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Genocide in the 20th century

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Bruce Short explains the modern concept of genocide and illustrates it by drawing examples from the 20th century. He concludes that genocide remains both the gravest and the greatest of the crimes against humanity.



Throughout recorded time, great massacres have occurred regularly in human history. Thucydides, the earliest historiographer, wrote that the Athenians, reacting harshly against an errant subject ally, put to death “all grown men of military age” and “all the women and children were sold for slaves”. This massacre and ‘ethnic cleansing’ was perpetrated upon the population of the small Aegean island of Melos in 416 BC, during the 16th year of the Great Peloponnesian War (Thucydides 1910, 306).

Raphael Lemkin and the Crime of Genocide

At the conclusion of World War II when nations addressed the Nazi extermination of Jews, Winston Churchill posited that we “face a crime that has no name”. A year earlier, Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-born Jewish lawyer and adviser to the United States War Ministry, had indeed given the Nazi horror a name: *genocide*. In 1944 Lemkin wrote: “By ‘genocide’ we mean the destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group”. He considered the term ‘mass murder’ in use at the time to be inadequate because it failed to account for the motive of the crime. Genocide motives include race, religion and nationalism and have nothing to do with the conduct of war. Genocide was not a war crime. What constituted war crimes had already been stipulated in the Fourth Hague Convention in 1907. Lemkin went on to state that genocide was: “not only a crime against the rules of war, but a crime against humanity itself” (Lemkin 1944, 79).

Genocide differs from all other crimes against humanity since it implies an intention to completely exterminate the chosen group. The specificity of genocide does not then arise from the extent of the killings but entirely from the intention of the crime, the destruction of a group. Nor is genocide a synonym for the Nazi Germany-specific genocide, the Holocaust. An estimated 100,000 Tutsi and Hutu indigenes died in a little over 100 days during the ethnocentric Rwandan genocide. Some 10,000 Rwandan people were individually killed each day every day from April to June 1994 – perhaps the fastest genocide in recorded history (Kuperman 2001, 16-20; Destexhe 1995, 31-32). Genocide shocks, in part, by the modes of death and the numbers of victims that succumb during a given

period. But more importantly, irrespective of numbers, a completed genocide fulfils its aim when a chosen cohort is ultimately totally annihilated. Few genocides in history have been so complete as to have totally expunged the targeted minority.

Lemkin commenced his academic research in the early 1930s wherein he sought unsuccessfully to establish two new crimes: *barbarity*, the destruction of national groups, and *vandalism*, the destruction of their unique cultural artefacts. He was the chief lobbyist for the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (UNGC), a document of nineteen articles adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) on 9 December 1948 [Resolution 260 (III) A] and ratified in international law in 1951 (United Nations 1951, 277). Surprisingly, the United States did not ratify the UNGC until 1986. Today, 120 countries have signed the convention. Many writers consider the definition of genocide propounded in the UNGC to be insufficient, nevertheless the UNGC definition has been embedded into the Statute of the International Criminal Court, effective from 2002.

UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide

The UNGC definition of genocide is based on four constituent factors: a criminal act; an intent – the criminal state of mind to exterminate; an ethnic, national or religious group; and the group specifically chosen as such. Furthermore, the UNGC clearly states that the authors and instigators of a genocide, and the incitement of a genocide, must be brought to trial and, under the conditions of Article 8, any government may call upon the competent UN bodies, “to take such action under the Charter of the UN as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in Article 3”.

In Article 2 of the UNGC, the definition of “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:

1. killing members of the group;
2. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

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4. imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and/or
5. forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

The convention stipulates ‘killing’ only once as one of the five genocide practices; and does not identify the state as the authoritative perpetrator, the *genocidaire*. Article 2 includes the two fundamentals of the crime of genocide: the mental element, meaning the ‘intent to destroy’; and the physical element, which includes the range of five acts. A crime must include both elements to be called genocide. Since the intent, defined as ‘anticipated outcome’, precedes actual acts of killing or harming, it is safe to say that any form of genocide requires anticipation and preparation (Finzsch 2007, 6).

Cultural genocide, *ethnocide*, is a term used to describe the deliberate destruction of the culture of a distinct group without physical annihilation of its members (Fein 1993, 10). Whilst cultural genocide is not defined in the UNGC, it does survive in a much reduced form in the prohibition of the forcible transfer of children from one group to another and in the term ‘ethnic’ group which suggests protection of groups with distinctive culture or language (Kuper 2004, 22-23). The failure to specify cultural and political genocide in the UNGC is in contradistinction to Lemkin’s ideas (Lemkin 1944). Both forms of genocide were very important elements in Lemkin’s philosophy.

The Vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples and Minorities to Imposed Conflict

Indigenous peoples and minorities throughout the world are blighted with an age-old characteristic: vulnerability to mass killings, massacres and murders. All too often today, international arms corporations, with the assistance of their governments, are ready and willing to provide a range of sophisticated weapons systems to regimes imposing harsh controls on dissident minorities. Indigenous inhabitants experience forced relocations, enslavement, disappearances, vandalism, overt and asymmetric warfare and genocide. Jewish minorities have suffered pogroms and deportations. This litany of atrocities has visited minority groups, vilified with generation-long negative stereotypes across national boundaries, for centuries.

The barbarity known as *ethnic cleansing* first entered academia and then the popular press in 1992 during the first stage of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian Serbian forces attacked the minority Bosnian Muslims. Ethnic cleansing refers to practices of mass-killing, rape, torture, bestiality, starvation and confinement to labour camps. The essential judicial distinction between ethnic cleansing and genocide lies in the question of intentionality. The intention of ‘cleansing’ is the removal of people, often without trace, from a defined territory or area (Das 2008, 113-118).

Politicides have also been described as a separate minority indigenous trauma. The victims are defined in

terms of their political position, which is seen to be opposed to the state or a dominant group. In this context, the modern indigenous group frequently is caught up in conflicts between governments and local insurgent organisations. They may be forced by totalitarian governments into counterinsurgency operations. Some authors contend that politicides are more numerous and just as deadly as genocides (Gurr and Harff 1992, 159-187).

Indigenous communities suffer genocidal and ethnocidal violence partly because of the ways they have been derided by the dominant parties. Terms such as ‘primitives’ ‘blacks’, ‘niggers’, ‘savages’, or ‘vermin’ form part of the dehumanising process that may precede genocide. A specific, state-contrived dehumanising pseudonym was used by the Hutu majority to label the Tutsi minority of Rwanda ‘cockroaches’ (invenzi), as part of the 1994 pre-genocide preparations (Destexhe 1995, 28).

20th Century Genocides

Genocide historians enumerate more than a dozen instances of genocide and mass killings in the 20th century. The first recorded was the genocide of the Hereros tribe in Hereroland, German South-West Africa (modern Namibia), perpetrated from January to September 1904. The Turkish 1915 genocide of the Armenians was so systematic, prolonged and overt that it was widely reported at the time in the international press. The devastating Soviet-induced Ukraine famine in 1932-33 followed by the 1943 Soviet mass deportations of peoples from seven republics were enacted simultaneously with Nazi Germany’s liquidation of the gypsies, disabled persons, religious leaders and the Jews. Later, in 1965 and 1966, the Indonesian Army committed mass killings of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Indonesia continued, in 1975, a genocidal policy following its invasion of East Timor. Pakistan massacred in excess of 3 million Bengali Muslims during a 9-month liberation war culminating in the 1971 birth of Bangladesh. During the 1960s to 1980s, there was a series of genocides in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan. In Darfur (Land of the Fur), western Sudan, genocide revisited in 2002. Government militias, the *Janjaweed*, systematically targeted the overwhelming majority non-Arab communities in Darfur to clear the land for Arab colonisation. The genocidal methods were by mass destruction of lives and habitat, forced relocations and hunting down of refugees, including trans-border incursions to Chad, which reached a zenith in late 2003 (Collins 2006, 3-22). Two genocides require special mention – Cambodia, 1975-79, and Rwanda, 1994.

Cambodia, 1975 - 1979

In July 2010, a UN-sponsored Cambodian war crimes court sentenced to 30-years imprisonment the first member of the former Pol Pot regime to be convicted of murders perpetrated during the Khmer

Rouge ('Red Cambodians') regime's control of Cambodia ('Kampuchea') between April 1975 and late 1979. The Khmer Rouge, a Maoist communist movement, self-styled the 'Democratic Kampuchea', was led by an ultra-Stalinist Cambodian communist, Pol Pot. The individual sentenced last July, known as 'Duch', superintended the 'S21' interrogation unit where tortured victims were sadistically photographed at the moment they were murdered. In an effort to establish a peasant, communist society, the Pol Pot regime began their rule by driving the entire population of the capital, Phnom Penh – 2.5 million people – into the countryside. All traces of industry and urban society, inexplicably thought to be corrupted by the West, were obliterated. Unremitting purges and pogroms thereafter befell the Cambodian nation. The mountain Chan tribes were nearly all captured and summarily executed. In this single example, in excess of 60,000 were murdered simply because of their Islamic faith.

Cambodia suffered the single most comprehensive disaster that has befallen any country since 1945. Conservative figures suggest that, before the Khmer Rouge takeover, about 1 million Cambodians died during the civil war and the American War in Vietnam. Perhaps another 3 million died during the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge rule and a further 100,000 died in the December 1978 Vietnam invasion to liberate Cambodia. These figures represent a high proportion of this small country's total population (Brogan 1992, 157 – 168).

Rwanda, 1994

There is a long history of chronic Tutsi-Hutu ethnic divide evident in both Burundi and Rwanda. Burundi was the scene of a Hutu-led genocide of the Tutsi minority in 1972 and this was followed by a similarly Hutu-dominated genocide in Rwanda from April to June 1994. Paul Rusesabagina, a 56-year-old Hutu Rwandan now living in exile in the United States, is better known as the manager of *Hotel des Mille Collines* who sheltered 1200 Rwandans in the capital, Kigali, during the 100-day Rwandan Genocide in 1994. His courageous humanitarian actions are remarkably re-created in Terry George's Academy award-nominated film, *Hotel Rwanda* (Pearson and George 2004).

At the time of Rwanda's independence from Belgian administration in 1962, 90 per cent of the population was Hutu, 10 per cent was Tutsi and 1 per cent was Twa pygmies. Similar ethnic proportions were reflected in Rwanda's immediate, and comparable-sized southern neighbour, Burundi. The 1994 mass murder of an estimated 800,000 to 1 million Rwandan people began the day of the April assassination of the Rwandan and Burundian presidents in an aircraft crash at Kigali airport. The genocide lasted 100 days and liquidated one-tenth of the small Rwandan population – the number of dead constituted the larger part of the minority Tutsi citizenry (Destexhe 1995, 69). The expressed intention of the Hutu-led government was to systematically eliminate every single Tutsi. This was to

be effected by members of the Rwandan Armed Forces and the two large militia gangs supported by Hutu citizens.

The United Nations and the Rwandan Genocide

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) 1993 – 1996 was established to monitor the cease-fire agreement of the Arusha Accord tabled in August 1993, in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha. This Accord was signed by the Hutu-led Rwandan government and the Tutsi-led rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), thereby ending the 1990 Rwandan civil war which had been initiated when the RPF, led by Major General Paul Kagame, crossed into Rwanda to support the local Tutsis.

At the outbreak of the later genocide in April 1994, nearly all 'blue-helmets' of UNAMIR were withdrawn leaving a deployed force of only 270 observers. On the successful take-over of government by the RPF in July 1994, Kagame was installed as vice-president, supporting a Hutu president. In May 1994, the UN Security Council authorised a peace-keeping mandate under UN Charter chapter VI for a 5500-strong force, UNAMIR II. This Canadian-commanded multinational force included elements of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The ADF contribution was mounted as Operation *Tamar* and commenced in August 1994 as a 12-month commitment of two, sequential, 6-month deployments each of 300 troops. The ADF group consisted of a medical element, the Australian Medical Support Force, and a security support element, the Australian Services Contingent.

The UN mandate which established UNAMIR II prohibited soldiers using their weapons, except in self-defence. This precluded their use to assist the local inhabitants they were sent to protect. The post-genocide chaos involved thousands of displaced persons (DP) distributed among many camps. One such DP camp was a sanctuary financed by a non-government-organisation in south-western Rwanda. It was structured around the Catholic Church at Kibeho and was under ADF protection. In a burst of homicidal hatred and revenge, more than 2000 heavily-armed RPF combatants descended on the defenceless Hutu DPs, killing in excess of 4000 DPs in a little less than 48 hours. This outrage became known as the Kibeho Massacre and is well described by O'Halloran (2010, 66 – 157)².

Conclusion

The Cambodian and Rwandan mass killings have several characteristics in common with other 20th century genocides. As in other genocides, international indifference to the plight of Rwandans and Cambodians was almost absolute.

Huge population displacements are characteristic of genocide, which usually reaches beyond the target

²This book is reviewed at page 35 of this edition of *United Service*.

group and the country where it took place. Hutu killers struck fellow Hutu who tried to save Tutsis and the majority of Hutus fled Rwanda to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Uganda and Tanzania. The diaspora was exacerbated by fear of the increasing successes of the RPF.

Ethnic targeted genocides usually feature extremes of brutality. Obedience to total authority diminishes individual guilt and promotes a certain solidarity amongst the killers – even the ordinary citizen is roped in. Identification of the victim is fundamental to genocide. The tall, lighter pigmented Tutsi, carrying a government-decreed identification pass, hastened the victimisation process (Destexhe 1995, 61 – 74).

It is extremely difficult for the international community to bring the perpetrators of genocide to justice. In August 2010, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights completed an extensive investigation and accused Rwanda of 'wholesale war crimes, including possibly genocide'. Yet the former Tutsi commander of the RPF, Paul Kagame, has served the last 10 years as Rwandan president, a post to which he was again re-elected in 2010; and mass killings of Hutu have continued over the past 7 years following Rwandan incursions into the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Indeed, the chronic ethnocentric Hutu-Tutsi malevolence and enmity is so profound and of such long-standing that discord could trigger further bloodshed, exacerbated by the fact that a member of the minority Tutsi group continues to head a reactionary self-serving government.

In this setting, Staub's elegant theory of the origins of genocide is worth recalling: "Genocide arises from a pattern, or gestalt, rather than any single source. The outcome of this evolution and the immediate cause of the genocide is that perpetrators come to believe either that the victims have something they want or (more likely) stand in the way of something they want" (Staub 1989, 23).

Genocide remains both the gravest and the greatest of the crimes against humanity.

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