Genocide in the non-Western World: implications for Holocaust studies

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Genocide: Cases, Comparisons and Contemporary Debates

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The Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies
Preface

With this book the Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies publishes the second volume in the Danish Genocide Studies Series – a series of publications written or edited by researchers affiliated to the center and its work on Holocaust and genocide in general as well as more specific on Danish aspects of the Holocaust.

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Genocide in the Non-Western World: Implications for Holocaust Studies

Robert Cribb

When Rafael Lemkin coined the term 'genocide' during the Second World War to describe Nazi Germany's attempts to exterminate Jews and Slavs within the Third Reich, he identified it as both an old and a new phenomenon. "Deliberately wiping out whole peoples," he wrote, "is not utterly new in the world. It is only new in the civilized world as we have come to think of it".1

With these words, Lemkin put his finger on what has always been one of the greatest intellectual challenges presented by the Holocaust: the paradox that civilization and the power and will to destroy humans seemed to have grown at the same time. Although massacres and gratuitous cruelty had been a part of human history since earliest times, ideas of progress and civilization had dominated recent Western discourse on the direction of history. Throughout the 19th century, the combination of political enlightenment and modern technology seemed to promise a better and fairer existence for all peoples, at least in the long term and at least for those who were willing to embrace the values of the West.2 The dawn of the 20th century had seemed therefore to promise great things for human kind, but the West's complacent optimism was shaken by the carnage of the First World War in Europe, and then still more comprehensively challenged by the barbarisms of the Second World War. Holocaust on the one hand and the atomic bomb on the other produced widespread apprehension over the possibility that advances in civilization had only given humankind a greater capacity for self-destruction.

Genocide as a phenomenon might be both old and new, but in the eyes of Lemkin, and in those of his successors in what has become the discipline of genocide studies, that which was new about genocide was inherently much more interesting and important than that which was old. To understand why Germany – the land of Beethoven, Goethe and Einstein – should have

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1 Rafael Lemkin (1945), "Genocide – a Modern Crime", Fore World, 4, April, p. 39.

committed genocide always seemed a more challenging and important question than understanding why Chinggis Khan destroyed the Tanguts in the 13th century or why Shaka, as king of the Zulu, cut such a bloody swath through the peoples of southern Africa in the 19th century. And to contemplate the experience of civilized people – people who listened to Beethoven, read Goethe and attempted to understand Einstein – in undergoing genocide as victims seemed more important than reconstituting the emotions of people who lived and died in distant and perhaps habitually violent societies.

Problems of Definition
For these reasons, the Holocaust became the paradigmatic event in genocide studies to an extent which is unusual in social science. Most social science concepts – authority, democracy, revolution, imperialism, populism – have been developed in the context of multiple cases, and the concepts themselves represent Weberian ‘ideal types’ which no real-life case quite matches. Genocide, by contrast, takes as its starting point the Holocaust. The vigorous debate over definitions, which has been a feature of genocide studies in the last two decades, centres in practice on identifying those features of the Holocaust which should be regarded as central to the concept and those which are circumstantial. The debate is ever-changing, but some of its contours have remained constant. Scholars debate whether genocide must always be directed against racial/religious groups or whether the mass killing of groups defined by political allegiance, gender or sexual orientation can also be considered genocide. They argue over whether genocide requires actual intent to destroy all of a group, or whether aiming to weaken a group numerically is sufficient to make the charge stick. They wonder indeed whether it is necessary to pay attention to intent at all, or whether identifying genocide should focus on outcomes rather than intent, so that genocide could be committed, for instance, by callous neglect. They discuss whether the scale of killings matters – either absolute numbers of victims or their proportion of the target population – and they consider whether only states can conduct genocide or whether communities may also be guilty. Can genocide be the work of centuries, or must it be a rapid process? Can genocide take place in the absence of a modern conception of race? Can the mass killing of combatants and civilian workforces in the context of war be considered genocide? Is there value in differentiating the concept, so that an event may be genocidal without being genocide? And would new terms like ‘ethnocide’, ‘politicide’, ‘depopulation’ and ‘indigenocide’ help us to understand these phenomena better?

The struggle over definition is made fundamentally intractable by the fact that the definition of genocide has to serve at least four purposes. First, it has a legal function. The celebrated definition adopted in the United Nations Convention on Genocide in 1948 provides the basis for the criminal prosecution of suspected perpetrators of genocide many national jurisdictions and in specially convened international tribunals. Genocide will be one of the crimes to be prosecuted in the future International Criminal Court. Although specialists on genocide sometimes retreat from the debate over definitions and propose simply accepting the Genocide Convention definition on the grounds that it has international legal recognition, there are serious disadvantages in using the Convention’s definition for academic purposes. On the one hand, most scholars do not, as a matter of principle, allow governments to define the concepts they work with. The scholarly judgement of whether a state is democratic, or whether an invasion is imperialist, ought not to be left to the state concerned, or even to other states, when it comes to scholarly analysis. In the case of genocide, moreover, we know that states intervened in the definition process on political grounds, with the result that political killings and the expulsion of people from their lands were not included in the Genocide Convention definition.³

Also important is the distinction between legal and scholarly processes and judgments. Legal proceedings operate under rather strict rules of proof, and good legal practice defines crimes in a way whereby it is possible to prove that people have committed them. These principles include the right of those accused to defend themselves. If the legal principles of the Genocide Convention definition were applied to scholarly research, then it would never be possible to reach a verdict of genocide in most historical cases because of the simple impossibility of putting the perpetrators on trial. The removal of half-Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal

families in Australia with the aim of assimilating them into white Australian society has been described by many observers as genocidal, but others have argued that the actions cannot be considered genocidal because none of the perpetrators can be prosecuted under the Genocide Convention.

Second, the term genocide has a moral function. The term gives us a concept which encapsulates the ways in which mass murder can be still more terrible than the sum of the individual murders it encompasses. In contradiction of Stalin's famous dictum, "One death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic", genocide is especially terrible because it involves the destruction of a part of humankind's rich cultural diversity and because it expresses a peculiarly horrible contempt for human life. Indeed these two moral grounds underpin the movement to extend the definition of genocide as widely as possible. If we value human diversity, then all attempts to destroy it have something fundamentally in common with the Holocaust; if we deplore all mass killing, then it becomes invidious to make a distinction on the basis of the motives of the killers or the status of the victims. In drawing general moral lessons from genocide, however, we tend to encounter the problem of relational ethics. That is, although we may accept in principle that the violent death of each human is morally equivalent, we are almost always more deeply affected by the death of an individual close to us than by that of a barely known person in a distant country. And we normally feel that our moral obligations to those close to us exceed those to people who are more distant. This consideration means unfortunately that the definition of genocide is likely always to be pulled between universalistic and relational ethics. The difficult issue of moral responsibility in genocide further complicates this problem. In accepting, as we commonly do, the principle that people may be complicit in crimes which they themselves did not commit, we allow for a chain of connection to atrocity which is not causal in the normal social science sense. The common notion that the descendants of perpetrators, and even the compatriots of those descendants, may bear some special responsibility to rectify or atone for a past genocide is tangled in all sorts of ways. Clearly, however,

it is a separate issue from both the legal process and the process of social scientific analysis.

Third, the definition of genocide has to do predictive duty for policy-making purposes. Especially in genocide studies circles there has been increasing attention to so-called "early warning" signs of genocide. The purpose of looking for such signs is to enable intervention to prevent genocide and to save lives, rather than simply intervening after the event to punish the guilty and bury the dead. The risk of genocide has become grounds in international law for flouting the principle of national sovereignty. Because genocide has been identified as a crime against humanity, laws of a sovereign country permitting or even ordering genocide are no longer protected by national sovereignty, at least in the eyes of some observers. Because foreseeing the future in politics and social affairs is notoriously uncertain, we need a prospective definition of genocide, one which unambiguously identifies the precursors to genocide with a clarity that will justify international intervention. It is likely, in fact, that no adequate definition can be formulated, and that future international intervention against genocide will be as selective and partisan as previous "just wars". Nonetheless, as long as the search for early warning signs continues, our definitions of genocide will somehow have to be adapted to this purpose as well.

Finally, genocide is a social science concept, used to group similar events for the sake of understanding each of them better. Within a scholarly framework (as opposed to a legal, moral or policy one) the purpose of a definition is to illuminate by comparison. Each case has its own individual characteristics, each presents different problems of evidence, and observing the salient features of one case can help us to know what we should look for in others. Devising a social science category with only a single example is little use for advancing knowledge; a category which is too broad may end up generating more no more than truisms about human nature. The common, though controversial, claim that the Holocaust is unique amongst genocides lies in the realm of politics and morality, rather than social science: every historical event is unique and every categorization is a compromise between similarity and difference. It makes no intellectual sense to deny that the Holocaust can be categorized with other genocides,
even if such a denial may be morally satisfactory. Because social science categories are heuristic, rather than absolute, we should in fact be rather relaxed about the constant re-crafting of definitions by social scientists, as long as that re-crafting delivers new insights.

**Templates for Analysis**

This chapter then is an attempt to consider the insights into genocide which may come from examining cases in the non-Western world. Given the vastness and maturity of Holocaust scholarship, it may seem rash and presumptuous to suggest that cases in Asia, Africa and Latin America have anything to contribute to the understanding of those events in Europe in the years 1938-1945. The point, however, is not that the Holocaust has been misunderstood but that aspects of the Holocaust which are less salient in conventional approaches become clearer in the light of comparisons. This can be put more strongly. Holocaust studies has created two templates for genocide studies which are not only less suitable than they should be for analyzing other genocides but are ultimately not entirely adequate for studying the Holocaust.

The first of these templates is one which attributes the Holocaust to a pathological anti-Semitism. The effect of this template is to locate the Holocaust deep in the Western tradition. We know that European societies periodically expelled and massacred Jewish communities, that they commonly hedged them in with regulations and discriminated against them, and that the Jew was perhaps the most important Other against which Western Christians defined themselves for centuries. All these historical truths appear to have created a path to the Holocaust which has no counterpart in the Nazi victimization of the Gypsies (Sinti and Roma) or the socialists and indeed no counterpart in other genocides. Viewed from this perspective, the Holocaust was a disaster waiting to happen. It may have been triggered by specific historical circumstances, but its causes lay in a

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6 Remarkably, the question of the purpose of comparison outside a moral context is no more than hinted at in the stimulating and provocative volume Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.) (1996). *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*. Boulder, Co.

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5 Daniel Goldhagen (1996). *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York; is only the most recent and celebrated example of this school.

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Deep-seated distortion of the Western psyche which made Jews a special target for hatred. The second template locates the Holocaust largely within the modernization process. This paradigm points to the pivotal role of Darwinism – an intellectual development of the 19th century – in providing a comprehensive, if mistaken, scientific basis for racism and to the quintessentially modern nature of political mobilization and technical organization in Nazi Germany. Only a modern state, according to this paradigm, could possibly carry out so dramatic an act of barbarism. Even if the Holocaust was prompted by ancient enmities, according to this template, its most shocking feature was the way in which it turned the achievements of Western civilization against humanity. For the followers of this paradigm, genocide is, as Lemkin himself suggested, “a modern crime”.

Both these templates are answers to the paradox outlined at the beginning of this chapter, namely the perpetration of massive atrocity by one of the West’s most advanced societies. The first template suggests that the apparent civilization of Germany was far more shallowly rooted than might have appeared, that ancient hatreds lurked remarkably close to the surface. Indeed these ancient hatreds probably still lurk there and only the strictest vigilance can prevent them from reaching the surface again. The second template argues that modernization is flawed, rather than incomplete. The two templates correspond roughly to the so-called intentionalist and functionalist theories of the Holocaust. The intentionalist argument is that the destruction of European Jewry was a principal goal of Nazism and that they pursued it from the start. The functionalists argue by contrast that the decision to exterminate the Jews on a massive scale (rather than expelling them or simply dispossessing them and tightening the discrimination against them) was a relatively late consequence of the bureaucratic and political structures of the Nazi state. In short, the dominant templates used for analysing the Holocaust locate its roots at either the beginning or the end of the modernization project. That is to say, the Holocaust took
place either because the Germans were too modern or because they were not modern enough.

Viewed from the perspective of non-Western history, both of these templates seem to be immediately debatable. First, there is a powerful case to be made for Blacks, rather than Jews, being the most primaeval of Others for the West; Hatt was marked out for servitude in Genesis, long before there was any hint of bad blood between Shem and Japheth. There is also a strong case for Asians (in the broad sense, stretching from Muslims to Japanese) as the most important Others in the European imagination. Second, many in the non-Western world would see no paradox at all in German brutality towards the Jews. They would point to five centuries of Western intervention in the non-Western world and to the vast number of people killed in the process of Western expansion, many of them murdered with exceptional cruelty. They would argue instead that Jews were a part of the Western societies which conquered the rest of the world and exploited and exterminated the peoples they encountered there. The existence of Israel and the support it receives from the West appear to them to be part of the same global process and in their view this long-term process, rather than the relatively brief Holocaust, demands scholarly and political attention.

These non-Western ripostes to Holocaust scholarship do not refute the standard Holocaust templates; they do not contradict the proposition that Christian hatred of Jews led to the Holocaust or that modern political and administrative structures amplified anti-Semitism so that it moved from prejudice and discrimination to a programme of extermination. They do suggest, however, that other characteristics may give the Holocaust its special character. By looking at genocides in the non-Western world we may be better able to identify those characteristics.

Even if we limit our survey to the 20th century, there is a wide range of events in the non-Western world which have been seriously proposed for inclusion in the category genocide. Conventionally the list of genocides in the non-Western world includes the genocide of the Hereros in South-West Africa, the Armenian genocide, the massacre of communists in Indonesia in 1965-66, the killings of Bangalis by Pakistan's military forces in East Bengal (later Bangladesh) in 1971, the massacre of Hutu by Tutsi in Burundi in 1972, the massacre of East Timorese by Indonesian troops after 1975, the genocide of Cambodians and others by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, and the killing of Tutsi by Hutu in Rwanda in 1994. In addition, we have to include the genocide of indigenous peoples throughout the whole century, encompassing native Americans (Amerindians) in the whole of the Western hemisphere, large minorities in China, India and Indonesia Christians and smaller communities in other countries. The Communist era in China, especially the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-76) and the suppression of Biafra (1967-69) are seldom discussed as genocides but they, too, clearly belong on this broad list.

The narrowest definitions of genocide would exclude many of these events on the grounds that they were primarily political rather than ethnic (Indonesia, China, Cambodia), or because they involved dispossession and deculturation rather than programmatic extermination (indigenous peoples). Mass killings in the context of secessionist war (Biafra, East Bengal, East Timor) seem to fall into both these categories. It is therefore useful to consider why — apart from any moral considerations — why political killings and the destruction of indigenous peoples ought now to be considered as genocide.

Mass Political Killings
The fact that mass political killings were classified as genocide by the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 but subsequently omitted from the Genocide Convention suggests that we should pay attention to the arguments for and against considering such killing as genocide. At the

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7 As standard catalogues, see Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn (1990), *The History and Sociology of Genocide*, New Haven; Samuel Hutton, William S. Parsons and Israel W. Charny (eds.) (1989), *Genocide in the Twentieth Century: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, New York; The Stalinist genocides in the Soviet Union would appear in this list as well, but for the fact that most of them were directed against people living in what is conventionally considered Europe.
The academic understanding of ethnicity, however, has changed considerably during the last fifty years. We now appreciate that ethnic identity is vastly more flexible than we once imagined it to be, that languages change, the dominant ideas in society change, and the borders between ethnic groups change as well. We have come to appreciate not only the enormous power of the modern state to create identities but its power to create the appearance of antecedents, to see ancestral Dutchmen in Tacitus, Batavians and ancestral Chinese in the carvers of the Shang oracle bones. This is not to say that there is no primordial element in national identity, but rather that national identity is highly flexible. For instance, we have now been presented with considerable evidence that the ethnic categories of Tutsi and Hutu which underpinned the genocides in Rwanda and Burundi were at least partly created by German and Belgian anthropologists. Although there is some evidence of migration into the Great Lakes area by pastoral tribes from the north, it appears that the ethnic difference between Tutsi and Hutu at the end of the 19th century was comparable to that between the English aristocracy and the mass of the people at the time of the English civil war. Cultural and physiological differences reflected class more than ethnicity and it was primarily a colonial era system of ethnic classification which created an ethnic conflict where none had previously existed.

We also appreciate now that one of the elements which contributes to shaping ethnic identities is often a political programme. This is not to deny any primordial element in ethnic identity nor to reject the now common argument that ethnic identity can be more or less thrust upon people by modern institutions, especially the state and industrial capitalism. Rather it is to point out that many, perhaps all, ethnic identities have a programmatic, that is, political dimension. Shamiel A. B. put his finger on this reality when he coined the term “nation of intent” to describe rival conceptions of the nation which compete to include or exclude particular people or regions from the nation. The case he describes – Malaysia


forces in each of these three countries was not simply one of constitutional forms, not even one of raw power, but an all encompassing vision of what it should mean to be Chinese, or Cambodian, or Indonesian. In this context it is useful to remember, too, that the term "un-American", despite its apparent reference to ethnic markers, is actually a thoroughly political term.

Of course political identity and ethnic identity are not the same thing, but in some contexts they closely resemble each other. Furnivall has famously described a plural society as one in which ethnic groups "mix but do not combine":

"Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit".11

Bearing in mind that Furnivall exaggerated the rigidity of ethnic barriers in colonial Southeast Asia, his description would not require very much editing to apply to the relationship between the political parties which dominated Indonesian society in the 1950s and early 1960s. Each party built around itself a cluster of social, economic, political and cultural organizations which became a kind of distinct society within a society.

When Chinese and Cambodian communists exterminated landlords and conservative intellectuals, and when the Indonesian army exterminated communists, they were not merely killing political enemies, they were seeking to destroy forever a particular kind of Chinese, or Cambodian, or Indonesian identity. The quasi-ethnic nature of this extermination is particularly clear if we remember how important class background was in choosing Chinese and Cambodian victims, and how the continuing persecution of communists in Indonesia targeted not only former communists but their families as well.

This perspective suggests that the Nazis' attempted extermination of Jews in Europe should not be understood simply as a consequence of either pathological anti-Semitism or bureaucratic and political procedures. Rather, it should be embedded in a broader understanding of Nazi ideology. The Nazis—like the communists in China and Cambodia and the anti-communists in Indonesia—were partly driven by a romantic vision of society. They wanted a moral, well-ordered and prosperous Germany, a Germany of honest farmers, upright soldiers, diligent workers, fertile, home-bound wives and polite, obedient children. They had an uncomplicated understanding of social complexity and the dynamics of social and economic change, and they imagined that societies could be improved by purging them of people who would prevent the ideal system from working. Totalitarian regimes have a particularly strong inclination to believe that their achievements are being held back by malevolent saboteurs, rather than by any shortcoming in the policy process or its implementation. They generally feel, too, that simple, brutal solutions are justified if they achieve results. In the Germany of the late 1930s the Jews—linked to capitalism, linked to modern forms of culture, and resolutely maintaining separateness inside the German nation—were easily seen as culprits, exploitative, corrupting and disloyal. Ancient anti-Semitism made Jews a likely target in corporatist Germany, and almost certainly added sharpness and brutality to the way they were persecuted. The examples of China, Indonesia and Cambodia suggest, however, the importance of exploring ways in which the Holocaust was generated by the Nazis' desire to shape German society.

This approach casts the Holocaust as part of a massive programme of social engineering designed to produce Germans with the cultural and social characteristics desired by the Nazis. It rather clearly makes the Holocaust a part of the same phenomenon as the destruction of Gypsies, socialists and homosexuals, even if the Jews may have been singled out for more comprehensive removal from society. Unfortunately, however, both examples also raise the issue of the responsibility of genocide victims for their own fate, an issue which ranks as one of the most sensitive of all in social science. If genocide is only a matter of racism, then we can feel confident in regarding it as wrong not only morally but intellectually. If the perpetrators of genocide are driven by an idea of human nature which is alien from reality—this is how we feel, for instance, about Nazi propaganda against the Jews—then we do not need to consider what the victims might have done to provoke their fate. If, on the other hand, genocide is an outcome of intense identity politics, then the behaviour of both sides warrants attention. We can only understand the violence done to Indonesian communists if we examine the strained political atmosphere which they contributed to shaping in the early 1960s. We can only understand the violence of the Chinese communists if we examine the violence of the Kuomintang government in the 1930s. We can only understand the violence of the Khmer Rouge if we understand the desperation of life in Cambodian villages in the 1950s and 1960s. But to go further and to accept that there might be ways in which the Armenians provoked reasonable Turkish anger, or even to hint that the Jews and Gypsies might bear some responsibility for what was done to them is to go beyond what is politically or academically acceptable.

The Destruction of Indigenous Peoples
At first glance, by contrast, the destruction of indigenous peoples around the world has less in common with the Holocaust than do political killings. The experience of indigenous peoples lies more clearly in the realm of resource politics rather than identity politics. As possessors of a resource—land or sea—indigenous peoples stand in the way of newcomers who wish to take over that resource. If the resource is more important than the people are, then the people are vulnerable to extermination. At best, their future is one on the margins of a new society and a new economy built on the ruins of their former existence. There is a clear parallel, of course, between the actions of Western settlers in the lands of indigenous peoples and the policies of Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe, where displacement and extensive killing along with disease and starvation were intended to change demographic realities. It is likely that German colonial policies in Eastern Europe would be illuminated by comparison with colonial policies elsewhere.

The Holocaust, however, was carried out against a people who were decidedly not indigenous to the land. Both the Holocaust and the mass political killings in China, Cambodia and Indonesia were carried out within a relatively short time and they removed from society a group
which had previously been integral to it. The destruction of indigenous peoples, by contrast, has been gradual—often the work of decades—and it has amounted to clearing the land of its former owners so that new settlers can take their place. It is often accompanied by virulently racist attitudes, but for the most part the victims are exterminated for the convenience of the new settlers, rather than because of any ideological determination to destroy them. In some cases, the genocide has been achieved mainly by the introduction of disease, by displacement from traditional lands, and by deculturation rather than murder. Only in the area of numbers does the genocide of indigenous peoples more closely resemble the Holocaust. Many communities in the Americas and Australasia have been more thoroughly destroyed than the Jews of Europe and many more have suffered comparable losses.

Despite these dissimilarities, the experience of indigenous peoples focuses attention on the economic motives of the Holocaust. Although scholars of Nazi Germany have been well aware of the vast scale of the confiscation of the property of Jews in Europe, this plunder has generally been seen as incidental to the broader project of extermination. The example of indigenous peoples, however, suggests the value of a research agenda into the economic and social consequences of the removal of Jews from German society: not just the question of property but also that of position. Who succeeded to all the posts that were vacated by Jews from the time that expulsion first became a serious state policy? And did the rhetoric and practice of the new settlers in these positions echo the developmentalist rhetoric that is characteristic of new settlers in the lands of indigenous peoples?

As with mass political killings, comparison with the extermination of indigenous peoples sheds extra light on the Holocaust. This light, however, also comes at a price. Addressing the economic motives for the Holocaust focuses attention, of course, on the economic and social position of Jews in German society. It is not possible to argue about economic motives without demonstrating that there was real economic advantage to important groups in German society from removing the Jews. Investigating this question, however, is likely to feed dangerous perceptions of Jewish domination of sections of German society. The concept of indigeneity further clouds the picture. Throughout the world, indigenous peoples claim a special right of their land, even after they have been partly displaced from it. This claim is also widely recognized amongst non-indigenous peoples, so that discrimination in favour of an indigenous community is widely seen as acceptable if the indigenous community is economically disadvantaged.

Conclusion

Analytical templates developed for understanding the Holocaust have tended to dominate the field of genocide studies. Whereas genocide scholars in general work in constant reference to the Holocaust even if it is not their field of expertise, Holocaust scholarship tends not to consider the insights which their field might gain from looking at other cases. The Holocaust templates emphasise the role of ancient anti-Semitism and of modern technology and organization in driving the Holocaust and making it possible. They tend to neglect the factors which many historians and other social scientists would stress in explaining extreme violence, namely general political conflict and economic competition. It is no longer tenable on analytical grounds to make a sharp distinction between ethnical and political killing on a mass scale and it is difficult on moral grounds to exclude the extermination of indigenous peoples from being considered as genocide. Extending the definition of genocide to include political killings and the extermination of indigenous people, however, is not simply a matter of morality and definitions, though it is both of these things as well. By considering the course of mass political killings and the fate of indigenous peoples in the non-Western world, we throw extra light on aspects of the Holocaust which do not stand out in the dominant templates which have been developed for understanding it.

Bibliography:


Comparing the Killing Fields: Rwanda, Cambodia and Bosnia

René Lemarchand

Genocide being what it is – the ultimate in man’s inhumanity to man – there are compelling moral reasons for taking seriously the issue of why genocide occurs: what is the real dynamic that lies behind the killing of millions of people in Africa, Europe and Asia? In seeking tentative answers to that question we will look at some of the more egregious examples of mass murders in Africa, Asia and Europe, namely Rwanda, Cambodia and Bosnia, and try to identify some underlying parallels and divergences.

The lack of a sustained comparative reflection on all three cases is a commentary on how little is known, even among the attentive public, about these “distant and far away places”. Indeed, it is sadly ironic (and politically consequential) that the major bloodbaths of the second half of the 20th century – Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi, Bosnia, East Timor and Chechnya – have taken place in countries that probably not one American out of thousand would be able to identify on a map of the world. At the time of the Rwanda genocide the academic experts on that country could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the same is true of Cambodia and Bosnia. Furthermore, what few experts there are on each genocide seldom talk to each other. For all the efforts of professional organizations to facilitate dialogue among genocide scholars, cross-disciplinary and cross-area communication is the exception rather than the rule. Although there are valuable sources of information on each state, there is thus relatively little in the way of comparative discourse on the factors and circumstances behind the appalling bloodletting suffered by these societies.

The aim of this article is not to break new theoretical ground – only to sketch out some pathways for comparative analysis, and thus bring out the differences and similarities in their recent historical experience. We shall begin with a brief discussion of the objections most often raised about