Genocides are not only immortalized in history, but also in memory. Genocides live on in the recollections of both their survivors and their victims, and these atrocities are no less tragic after they are said to have ended. In his memoir *Night*, Elie Wiesel recalled being buried under the dead bodies of Jews who had been forced to march without breaks or to face being shot or trampled by the thousands who ran behind them. He remembered hearing the beautifully terrible sound of his friend Juliek playing the violin, also lost in the pile of bodies (Wiesel 95). Veronika Berberyan remembered a Turkish officer decapitating his grandfather, who had spent his last moments praying (Deranian). Chief Junaluska, who had once saved Andrew Jackson’s life in battle, recounted the moments in which he begged the president to stop the Indian Removal Act. He was rejected and his tribe was sent on the infamous Trail of Tears, along with thousands of other Native Americans (Burnett).

Horrific incidences, such as the described death march, the decapitation, and the Trail of Tears, are a common factor of most genocides. When examining these dark parts of history, it is difficult not to wonder whether justice can be achieved after them. Since a just punishment is one that is both humane and fitting to a crime, it does not seem possible to achieve justice after genocide. The cruelness of genocide cannot be met with a penalty that both matches the monstrosity of the crime and is humane. Throughout history, trials after genocide have repeatedly failed, though the world is learning how to prevent genocides and put perpetrators on trial. Museums that showcase the horrors of genocide and school units dedicated to teaching about these histories have opened the door to better verdicts and prevention of genocide. Total justice cannot be obtained after genocide, as proven by trials after the Holocaust, Armenian Genocide, and the Native American Genocide; however, it is possible to get closer to justice by learning from these tragedies and applying this knowledge to work towards a better future.

One case of justice not being achieved after genocide is illustrated by the Nuremberg Trials. These trials took place after the Holocaust, a genocide of the Jews committed by Nazi-Germany during World War II. After the war ended, the rest of the world was horrified when
what had been happening in Nazi-Germany was revealed. On November 20th, 1945, the International Military Tribunal put the leaders of the Nazi Regime on a series of trials, now known as the Nuremberg Trials. Eleven were hanged, three were given life sentences, four were given 10 to 20 years of prison, and three were released. Although some see this as justice, it falls very short. Not only are these sentences not fitting of the years of torture and malnourishment the Jews experienced, but also the twenty-two Nazis put on trial and given verdicts were a minute percentage of the officers involved in the Holocaust. Of those twenty-two, some even evaded justice. Hermann Goering, a Nazi leader, escaped his death sentence by committing suicide (Austin). Fortunately, schools now have units on the Holocaust in which students learn about the genocide and often visit Holocaust museums, allowing them to witness the dark moment in history firsthand. These experiences, in addition to learning about the ineffectiveness of the verdicts of past genocides, can inspire people to implement change in the justice system. Through education, total justice is not achieved, but by becoming informed, the world can be pointed in the right direction. This pursuit of righteousness can prevent future genocides. Therefore, while the Nuremberg Trials proved that justice cannot be achieved in the courts, it can prevail if future disasters can be averted.

Prior to the trials of the Nazis, which showed that justice cannot be achieved because of unfitting punishments, the legal proceedings dubbed the Constantinople War Crime Trials proved that justice can also fail if just verdicts are not acted upon. These trials were in response to the Armenian Genocide, the slaughter of the Armenians by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire. In the beginning, many victims of the genocide were killed by being forced to march through the desert, naked, until they dropped dead (“Armenian Genocide”). Not only was it classified as a genocide because of the mass killing of a specific group, but also because many children were kidnapped by the Ottoman Empire. One of the main types of genocides acknowledged by the recently established International Criminal Court is “Forcibly Transferring Children” (International Criminal Court 3). In the aftermath of the genocide, an order was given to the Turkish courts-martial to try leaders of the Ottoman Empire. Soon, over one hundred of these leaders were captured. A few were tried, but very quickly a problem arose: an international court had not yet been developed, and so it was unknown what law to try the culprits under. This caused a deadlock, and a majority of the perpetrators of the genocide were not punished at all. However, though the trials themselves were ultimately failures, they led to the creation of an
International Court and led to fairer verdicts in future post-genocide trials, such as the aforementioned Nuremberg Trials. The Armenian Genocide was used as a lesson to ensure that the next time genocide occurred, justice would not be abandoned. In this way, the Constantinople War Crime Trials educated coming generations and carved the path towards more just trials.

Whereas the Armenian Genocide was a well-known genocide, the Native American Genocide was ignored for hundreds of years, though some consider it the biggest genocide in history. It began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World and ended only recently, and estimates of the number killed range anywhere from two million to one hundred million (Fidanakis). Andrew Jackson’s infamous Trail of Tears, in which tens of thousands of Natives were forced from their homes, was only one of the many offenses of the United States in the genocide (Trail of Tears). However, the Native Americans have received some justice in the courtroom, such as in *Michigan v. Bay Mills Indian Community*, in which their sovereign immunity was upheld (Michigan v Bay Mills Indian Community). Many trials, especially recently, have protected and upheld the rights of Native Americans. These cases, though, in no way compensate for the atrocities committed against them. Neither do they punish those responsible, most of whom died long ago. Though in this way justice is not attainable, it serves as a hard lesson that even in a country that proclaims itself the land of freedom, genocide can occur. There is still room for improvement, as Christopher Columbus is taught in schools as the hero who discovered America, rather than the origin of hundreds of years of genocide.

Fortunately, classes such as Advanced Placement United States History now offer insight into the tragedies the United States imposed on the Native Americans, and organizations have been established that teach about this genocide to raise awareness (Lee). Hopefully, through teaching, future atrocities can be prevented.

Overall, total justice is unachievable in the real world, but greater partial justice can be acquired through education. The legal proceedings that followed the Holocaust, Armenian Genocide, and Native American Genocide are definite examples of this absence of justice. The Constantinople War Crime Trials after the Armenian Genocide showed that a disorganized legal system can cause the guilty to go free. The Nuremberg Trials after the Holocaust proved that punishments to key leaders can be unfitting of the crimes they committed. Lastly, the trials after the Native American Genocide showed that even after a genocide full of hundreds of years of horror, justice and compensation can still be sought through court cases. Museums and school
units have begun educating the public about the dark times of genocide. This is the first step towards an upgraded legal system and prevention of genocides in general. Though a court verdict will never erase the pain of those affected by genocide, it can provide a bridge from atrocity to justice.

Works Cited


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