CIVICS · SIERRA LEONE

From War to Reckoning

How a country tried to answer for what was done in its own name · a one-page classroom resource

Between 1991 and 2002, Sierra Leone fought a civil war that killed tens of thousands and displaced around 2.5 million people. When the fighting stopped, the country faced the question every nation meets sooner or later: **what do you do with what was done?** This page follows one country's road from war to two different tools of justice, a truth commission and a court.

By the end of the lesson students can: explain why Sierra Leone built a truth commission, compare truth-telling with prosecution, and argue one recommendation of their own.

TIMELINE

27 Apr 1961	Independence from Britain. Sir Milton Margai becomes the first prime minister.
19 Apr 1971	Sierra Leone becomes a republic. Siaka Stevens becomes president.
23 Mar 1991	Civil war begins as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) attacks from Liberia.
Mar 1996	The country holds elections; Ahmad Tejan Kabbah becomes president.
May 1997	Soldiers and the RUF seize power in a coup. Kabbah flees the country.
Mar 1998	West African forces (ECOMOG) retake Freetown and restore Kabbah's government.
7 Jul 1999	The Lomé Peace Agreement is signed. It grants amnesty to fighters and promises a truth commission.
May 2000	British forces intervene. The rebellion collapses.
18 Jan 2002	President Kabbah declares the war over.
2002–2004	The Truth and Reconciliation Commission takes testimony and holds public hearings across the country.
5 Oct 2004	The Commission's final report is presented: it names causes, honours victims, and calls for reparations and reform.
2002–2013	The Special Court for Sierra Leone tries those "most responsible." In 2012 it convicts former Liberian president Charles Taylor.

IDEAS TO DRAW OUT

- **Truth and punishment at once.** Sierra Leone ran two tools side by side: a commission that listened and wrote down the record, and a court that prosecuted. One aimed at healing, the other at accountability.
- **The right to know.** The Commission held that the right to the truth is inalienable: a nation has to look at itself honestly if it wants the past never to repeat.
- **Roots, not only blame.** The report named corruption, inequality and leaders who stopped listening as the war's central causes. Its recommendations were about prevention, not just guilt.
- **Everyone included.** The Commission made a special child-friendly version of its report, because children were victims and perpetrators too.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASS

1. Why would a country choose to hear painful testimony in public? What does that give people that a prison sentence does not?
2. The Lomé Agreement pardoned fighters, and then the country said "never again." Can peace and justice both be true at the same time?
3. The Commission named corruption and inequality as causes. Whose job is it to fix those, leaders or citizens?
4. If you could add one recommendation for Sierra Leone today, what would it be, and who would carry it out?

Use it as a 40-minute lesson: read the timeline together, then take two questions in pairs and two as a class.

Sources: Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report (2004); Special Court for Sierra Leone; public historical records.

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Made for Blessing's classroom.