
Yale Center for International and Area Studies
Working Paper Series

GENOCIDE STUDIES PROGRAM

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1998

Working Paper
GS 01

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Paper presented at the
Genocide Studies Program Seminar
February 12, 1998

YALE UNIVERSITY
Mellon Sawyer Seminar Series
Ben Kiernan, Director

Yale Center for International and Area Studies
Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Ave.
New Haven, CT. 06520-8206

THE SEVEN STAGES OF GENOCIDE

by Gregory H. Stanton

The International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines "genocide."

"In the present Convention, 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:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

The Convention declares the following acts punishable:

- (a) Genocide;
- (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide;
- (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;
- (d) Attempt to commit genocide;
- (e) Complicity in genocide."

The Genocide Convention is sometimes misinterpreted as requiring the intent to destroy a whole national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such. Some genocides have fit that description, notably the Holocaust and Rwanda. But most do not. Most are intended to destroy only part of a group. The Genocide Convention specifically includes the intentional killing of part of a group as genocide. It reaffirms this definition when it includes as among the acts that constitute genocide "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part". Those who shrink from applying the term "genocide" usually ignore the "in part". Thus, intent to destroy a part of an ethnic group coupled with killing members of the group constitutes an act of genocide.

Intent

Criminal law distinguishes intent from motive. A murderer may have many motives - gaining property or eliminating a rival for power. But his intent is determined by the purpose of his act: Did he purposely kill the victim? Genocidal intent is determined by the purpose of the act: Did the killer purposely kill the victim because the victim was part of an ethnic group the killer intends to destroy, at least in part?

This article expresses the views of the author, and not necessarily those of the Department of State.

The motive of the killer to take the victim's property or to politically dominate the victim's group does not remove genocidal intent if the victim is chosen because of his ethnic, national, racial, or religious group.

Genocidal intent does not require an overall plan. An act of genocide may arise in a culture that considers members of another group less than human, where killing members of that group is not considered murder. This is the culture of impunity characteristic of genocidal societies. In Burundi, Tutsis who kill Hutus have seldom been convicted or even arrested. Massacres are ethnic, intended to destroy parts of the other ethnic group.

The intent of the act of genocide does not have to be part of a plan to kill a whole group. If a killing is part of a genocidal massacre, where victims are killed because of their ethnic identity, it is an act of genocide even if only a part of a group (the intellectuals, officers, leaders) is targeted.

Acts of genocide

The crime of genocide is defined by the Genocide Convention as "acts of genocide." It does not exist apart from those acts. A pattern of acts of genocide is frequently called "genocide" and evidence of such a pattern of ethnic, racial, or religious massacres is strong evidence of genocidal intent.

THE GENOCIDAL PROCESS

Prevention of genocide requires a structural understanding of the genocidal process. Genocide has seven stages or operational processes. The first stages precede later stages, but continue to operate throughout the genocidal process. Each stage reinforces the others. A strategy to prevent genocide should attack each stage, each process. The seven stages of genocide are classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, identification, and extermination.

Classification

All languages and cultures require classification -- division of the natural and social world into categories. We distinguish and classify objects and people. All cultures have categories to distinguish between us and them, between members of our group and others. We treat different categories of people differently. Racial and ethnic classification may be defined by absurdly detailed laws -- the Nazi Nuremberg laws, the "one drop" laws of segregation in America, or apartheid racial classification laws in South Africa. Racist societies often prohibit mixed categories and outlaw miscegenation. Bipolar societies are the most likely to have genocide. In Rwanda and Burundi, children are the ethnicity of their father,

either Tutsi or Hutu. No one is mixed. Mixed marriages do not result in mixed children.

Symbolization

We use symbols to name and signify our classifications. We name some people Hutu and others Tutsi, or Jewish or Gypsy. Sometimes physical characteristics -- skin color or nose shape -- become symbols for classifications. Other symbols, like customary dress or facial scars, are socially imposed by groups on their own members. Genocidal governments often require members of a targetted group to wear an identifying symbol or distinctive clothing -- e.g. the yellow star. The Khmer Rouge forced people from the Eastern Zone to wear a blue-checked scarf, marking them for forced relocation and elimination. Without symbols for our classifications, they would become literally insignificant. Yellow stars became insignificant in Denmark because non-Jewish Danes also chose to wear them, rejecting the Nazi's classification system.

Dehumanization

Classification and symbolization are fundamental operations in all cultures. They become steps of genocide only when combined with dehumanization. Denial of the humanity of others is the step that permits killing with impunity. The universal human abhorrence of murder of members of one's own group is overcome by treating the victims as less than human. In incitements to genocide, the target groups are called disgusting animal names -- Nazi propaganda called Jews "rats" or "vermin"; Rwandan Hutu hate radio referred to Tutsis as "cockroaches." Bodies of genocide victims are often mutilated to express this denial of humanity. Such atrocities then become the justification for revenge killings, because they are evidence that the killers must be monsters, not human beings themselves.

Organization

Genocide is always collective because it derives its impetus from group identification. It is always organized, often by states but also by militias and hate groups. Planning need not be elaborate: Hindu mobs may hunt down Sikhs or Muslims, led by local leaders. Methods of killing need not be complex -- Tutsis in Rwanda died from machetes; Muslim Chams in Cambodia from hoe-blades to the back of the neck ("Bullets must not be wasted," was the rule at Cambodian extermination prisons, expressing the dehumanization of the victims.) The social organization of genocide varies by culture. It reached its most mechanized, bureaucratic form in the Nazi death camps. But it is always organized, whether by the Nazi SS or the Rwandan Interahamwe. Death squads may be trained for mass murder, as in Rwanda, and then force everyone to participate, spreading hysteria and overcoming individual resistance.

Polarization

Genocide proceeds in a downward cycle of killings until, like a whirlpool, it reaches the vortex of mass murder. Killings by one group may provoke revenge killings by the other. Such massacres are aimed at polarization, the systematic elimination of moderates who would slow the cycle. The first to be killed in a genocide are moderates from the killing group who oppose the extremists: the Hutu Supreme Court Chief Justice and Prime Minister in Rwanda, the Tutsi Archbishop in Burundi. Extremists target moderate leaders and their families. The center cannot hold. The most extreme take over, polarizing the conflict until negotiated settlement is impossible.

Identification

Lists of victims are drawn up. Houses are marked. Maps are made. Individuals are forced to carry cards identifying their ethnic or religious group because identification greatly speeds the slaughter. In Germany, the identification of Jews, defined by law, was performed by a methodical bureaucracy. In Rwanda, identity cards showed each person's ethnicity. Tutsis were pulled from cars at roadblocks and murdered. Throwing away the cards did not help, because anyone who could not prove he was Hutu, was presumed to be Tutsi. Hutu militiamen conducted crude mouth exams to test claims to Hutu identity.

Extermination

The final step, the final solution, is extermination. It is considered extermination, rather than murder, because the victims are not considered human. They are vermin, rats, or cockroaches. Killing is described by euphemisms of purification: "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, "ratonade (rat extermination)" in Algeria. All members of the alien group are killed, including children. Because they are not considered persons, their bodies are buried in mass graves or burnt like garbage.

PREVENTION

A full strategy for preventing genocide should include attack on each of genocide's operational processes.

Classification may be attacked either through devaluation of the distinctive features used to classify (e.g. amalgamation of regional dialects and accents by exposure to mass media or standardized education,) or through use of transcendent categories, such as common nationality or common humanity. Promotion of mixed categories, such as the financial incentives for inter-caste marriages in Tamil Nadu, India, may help break down group endogamy, but do not combat genocide in bipolar societies where mixed categories have no recognition. In bipolar societies, transcendent institutions like the Catholic Church should actively campaign against ethnic classifications. Special effort should be made to keep such institutions from being captured and divided by the

same forces that divide the society, e.g. through hierarchical discipline from Rome for the Roman Catholic Church.

Symbolization can be attacked by legally forbidding use of hate symbols (e.g. swastikas) or ethnic classification words. "Nigger" or "kaffir" as racial expletives may be outlawed as "hate speech." Group marking like tribal scarring may be outlawed, like gang clothing. The problem is that legal limitations on hate speech will fail if unsupported by popular cultural enforcement. Though Hutu and Tutsi were forbidden words in Burundi until the 1980's, the prohibition had little effect, since other euphemisms and code-words replaced them. Prohibition may even become counter-productive, as part of an ideology of denial, that prevents people from naming, discussing and overcoming deep cultural divisions.

Dehumanization should be opposed openly whenever it shows its ugly face. Genocidal societies lack constitutional protection for countervailing speech, and should be treated differently than democracies. Hate radio stations should be shut down, and hate propaganda banned. Although restrictions on free speech are not necessary in a healthy polity, even in democracies hate speech should be actively exposed and opposed. Direct incitements to genocide should be outlawed. Incitement to genocide is not protected speech. Hate crimes and atrocities should be promptly punished. Impunity breeds contempt for law, and emboldens genocidists, who can literally get away with murder.

Organizations that commit acts of genocide should be banned, and membership in them made a crime. Freedom of association in a democratic society should not be misconstrued as protecting membership in criminal organizations. At Nuremberg, membership in the SS was itself prosecuted. Similarly, the Interahamwe, Sans Ehec, and other genocidal hate groups should be outlawed, and their members arrested and tried for conspiracy to commit genocide. The UN should impose arms embargos on governments or militias that commit genocide. Because arms embargos are difficult to enforce, for Rwanda, the UN established an international commission to investigate and document violations of the arms embargo. The UN may also require member states to freeze the assets of persons who organize and finance genocidal groups.

Polarization can be fought by providing financial and technical aid to the moderate center. It may mean security protection for moderate leaders, or assistance to human rights groups. Assets of extremists may be seized, and visas for international travel denied to them. Coups d'etat by extremists should be immediately opposed by international sanctions.

Identification of victims considerably speeds genocide. When ID cards identify victims' ethnic or religious group, or when victims are forced to wear yellow stars, the killing is made efficient. When death lists are drawn up, the international community should recognize that genocide is imminent, and mobilize for armed intervention. Those identified should be given asylum, and assistance in fleeing their persecutors. Had the U.S. or Britain in Palestine accepted all Jewish immigrants, millions of lives might have been saved from the Holocaust.

Extermination, whether carried out by governments or by patterned mob violence, can only be stopped by force. Armed intervention must be rapid and overwhelming. Safe areas should be established with real military protection. An intervention force without robust rules of engagement, such as UNAMIR in Rwanda in April, 1994 or UNPROFOR in Bosnia, is worse than useless because it gives genocide victims false hope of security in churches or unsafe "safe areas", delaying their organization for self-defense. In bipolar societies, separation into self-defense zones is the best protection for both groups, particularly if international troops create a buffer zone between them.

Experience with UN peacekeeping has shown that humanitarian intervention should be carried out by a multilateral force authorized by the UN, but led by UN members, rather than by the UN itself. The Military Staff Committee envisioned in Article 47 of the UN Charter has never been organized, and the UN does not have a standing army. The strongest member states must therefore shoulder this responsibility in conjunction with other UN members. The U.S. is now promoting the organization of an African Crisis Response Initiative composed of African military units coordinated and financed by the U.S., Europeans, and other powers.

PUNISHMENT

When Adolf Hitler was asked if his planned invasion of Poland was a violation of international law, he scoffed, "Who ever heard of the extermination of the Armenians?"

Impunity -- literally getting away with murder -- is the weakest link in the chains that restrain genocide. In Rwanda, Hutus were never arrested and brought to trial for massacres of Tutsis that began months before the April, 1994 genocide. In Burundi, Tutsi youth gangs have never been tried for killing Hutus. Burundi judges are nearly all Tutsis, as are the army and police. They seldom, if ever, convict their own.

Social order abhors a legal vacuum. When courts do not dispense justice, the victims have no recourse but revenge. In societies with histories of ethnic violence, the cycle of killing will eventually spiral downward into the vortex of genocide.

In such societies, the international community should fill the legal vacuum by creating tribunals to prosecute and try genocide. That has been done for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. We need to create a Permanent International Criminal Tribunal that will have world-wide jurisdiction to try genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The Tribunal must be supported by effective institutions to arrest and imprison those indicted and convicted by the Tribunal. Only such a permanent court will provide the deterrent effect necessary to give pause to those planning future genocides.

A permanent international criminal court, coupled with effective organizations to arrest and punish the perpetrators of genocide, could be the greatest step forward in mankind's long battle against genocide. The strongest antidote to genocide is justice.

