

Understanding Today's Genocides - The Snare of Analogy

The spectre of genocide is always that of a repeat of the last genocide. Many Israelis, faced with the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon, fear a 'second Holocaust'. The UN works to prevent 'another Rwanda', and genocide campaigners believe that one happened in Darfur. Genocide politics is about recognition - claiming the label for the particular set of atrocities with which people are concerned - and it generally proceeds by analogy with previous events. The Holocaust remains the defining episode: as Jeffrey Alexander has argued, it has been constructed as a 'sacred evil', the ultimate embodiment of evil in the modern world, so that all other evils must be related to it. Defining 'other' genocides requires 'bridging' from (or to) the Holocaust, so that some of its sacred-evil quality rubs off on them. Indeed, genocide as such has become something of a 'sacred evil': without its recognition, atrocities become second class, 'only ethnic cleansing', and the demand for intervention or justice is strangely diluted.

Bridging, or reasoning by analogy, may be understandable politics, but it is inadequate for academic understanding. History may repeat itself, as tragedy or farce, but genocides do not repeat themselves in the ways that elections or football tournaments do. It may be utterly unscientific to claim that the Holocaust is 'unique' in a metaphysical sense, but there is a profound sense in which all large-scale historical episodes are distinctive from each other. Of course, the argument about the uniqueness of each historical episode does not take us very far, as it risks a loss of generalising perspective. But it is important if it reminds us that history involves change as well as repetition, and that each historical period needs to identify the danger of genocide in its own terms. One tires of the kind of transhistorical 'analysis' that always looks for similarities with the Holocaust, whether it be in the earlier events in Armenia or the later ones in Rwanda, let alone its variant that dismisses events in places like Bosnia and Darfur because of their insufficient conformity to the Holocaust paradigm.

This paper argues, therefore, that genocide research requires a more radical historical understanding if we are to understand the specific dangers of genocide in our time. There is, of course, a great deal of historical research on genocide, but as the contents of Dan Stone's edited volume, *The Historiography of Genocide* (2008) suggest, most of this consists of isolated case-studies rather than attempts to analyse developmental tendencies in modern history. The one 'world history' of the problem, Ben Kiernan's *Blood and Soil* (2007), does not develop a coherent narrative of historical change, but attempts to trace thematic similarities across widely varied historical periods. Yet what if, despite all the similarities and continuities across periods, there are in fact crucial differences and discontinuities? What if the danger of genocide in the twenty-first century is not a repetition of the Holocaust or Armenia, or even of Rwanda, but takes significantly different forms, reflecting the distinctive features of social, political and international relations in our own times? This paper argues that we are in danger of being deeply misled by our need to find repetition and analogy.

The core elements of genocide

Of course to identify the 'same' substantive social phenomenon in different historical forms requires a clear and coherent idea of what constitutes 'genocide'. The big problem of genocide research is that there is no consensus on this definitional question: the idea that genocide is always the same, i.e. that it is similar to the Holocaust, gains plausibility in this situation. However the idea of genocide as first proposed by Raphael Lemkin in his *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944) is a broad notion of the violent 'destruction' of a social collectivity, which is potentially a rich tool of social understanding. Although at that point Lemkin restricted its scope to the destruction of national and ethnic groups (earlier he had defined the threatened groups more broadly), it is now

widely accepted, as Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonahsson argued in their *History and Sociology of Genocide* (1990), that it refers to the destruction of any group, the definition of the group being according to the perpetrators' ideology (which often does not match the self-understanding of the attacked population or any 'objective' criterion). Rather, as I have argued in my *What is Genocide?* (2007), genocide can be coherently understood as destructive violence against any civilian population, to be distinguished on the one hand from war (destructive violence exchanged between two armed forces) and on the other from those forms of coercion and even violence which do not seriously threaten to destroy a population group and its social relations.

This means that genocide should be understood, as Lemkin argued, as a broad category of violent and coercive actions that reflected destructive goals towards social groups. Lemkin stressed economic, political and cultural alongside physical and biological destruction; we might also emphasise territorial destruction, since the most common method of destroying a particular group, its social networks and culture is to uproot it from where it has lived, and sexual violence, since rape is almost invariably used to help shatter the integrity of communities. Genocide cannot be coherently limited to mass murder, in terms of which some writers have tried to define the phenomenon, because mass killing is only one of the methods of group destruction, the extent of whose use varies widely between cases, and which is always combined with other methods such as expulsion, rape and cultural attacks.

If genocide is understood as a type of social action carried out by perpetrators, it must also be recognised as a type of conflict, generating civilian as well as armed resistance and intervention, either from the attacked population or from third parties, or both. Moreover as a type of political and/or armed conflict, it generally occurs in the context of other, more 'conventional', political and armed conflicts. Genocidal conflict is usually an outgrowth of either political conflict or war, and frequently causes new political conflict and war. A crucial analytical problem in the study of genocide is to simultaneously distinguish and show the relationships of genocide and other forms of conflict.

Indeed a major fallacy of the field is the idea that episodes of genocide can be neatly constructed as 'genocides', discrete from other political and armed conflict. This fallacy is encouraged by the idea of the Holocaust as a discrete attack of Nazi Germany on European Jews: but conceptualising this as a distinct 'genocide' abstracts it from both the larger complex of destructive Nazi anti-population policies of which it was apart (which Lemkin called 'the Nazi genocide' rather than 'the Holocaust'), and from the larger field of political and armed conflict (the Second World War) in which it was enmeshed. The idea of 'genocides', of large, distinct, sustained episodes of group destruction, needs to be understood as a way of recognising genocidal violence and conflict of a certain scale and duration, not as a substitute for 'genocide' as a generic concept of socially destructive action and conflict.

This point is important because genocidal action and conflict may occur in relatively limited episodes in conflicts which, taken as wholes, are not genocidal. Leo Kuper (1981) proposed the concept of 'genocidal massacre' to describe small-scale, localised genocidal killing. We can extrapolate from this the need for ideas of genocidal expulsions, genocidal mass rape, etc., and propose the concept of 'genocidal violence' as a general term for such localised destructive action. This concept is applicable across all historical periods, but may be particularly important in periods in which the scope for large-scale, sustained destructive violence *à la* Holocaust is more restricted. Genocidal massacres have been particularly identified in colonial history; I shall argue that our own period is another in which localised genocidal violence is an important theme.

Historicising modern genocide

In this perspective, we can see that genocide has been deeply embedded in modern history, but in

hugely varying forms. The archetypal Holocaust-type genocides of twentieth-century Europe were preceded by centuries of 'colonial genocide', as European empires spread across the world. While European genocide in its Second World War nadir was large-scale, state-centric and systematically murderous - albeit there were many smaller episodes, much societal involvement and many destructive policies that fell short of mass murder - the genocide of colonisation was very often smaller-scale, perpetrated by settler militias and local authorities rather than imperial governments and armies, with more sporadic killing. In this sense, European genocide involved not only a refocusing of violence used against colonial 'natives' onto the inhabitants of the metropolises themselves, but its centralisation, statisation and further radicalisation.

Why did this change in genocide take place? We can only answer this question by looking at the development of crisis and tensions inside the inter-imperial international system, and how this combined with the generalisation of nationalism in the system, as I argue in my book, *Genocide and International Relations* (2013). Industrial capitalism powered the empires of Western Europe to wider colonial conquests, leading in turn to sharper conflicts in Europe itself, culminating in the Great War. Failing to match the power of the Western empires, in this war the old Ottoman, Romanov and Habsburg empires disintegrated amidst increasingly destructive nationalist rivalries, which at their worst became genocidal, most notoriously (but not only) against the Armenians in 1915. The subsequent polarisation of international politics saw radical totalitarian regimes arise in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and their genocidal tendencies, already visible before 1939, were greatly deepened in the all-out struggles of the Second World War. This war generalised genocide in the international system, in large parts of Europe and Asia, so that many lesser states also pursued genocidal policies. Even the Western Allies condoned them, for example when the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland and other states murderously expelled their ethnic German populations at the end of the war.

It is the argument of this paper that this huge development in Europe, which transformed the world history of genocide, was only one of a number of key international junctures in which the phenomenon has been radically transformed. The outcome of the war, indeed, led to a radical change in the situation. The best-known face of this transformation was the international criminalisation resulting from the Genocide Convention of 1948. But alongside this benign change, even in the period of the Convention's drafting, were more troubling new phenomena: the settlement in Europe that legitimated the Soviet-led population upheavals of the war's conclusion; the massive violence directed against population groups on both sides in the Chinese Civil War; the huge forced migrations, mass murders and rapes of the Indian Partition; and the more limited but still destructive forced removal of Palestinian Arabs, precipitated partly by the United Nations' own plan for partition.

As the Cold War set in, defining a new international order dominated by superpower and bloc rivalries, quite different patterns of genocide developed from those of the previous period of inter-imperial crisis. Some were closely linked to Cold War conflicts, like the genocidal violence of the Korean War, the mass murder of Communists in Indonesia in 1965, and the later violence against populations linked to leftists in Guatemala, Argentina, Chile, Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America. Others were indirect reflections of Cold War polarisation, like the genocidal famine of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, during the period when China was in conflict with both superpowers, and the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, where the regime was likewise pitted both against the USA and Vietnam, a Soviet ally. Other strands reflected the terminal crises of the European empires - many wars of decolonisation saw genocidal violence - and the power struggles of the new post-colonial states. These arose both in contests over who controlled the state - for example the ethnopolitics of Rwanda and Burundi from the early 1960s onwards - and secessionist wars over the shape of the state, perhaps the most widespread context of genocidal war during the Cold War period, in states like Pakistan, Nigeria, Sudan and Iraq.

Post-Cold War, global-era genocide

Cold War genocide was, therefore, quite different in location, context and (often) form from the genocide of the high imperial period in Europe. But by the same token, the end of the Cold War also signalled important changes in genocide. As after 1945, there was huge optimism about a more peaceful and less genocidal world, and some important developments in policies to affect genocide: ideas of 'humanitarian intervention' and the 'responsibility to protect' partly shaped Western and UN policies; and international criminal tribunals were established to try perpetrators of the worst new genocidal violence in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, finally followed at the beginning of the twenty-first century by the International Criminal Court that had been envisaged when genocide was criminalised half a century earlier.

However once again these developments were offset by new threats, other effects of the Cold War's unwinding. The dissolutions of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, like the collapses of earlier multinational empires, produced series of genocidal wars, and a similar pattern could be seen in Indonesia, where the anti-Communist Suharto regime collapsed precipitating a series of genocidal conflicts. The new international balance of power enabled the USA to use its military power not just in limited 'humanitarian' ways but in serious power-projections like the Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003, both of which led to genocidal crises: in the first case, the weakened Saddam Hussein regime attacked the emboldened Shia and Kurdish populations, while in the second its Sunni guerrilla successors initiated a low-level genocidal conflict, attacking the Shia population, to which Shia-based militia responded with violence against the Sunni population.

Beyond these effects that can be linked directly to the post-Cold War transition, what patterns of genocidal violence can be seen in the 'global' era of the twenty-first century? First, we can note a near-disappearance of the problem in East and South-east Asia, and also a marked diminution in Latin America, effects comparable to the disappearance of genocide in Europe between after 1949. Towards the end of the Cold War period, following Mao's death in 1976, the party dictatorship in China was normalised in a way similar to the normalisation of Soviet power following Stalin's death in 1953. Under Deng Xiaoping, China industrialised by expanding into world markets, achieved rapprochements with the USA and USSR/Russia, and replaced terror with more normal bureaucratic repression as its mode of rule. In these circumstances, neither international nor domestic tensions had genocidal outcomes. By the 1990s, even Cambodia underwent some sort of normalisation, as the Khmer Rouge threat finally disappeared.

Second, a changed pattern of genocidal wars could be seen. Some of the conflicts of the Cold War period - for example in Angola, where the protagonists were closely linked to Cold War sponsors and allies - ended, albeit sometimes after continuing in new forms for a period. Others, however, like the conflicts in Sudan, were exacerbated by new local tensions and stoked by new international rivalries. In general, the focus of genocidal wars shifted overwhelmingly to Africa, including the Rwandan civil war that led to the 1994 genocide. Rwanda was also a catalyst for a new regional pattern of war, focused on Zaire (which became the Democratic Republic of the Congo), in which many different states became involved and multiple genocidal episodes developed, committed by different state and militia actors. What was noticeable not only in the Great Lakes Region but also in North-east and West Africa was a developed regionalisation, in which patterns of genocidal war spilled across borders.

Third, it became evident that democratisation, a key process of the post-Cold War world, was linked to new genocidal dangers. As local populations demanded more freedoms, Western governments withdrew support from Cold-War authoritarians, and local elites saw they must increasingly manage electoral processes, new contexts of violence developed. Not for nothing did Michael Mann (2005) call 'ethnic cleansing' the 'dark side of democracy'; as he and others have pointed out, while stable democracies may not be contexts of genocide, unstable democratising

countries are often more violence-prone than stable authoritarianisms. And contemporary democratisation has a specific genocide-producing mechanism: ethnopolitically polarised electoral politics. Implicated in the genocidal wars in Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s, electoral politics was also a crucial context of violence in places like Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe in the 2000s.

Conclusions

The argument of this paper has been that the contexts and forms of genocide are historically specific in ways that the genocide field, dominated by transhistorical forms of comparative study, has barely recognised. In particular, the problem of genocide is intimately linked to the nature of the international order, and we can trace radical changes in genocide together with epochal changes in the international system. This means that we should not be looking, in the twenty-first century, for repetitions of the classic twentieth-century genocides. On the contrary, genocidal violence in our period is taking, and will take, new forms, some of which I have tried to indicate. Some are even closely linked to apparently benign international developments like democratisation.

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