred. Comparison across cases helps students avoid treating the Holocaust as unique in every way while still recognizing its exceptional scale and bureaucratic structure.

The consequences of mass atrocities were devastating and long-lasting. Millions were killed, families and communities were destroyed, and survivors faced trauma, displacement, and the loss of homes, property, and cultural life. In response to World War II, the international community created new legal frameworks such as the Genocide Convention and pursued accountability through the Nuremberg Trials. Yet later atrocities in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and elsewhere showed that legal definitions alone could not prevent mass killing. In a DBQ, students should be prepared to argue not only about causes but also about consequences, including refugee crises, international law, memory, and the continuing challenge of prevention.

DBQ Documents Analysis Section

Document 1

- **Type of Source:** Law excerpt
- **Author:** Reich government of Nazi Germany
- **Date:** 1935

“The preservation of the German nation requires the firm protection of its blood, its honor, and the social order upon which its future rests. Experience has shown that the mixing of populations unequal in character and destiny threatens the unity of the people and weakens the foundations of the state. Marriage between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood is therefore prohibited, and such unions contracted in defiance of this law shall be considered invalid even if concluded abroad in order to evade the provisions of the Reich. Extramarital relations between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are likewise forbidden. Jews may not display the Reich flag or national colors, but they are permitted the use of Jewish colors, for the state recognizes

that clear separation is in the interest of public order. These measures are not punishments directed at individuals, but legal safeguards intended to secure the biological and moral future of the German people.”

Historical Situation: This document reflects the Nuremberg Laws, which formally institutionalized antisemitic racial policy in Nazi Germany.

Perspective / Limitation: The source presents racial discrimination as legal necessity and national protection, but it conceals the brutality and pseudoscientific ideology behind the policy.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how states used law and racial ideology to lay the groundwork for genocide.

Questions

1. How does the government justify the exclusion of Jews in this law?
2. What specific evidence in the document shows systematic legal discrimination?
3. How does this document help explain how mass atrocities can develop gradually through state policy?

Document 2

- **Type of Source:** Survivor testimony
- **Author:** Jewish survivor of Nazi camps
- **Date:** 1946

“We were not brought into the camp as people, but as material to be sorted, counted, worked, and discarded. At the moment of arrival, families were divided with such speed that there was scarcely time to recognize who had been taken to one side and who to the other. Names ceased to matter, for numbers were easier for the authorities and safer for the guards, who preferred not to see us as human beings. Hunger was constant, and disease spread with terrifying ease among bodies already worn down by labor, cold, and fear. There were beatings for minor offenses, punishments without explanation, and a sense that the entire system had been designed not simply to imprison but to break the mind before the body. Even those who survived did so in a condition of uncertainty, watching others disappear and understanding that survival depended on forces beyond fairness or reason. Liberation ended the camp, but it did not restore those who had already been erased.”

Historical Situation: This testimony reflects the Holocaust and the experiences of those imprisoned in Nazi concentration and extermination camp systems.

Perspective / Limitation: As a survivor account, the document powerfully captures lived experience and dehumanization, though it represents one perspective rather than the full administrative structure of genocide.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to demonstrate the human consequences of genocide and the central role of dehumanization.

Questions

1. What perspective does this source provide on the camp system?
2. What evidence in the document shows how victims were dehumanized?
3. How does this document help explain the social and human consequences of state-sponsored mass atrocity?

Document 3

- **Type of Source:** Government order
- **Author:** Ottoman interior ministry official
- **Date:** 1915

“In the present military circumstances, the government has determined that extraordinary precautions are required in districts where Armenian elements have shown signs of collaboration with hostile forces or of obstructing public security. Provincial authorities are therefore instructed to proceed with the transfer of such populations from zones of strategic concern to locations designated by the state. The execution of this measure must be orderly and decisive, with close attention to the prevention of resistance, concealment of property, or interference by outside parties. Records are to be kept of households, goods, and lands so that administration may be conducted efficiently during and after the transfer. Officials are reminded that discipline is essential and that hesitation may endanger the army and the unity of the empire in a time of war. These removals are undertaken not from local hostility but from the necessities imposed by national survival under conditions of grave external threat.”

Historical Situation: Ottoman authorities used wartime conditions during World War I to justify Armenian deportations that led to mass death and atrocity.

Perspective / Limitation: The source presents forced removal as a security measure and conceals the deadly reality of deportation, dispossession, and mass killing.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how war and state authority can be used to justify ethnic violence and genocide.

Questions

1. How does the government justify the removal of Armenians in this document?
2. What evidence suggests that these “transfers” were coercive state actions rather than voluntary movement?
3. How does this document help explain the role of wartime crisis in enabling mass atrocity?

Document 4

- **Type of Source:** Propaganda speech
- **Author:** Senior Nazi official
- **Date:** 1942

“The Jewish question is not, as some weak minds imagine, a matter of private prejudice or temporary political dispute. It is a question of whether Europe shall retain the strength to defend itself against the corrosive forces that have for generations worked beneath the surface of national life. Wherever disorder, decay, and defeatism appear, one finds the same elements seeking advantage from the confusion of peoples. A state that lacks the courage to remove such threats condemns its own children to decline and humiliation. Measures that sentimental observers condemn are in truth acts of responsibility, for the future cannot be secured if disease is permitted to remain within the body of the nation. History will not judge us by whether we flinched before hard necessity, but by whether we possessed the will to act decisively when confronted with enemies concealed among us and nourished by our past weakness.”

Historical Situation: Nazi propaganda increasingly justified persecution and annihilation as necessary to defend the nation during World War II.

Perspective / Limitation: The source is openly dehumanizing and ideological, portraying Jews as a hidden threat while disguising genocide as national self-defense.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how extremist ideology and dehumanization helped make genocide politically possible.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of this speech?
2. What language in the document shows dehumanization of the target group?
3. How does this document help explain the relationship between ideology and mass atrocity?

Document 5

- **Type of Source:** International legal document
- **Author:** United Nations General Assembly
- **Date:** 1948

“The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish. In the present Convention, 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: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life

calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. The Parties recognize that such acts offend the conscience of mankind and threaten the foundations of civilized order. States are therefore called upon to enact the necessary legislation, cooperate in prosecution, and deny perpetrators the protection of sovereignty where crimes of this nature have been committed.”

Historical Situation: After World War II and the Holocaust, the United Nations attempted to define genocide in international law and create mechanisms for punishment and prevention.

Perspective / Limitation: The source reflects the international desire to respond legally to mass atrocities, but it does not guarantee enforcement or political will.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show a major consequence of twentieth-century atrocities: the development of international legal standards.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of this document?
2. What evidence in the source shows how genocide is being defined in legal terms?
3. How does this document help explain one major consequence of mass atrocities after 1900?

Document 6

- **Type of Source:** Eyewitness report
- **Author:** Foreign journalist reporting from Rwanda
- **Date:** 1994

“The violence does not resemble spontaneous disorder so much as the rapid execution of a plan already seeded through fear, rumor, and organized command. Roadblocks appear with astonishing speed, and those stopped are not questioned as individuals but identified by category, often through papers, lists, or the accusations of neighbors. Radio broadcasts, far from calming the population, speak in a language that turns people into pests and traitors, making their destruction sound like a civic duty rather than a crime. Entire families vanish within hours, and churches, schools, and fields become sites of pursuit rather than refuge. What is most striking is not only the scale of the killing but the collapse of the ordinary barriers that usually restrain such acts. Once identity is fixed and violence is publicly blessed, participation spreads with terrifying speed, while the outside world debates definitions and delays intervention.”

Historical Situation: During the Rwandan Genocide, extremist Hutu leaders, militias, and propaganda networks organized mass killing against Tutsi civilians and moderate Hutu.

Perspective / Limitation: The source offers an observer's perspective on how organized killing unfolded, but it does not fully explain longer colonial and political roots of ethnic division.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show how propaganda, identity, and organized violence continued to shape mass atrocities after World War II.

Questions

1. According to the source, what factors made the violence organized rather than spontaneous?
2. What evidence in the document shows the role of propaganda and identity in the killings?
3. How does this document help explain continuity in the causes of mass atrocities after 1900?

Document 7

- **Type of Source:** Revolutionary directive
- **Author:** Khmer Rouge leadership
- **Date:** 1976

“The revolution cannot be secured so long as the old society survives within the habits, memories, and loyalties of the people. Those attached to urban life, private property, religious influence, foreign thinking, or intellectual pride remain obstacles to the complete transformation required for true equality. It is therefore necessary not only to reorganize labor and settlement, but to identify and remove elements whose continued presence invites betrayal, sabotage, and decay. The countryside must be purified of corruption carried from the cities, and the people must learn that survival depends upon obedience to the collective will. Sentimentality toward those who resist change is a luxury the revolution cannot afford. If hardship is severe, it is because the task is severe. Better that temporary suffering cleanse society than that weakness permit the old order to return and poison the future.”

Historical Situation: The Khmer Rouge sought to transform Cambodia through radical agrarian revolution, forced relocation, repression, and mass death.

Perspective / Limitation: The source presents revolutionary violence as purification and necessity while hiding the human cost of forced labor, starvation, and execution.

Use in Argument: This document can be used to show that mass atrocities could also emerge from revolutionary ideology, not only racial nationalism.

Questions

1. What is the revolutionary goal described in this directive?
2. What evidence in the document shows how ideology justified coercion and violence?
3. How does this document help explain both similarities and differences between the Cambodian case and the Holocaust?

Major Causes of Mass Atrocities After 1900

Cause	Documents	Explanation
Extremist ideology	1, 4, 7	Racial or revolutionary ideologies defined targeted populations as threats or obstacles
War and national emergency	3, 4	Wartime conditions made repression, relocation, and killing easier to justify
State power and bureaucracy	1, 3, 5	Laws, orders, records, and organized authority enabled large-scale violence or later accountability
Propaganda and dehumanization	4, 6	Language depicting groups as dangerous, diseased, or traitorous helped normalize violence
Weak intervention / delayed response	6	Outside hesitation allowed organized killing to intensify

Consequences of Mass Atrocities

Consequence	Example	DBQ Use
Destruction of communities	Holocaust, Rwanda, Armenia, Cambodia	Use to explain the long-term human and social damage of atrocity
Trauma and displacement	Survivors, refugees, orphaned populations	Connect to social and demographic consequences
International law	Genocide Convention, Nuremberg Trials	Show that atrocities reshaped legal ideas and postwar justice
Memory and commemoration	Museums, memorials, testimony	Explain how societies responded after violence
Continued global instability	Recurrent genocides after WWII	Show that legal response did not eliminate future atrocities

Historical Reasoning Section

Change Over Time

Mass atrocities after 1900 became more systematic because modern governments and extremist movements could use bureaucracy, transportation systems, identity documents, propaganda, and mass communication to identify and isolate target groups. Earlier forms of communal or ethnic violence certainly existed, but twentieth-century states often carried out persecution with greater administrative reach and

ideological precision. The Holocaust is the clearest example of this scale and organization, but later atrocities in Cambodia and Rwanda also show the deadly combination of state power and modern mobilization. Over time, international responses also changed, as the world attempted to define genocide and establish legal accountability. In a DBQ, students can use this change over time to argue that both the methods of atrocity and the legal response to atrocity changed after 1900.

Continuity Over Time

At the same time, mass atrocities after 1900 reflected older patterns of scapegoating, exclusion, forced removal, and violence against minorities or politically vulnerable groups. Leaders continued to use fear, prejudice, and accusations of disloyalty to turn one group against another. Wartime conditions and political instability remained especially dangerous because they made extraordinary violence seem necessary. Across different regions and ideologies, target groups were repeatedly portrayed as internal threats to national unity, security, or social purity. In a DBQ, students can use continuity to show that although the twentieth century introduced new scale and organization, the basic mechanisms of fear and exclusion remained familiar.

Comparison

The Holocaust, Armenian Genocide, Cambodian genocide, and Rwandan Genocide all involved targeted violence against specific populations, but they differed in ideology, wartime setting, and methods. Nazi policy was deeply racial, bureaucratic, and industrialized. The Ottoman case used wartime relocation and security language to justify destruction. Rwanda showed how propaganda and organized militia violence could generate extremely rapid mass killing, while Cambodia reflected revolutionary ideology and forced social transformation. In a DBQ, comparison helps students show that mass atrocities had common causes, such as dehumanization and state power, while also differing in context and structure.

Key Takeaways

- Mass atrocities after 1900 were often caused by extremist ideology, war, propaganda, and the expansion of state power.
- Dehumanization was a critical step in making large-scale violence appear necessary or acceptable.
- The Holocaust is the most widely studied example, but other atrocities such as those in Armenia, Cambodia, and Rwanda also reveal important patterns.
- One major consequence of twentieth-century atrocities was the development of international legal definitions and attempts at accountability.
- Comparing cases is essential because it helps explain both shared causes and important differences among genocides and other mass atrocities.

DBQ Practice Section

Prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which extremist ideology was the most important cause of mass atrocities after 1900.

Task Instructions:

Develop a thesis. Use at least 4 documents. Include outside evidence. Explain sourcing for at least 2 documents.