

## Lesson 1

### *Student Handout 1.3—Does the Label Matter? The Question of Genocide*

#### Document 1

**American studies scholar David E. Stannard argued in 1992 that what happened to Native Americans at the hands of Europeans was genocide.**

The term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944. ... Under [his] definition, “genocide was the coordinated and planned annihilation of a national, religious, or racial group. ...” Finally, in 1948, the Genocide Convention of the United Nations was adopted. ... [It gave a definition as follows:] [G]enocide means ... acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: killing ... [or] 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; ... imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” ... In light of the U.N. language ... it is impossible to know what [happened] in the Americas during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and not conclude it was genocide.

Source: David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 279-81.

Note: This definition of genocide is still the official one, adopted in 2002. A total of 104 nations now support the International Criminal Court’s right to try cases of genocide according to it.

#### Document 2

**American historian James Axtell in 1992 urged caution about using “genocide” to describe what happened to Native Americans at the hands of Europeans.**

The latest and most inclusive definition of *genocide* [from *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, 1988] is simply “a form of one-sided *mass* killing in which a *state* or other authority *intends* to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the *perpetrator*.” ... “Genocide” ... is historically inaccurate as a description of the vast majority of encounters between Europeans and Indians. Certainly no colonial government ever tried to exterminate all of the Indians as Indians, as a race, and you can count on one hand the authorized colonial attempts to annihilate even single tribes. ... The vast majority of settlers had no interest in killing Indians—[they] were much too valuable for trade and labor. ... [T]he vast majority of Indians succumbed, not to colonial oppression or conquistador cruelty—as real and pervasive as those *were*—but to new and lethal epidemic diseases imported *inadvertently* by the settlers. ... Genocide, as distinguished from *other* forms of cruelty, oppression, and death, played a very small role in the European conquest of the New World.

Source: James Axtell, *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 261-3.