

## Teaching the Srebrenica Genocide

**Fiona Malcolm** is Vice-Chair of *Remembering Srebrenica, Scotland* and Head of Humanities at the Braes High School, Falkirk

On the 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated - it was the spark that ignited the First World War. How many times have we said those words to our pupils? Is there a History teacher in Scotland today who doesn't, or hasn't, taught about the First World War and the assassination's role in it? Probably not. In October 2017, I visited Bosnia-Herzegovina for the first time as part of a delegation with the charity *Remembering Srebrenica Scotland*. I stood on the corner where Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. After teaching this topic for close on twenty years, I was excited. Is it strange that something as mundane as a street corner summons such strong feelings? An incident on a corner, in the early years of the last century; in a city thousands of miles away. Maybe that is why we are History teachers - the human emotions our subject invokes. It isn't just about 'deid folk and dates'. Indeed, much of History is still very much alive. It is a continuous organism ebbing and flowing with cultural, linguistic and educational changes. It is traditional and revised. It is questioned and questioning. It is a story of the human experience and all the joy, heartache, love and hope. For me, that is all encompassed in the teaching of the Srebrenica genocide - a personal journey that began in November 2016; and a journey that continues today.

I was contacted by Andy Lawrence, a History teacher at Hampton School in London via Twitter in November 2016. His group *Genocide80Twenty* were looking for a school to partner with on raising awareness of the Srebrenica genocide. He had seen tweets on the work done in the History department at my school on the Holocaust and wondered if we would be interested in working on a joint project. Absolutely! We teamed up, alongside four other schools in England, to create a memorial of the genocide by writing all 8372 names of the men and boys who were murdered in the letters that spelled out Srebrenica. Braes High were given the letter I and E and 830 names. During our S3 lessons, pupils took turns to write the names of the genocide victims in and around the letters.

This work was presented with an 'Award for Extraordinary Contribution to Srebrenica Education' from the charity *Remembering Srebrenica*, and our collaboration continues.

Both learning about Srebrenica and participating in the collaboration with Hampton School raised more questions than it answered. How could people do this? Why did people do this? As a teacher, I can give them the academic response; as a person, I don't know the answer to those questions because I don't understand that level of hate. While the pupils were writing the names of the dead, they were researching about the survivors and producing posters to tell their stories.

## A very, very brief history!

Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in 1991 when two states, Slovenia and Croatia, declared their independence. Six months later, in April 1992, Bosnia, with its multi-cultural history, declared independence. Karadžić, the self-appointed leader of the Bosnia Serbs, declared war against the Bosnian Muslims army. It was a war of aggression to destroy a people – Muslims. And so, in Bosnia in 1992, began the Ten Stages of Genocide. In April 1993, the United Nations declared Srebrenica a 'safe area' under UN protection. Despite that, the United Nations Protection Force's (UNPROFOR) Dutchbat soldiers did not prevent the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) under the command of Ratko Mladić capturing the town and inflicting genocide. From the 5 July 1995 until the 21 July 1995 saw eighteen days of hell rain down on the Bosnian Muslims of Srebrenica: 8372 men and boys were massacred.

Gregory Stanton, President of Genocide Watch, developed the eight stages of genocide in 1996. In 2012, he added a further two.

### The stages are:

1. **Classification** - A division of 'us' and 'them'
2. **Symbolisation** – A visual manifestation of hatred
3. **Discrimination** - Dominant group denies civil rights or citizenship to others
4. **Dehumanisation** - Those perceived as 'different' are treated with no form of human rights or dignity
5. **Organisation** – Training and planning
6. **Polarisation** - Propaganda to spread hate
7. **Preparation** - Perpetrators plan the genocide building up armies and weapons
8. **Persecution** – Segregation, deportation, property expropriated, death lists drawn up – massacres begin
9. **Extermination** - Systematic campaign of violence and murder
10. **Denial** - The perpetrators or later generations deny the existence of any crime

In 2004, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), located in the Hague, ruled that the actions of the Serbs constituted a genocide. Three years later the abuse of approximately 30,000 women, children, and the elderly, who were forcibly separated from the men, was also declared a genocide.

## So why was I interested in teaching about this genocide?

I had been teaching the Holocaust for years. Numerous young people had had the opportunity to participate in *Lessons from Auschwitz* through the *Holocaust Educational Trust (HET)*. Every time, this involvement has a profound impact on them. I attended the Teacher Training course through HET at Yad Vashem – an unbelievable experience. No pupil left my department without knowing something about the Holocaust. However, over the years I felt that pupils believed that genocide ended in 1945 – that it was done and dusted and there was nothing left to learn. In other words, there was a gap. There was a need for learning

progression, cohesion and improvement. Educationalist Elliot Eisner refers to this as the 'null curriculum' – what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. In reality, there have been, and still are, genocides since the Holocaust. Srebrenica was the first genocide on European soil since the Holocaust in the Second World War.

The Srebrenica genocide resonated with me. I was in late high school/early university during the Bosnian War. I remember seeing it on the news, seeing films of the men in concentration camps; starving, beaten, humiliated and wondering, 'What the hell is going on here? Why is the world not doing anything?' After my collaboration with Hampton School, I got involved with the *Remembering Srebrenica Scotland* charity. I have had the privilege of meeting survivors of the war: Nedžad Avdić, one of only a few survivors of the execution squads when he was 17; Reshad Trbonja, aged 19 picked up a weapon to fight in the Siege of Sarajevo and didn't put it down for three years; Hasan Hasanović, aged 19, a genocide survivor, who spoke at my school. These men were boys at the time; they were my age group. 1700 miles separated us, but our lives and experiences were entirely different.

Teaching about genocide can be intellectually and emotionally demanding. There is no doubt that there is an ethical dimension to the teaching of genocide education. It can be difficult for teachers to approach an area of history that is considered to be controversial. I would argue that we need to re-evaluate our thinking and language. Why is it controversial? Is it because we don't have simple answers to difficult questions? Isn't that part of the job? In our fast-changing world, schools have a moral and intellectual responsibility to not allow polarised and convenient politics, fake news, and partial memory get in the way of the facts. It is the role of schools through the curriculum and events to promote global citizenship, human rights and to bear witness for the future.

We, as educators, have a moral responsibility to engage our young people in enquiry and critical thinking more than ever before. The Srebrenica genocide happened within the lifetime of their parents and grandparents. It is living history; history in colour. Many victims and perpetrators are still alive. On 14 December 1995, the peace treaty ending the war, Dayton Agreement, was signed. Bosnia and Herzegovina was sectioned into two parts: Bosnia (which was largely populated by the Croat-Bosniaks) and Republika Srpska (where Serbs were in the majority). The idea was to set up a federal structure to preserve Bosnia as a multi-ethnic state. The town of Srebrenica resides in the area of Republika Srpska. The perpetrators of the war, among them Karadžić and Mladić, were charged and convicted of crimes against humanity and genocide by The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a United Nations court of law located in The Hague. The town synonymous with the genocide, where the final resting place of the victims is at the Potočari Memorial and Cemetery, has had a genocide denier as mayor since 2016; Mladen Grujic, a Serbian nationalist. How does a people move on under such circumstances?

### **How can you bring Srebrenica education into your school?**

The teaching of Srebrenica is something I feel very strongly about. This happened within the lifetime of many of us who are teaching, and of the parents of our young people. The charity is aware that education is a primary focus and

support is available for educational establishments that are keen to introduce this into their curriculum. The charity is organising teacher training events across Scotland and, eventually, pupil visits to Bosnia. In addition, a travelling exhibition is being created that schools can borrow and display.

The Srebrenica genocide can be taught across the curriculum using the lessons as stimuli, background or information: RMPS, English, Art, Drama, PSE. Links can be made to, for example; Rights Respecting Schools, anti-bullying, Equalities groups, Holocaust Memorial Day events.

The Remembering Srebrenica Scotland (RSS) website has a set of four lessons that are ready to use. During this academic session, the Education Committee at RSS are creating a series of lessons including geographical changes in the Balkans region; victims, perpetrators, bystanders; 'gendercide'; international response which will be available for use 2021 – 2022. The lessons can be taught together as a course, in a standalone fashion or in connection to the Holocaust. All lessons come with short, accessible lesson grids, and are linked to the Es&Os and benchmarks.

### **Why should you bring Srebrenica education into your school?**

Teaching about Srebrenica enables young people to explore complex and pertinent issues, as well as their own values and beliefs, and importantly, to engage in discourse, in a safe space. Genocide education breaks down barriers between 'them' and 'us,' and enables our pupils to develop empathy and respect for others - the teaching of genocide furthers the notion of personal responsibility. Young people will question the political decisions of the international community towards Bosnia during the early 90s. They will ask about the rise of nationalism. They will be faced with the human cost of change. They won't like what they hear. They will feel uncomfortable. Their emotions will be heightened. They will disagree with each other. They will argue. It will evoke strong feelings; it will divide opinion. They will feel overwhelmed and powerless. As educators, we must help our young people confront the horrors, but not be overwhelmed by it. History shouldn't be easy. History shouldn't be pleasing. The past shouldn't be wrapped up in a pretty bow. Through teaching about Srebrenica we are faced with the challenge of presenting history that is still very much alive today. Our role is to encourage and accommodate these enquiries. To develop their critical thinking skills. To make controversial statements; play Devil's Advocate.

In short, to make them think.

Contact: [fionam@srebrenica.scot](mailto:fionam@srebrenica.scot)

### **Useful websites:**

<https://srebrenica.scot>

<https://www.srebrenicamemorial.org/en>

<https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/bosnia/>