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Genocide

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Summary

Genocide is a concept applied to different event contexts for various reasons and perspectives (legal, moral, analytical, activist). At its centre is the intentional destruction by force of a group defined by the violent actors. This destruction does not necessarily result in the annihilation (mass murder) of members of the persecuted group but essentially consists of the transformation of their identity. Although the term is relatively new, many of the associated practices are not. These include mass killings, expulsions, enslavement, child theft, destruction of cultural and religious sites, prohibition of the practice of customs and rituals, and the use of one's language. These measures are driven mainly by political motives, closely tied to attaining and maintaining centralised political power.

Definitions

Genocides are primarily understood as incidents of extreme, highly asymmetrical, collective violence perpetrated against non-combatants. As in most other fields of research, there is a difference between the subject matter and the term. Forms of violence defined in this way can be traced back thousands of years, but the term itself, and thus also the definition of what constitutes genocide, is relatively new. The story has been told many times, so only the outcome will be discussed here. Since 1951, there has been a UN convention (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide) that defines in detail under international law what is to be considered genocide. This definition contains three essential elements.

These are, *firstly*, the prohibited or harmful acts; *secondly*, the groups affected; and *thirdly*, the intentionality of the actors carrying out the acts. The list of acts has been greatly expanded, particularly in the last decade, especially in social science literature. Concerning the groups, the addition of political opponents of the perpetrators of violence has been the subject of much debate. The criterion of intent, which is difficult to prove but central in a legal and moral context, has hardly been questioned. It follows that genocide consists of a massive attack on at least one group that is intended to endanger its continued existence in a targeted manner. The attack,

therefore, is intended to destroy the group. This excludes cases of community destruction that are or were a side effect of other goals. This applies, for example, to the hunting of people for enslavement and some forms of colonisation.

As can be observed with other concepts (such as trauma), the contexts of action labelled as genocide are expanding ever further (Haslam & McGrath, 2020). There are essentially two reasons for this. The first reason can be found in the area somewhat inadequately referred to as political motivation. This includes both symbolic and legal recognition of past injustices. This aspect in particular shows how deeply psychological such politically perceived claims are. Recognition by the perpetrators of violence, as well as by a third party in the form of a global community represented by international organisations, is a fundamental prerequisite for processes of pacification, compensation, and, in some cases, even reconciliation (Benjamin, 2017). The manifold efforts to label contemporary events involving collective violence as genocide are clearly political in nature, as this has, or should have, consequences under international law (Feierstein, 2019). Current examples include the Myanmar/Rohingya complex (United Nations Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, 2022) and the measures taken by the Chinese state in the areas inhabited by Uyghurs since the 9th century (Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy & Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, 2021). A current example (2025) is the activities of the Alevi Studies Network to classify the murder of a large number of Alawites in Syria as genocide. Furthermore, many groups endeavour to have past events recognised as genocides by political bodies such as parliaments. This applies, for example, to Dersimis in Germany regarding the events of 1937-38, which are described in the literature as massacres, counterinsurgency, extermination campaigns, and genocide (Gudehus & Husenbeth, 2024). In some cases, tribunals have been set up on non-governmental initiative, which, in the cases of Sri Lanka and the Uyghurs, for example, have concluded, based on the provisions of the UN Convention, that both cases constituted or constitute genocide (Permanent People’s Tribunal, 2010; Uyghur Tribunal Judgement, 2021).

The second reason pertains specifically to the discussion in the social sciences. Here, the main issue is to question the idea that genocide is an event of extreme violence against many members of a precisely defined group. Concepts such as cultural genocide and cold genocide are thus gaining in importance. Both largely disregard physical violence against people and instead emphasise the suppression of, for example, language, rituals, religious practice or clothing over long periods of time (Anderson, 2015; Bachman, 2019). The focus is not on physical destruction, but rather on erasing the distinctive characteristics of a group, thereby transforming identities. The group is dissolved through a variety of measures, including forced marriages with

members of the oppressor group (Turdush & Fiskesjö, 2021). The attack is therefore directed at everything that characterises identities.

Accordingly, a minimal definition of genocide could be that genocide is the prohibition, enforced by extreme violence, of being who one is and where one is. This applies above all to all those events of extreme collective violence that have taken place and are still taking place in the context of homogenisation efforts within the framework of state-building processes. A state's people are defined, often based on religious criteria, which leads to the exclusion of others. These are typically portrayed as a threat that must be countered with force. However, the perpetrators of violence not only want to exclude others, but also to seize their resources in many cases. This applies in the context of colonialism, for example, as seen in the case of the People's Republic of China in Tibet and East Turkistan (Xinjiang). The fundamental aim is to make the others disappear (this also applies where the others are first created discursively by the violent group).

In line with these and other extensions, it makes little sense to discuss which case can be labelled as genocide, as political, moral, and often only secondarily analytical criteria are put forward by various actors. From an analytical point of view, it is more productive to differentiate between forms on an empirical basis (what happened? What are the consequences? Who are the actors? etc.). The mass murder of people, for example, is something different from a ban on language and religion. The aim of both, however, is to dissolve the social structure and thus the attacked or oppressed group itself (and both can also take place in parallel or consecutively). This can happen quickly – i.e., within a few weeks, months, or years (Turkish genocide against the Armenians, Rwanda, Shoah) – or take generations (Papua-New Guinea, Dersim).

While in these examples the groups are still relatively clearly identifiable, which makes them recognisable and thus vulnerable, there are concepts that focus not on destruction but on the violent restructuring of societies. The Argentine sociologist Feierstein (2014), for example, defines genocide as the intentional destruction of the social structure of societies. Consequently, policies of enforced disappearance, torture centres and the adoption of children of murdered persons are seen as indicators of genocide that is not directed against a group but aims to transform a society and the identities of its members. Such a definition has consequences for criminal prosecution in Argentina itself, which is what makes such efforts so interesting. There, those who were politically responsible for the violence, as well as those who worked in the torture centres, have been and continue to be charged with genocide.

Another consequence of such events is that writing about them discursively reinforces

the separation made by the group perpetrating the violence between them and those they persecute. In this respect, one goal, the simplification of identities or, respectively, the attribution of singular identities, is achieved in most cases.

Practices of Community-Destroying Violence

The following is a selection of (often interrelated) practices and examples to illustrate the breadth of activities currently being discussed as genocidal violence.

Killings: The attempt to murder as many members as possible of at least one group defined by the perpetrators of violence. In these cases, forced adoptions and rape are not intended (which does not mean that they do not occur). One example is the Holocaust and the extermination of Sinti and Roma by the German state under National Socialist rule.

Expulsion and massacre: The attempt to remove as many members as possible of at least one group defined by the perpetrators of violence from an area. In various cases, this expulsion is extremely violent and thus leads to the physical destruction of large sections of the population. One example is the genocide of Armenians and other Christian groups by Turkey, which reached its peak in 1915. Such expulsions are often accompanied by massacres, such as that of the Dersimis (1937-38), also by the Turkish state (Küpeli, 2022, pp. 189-209).

Removal of children: Strictly speaking, this removal of children from the persecuted group is only possible if they are not considered inferior, different and therefore incurable. This often happens when the difference between the groups is political and thus not racialised. Examples can be found above all in the military dictatorships of South America. In Argentina, for example, children of persecuted people (some of whom were born in captivity) were adopted by members of the regime. The de-indigenisation of children, as took place in the so-called residential schools in Canada for almost a century and a half, can be understood even more strongly than forced adoptions as a measure of social restructuring. The children were taken away from their parents, forbidden to use their language, and forcibly turned into relatively uneducated and Christianised members of non-indigenous society. In the national-socialist Germany, too, children were taken from the families of political opponents (especially communists) and placed with foster families far away for years, with the option of adoption.[1]

Enslavement and exploitation: Here, extermination is not always the primary goal but can be an unintended side effect. Concerning the German concentration camps, for example, it is sometimes rightly referred to as extermination through work. At the

same time, there were also activities within the complex of forced labour in the camps that were not life-threatening. Exploitation is particularly drastic in the case of forced labour in sugar production and manufacturing, especially in the Caribbean, primarily in the 16th century and again in the 19th century regarding cocoa and coffee. However, human history provides many other examples, from Sumer (an early advanced civilisation in Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium BC) to the camps of the Soviet Union (GULag). When I spoke above of unintended genocides, this referred in particular to the so-called slave hunts in the context of the Trans-Atlantic-Slavery. For there is no doubt that entire communities (though not entire language groups) were destroyed through murder, the destruction of their homes and cultural sites (to prevent them from fleeing and returning), deportation and exploitation (Zeuske, 2013).

Social restructuring: This explicitly does not refer to the murder of large parts of a group, but rather to the use of violence, and in particular terror (primarily through torture), to restructure societies in terms of their sociality. In relation to Argentina, for example, this refers to the massive suppression of social solidarity and the promotion of a monopolistic capitalist economic order (Feierstein, 2014). Revolutions, such as the French Revolution, are characterised by several elements and practices that are reflected in various definitions of genocide. In addition to the Terreur, whose target group was not clearly defined from the outset and spread dramatically – a parallel to the events in Cambodia in 1975-1979 (Bultmann, 2017) – the army slaughtered up to a quarter of a million people in the Vendée. Here, too, the goal was not the extermination of a group, but the enforcement of centralised state power (Secher, 1986).

Elimination of ethnic distinctiveness: The aim of this form is to bring about the long-term disappearance of the group defined by the perpetrators of violence. The People's Republic of China, for example, is engaged in a long-term process of Sinicisation in areas historically inhabited by groups that differ from Han Chinese in terms of various cultural elements. This affects Tibet, Xinjiang, and parts of Mongolia, among other regions. Even though killings on a massive scale have taken place here, the essential elements of the policy of violence are not the direct murder of large numbers of people. Instead, the respective cultures are being destroyed on several levels. Physically, this involves the dismantling of religious and cultural sites and landscapes. Added to this is the suppression of language use and customs. For example, women are either forcibly sterilised or forced into partnerships with Han Chinese, resulting in direct interference in family structures (Turdush & Fiskesjö, 2021). This is a particularly sustainable form of colonisation. Similar to the destruction of villages, which deprives enslaved prisoners of the opportunity to return, such policies aim to create a point of no return.

This incomplete and greatly abbreviated list should demonstrate how diverse the practices (of criminal activity) are and that some of them have been used for thousands of years in very different forms and combinations. Ultimately, the destruction of a group is not necessarily the primary goal of those who commit acts of violence considered genocidal. As a rule, since the emergence of the first so-called advanced civilisations, it has been about political power – about control over territories, resources and people. Genocidal violence is thus ultimately a secondary phenomenon. Seen in this light, the question of the intention to destroy on a collective level inevitably becomes relative. This is far less true for the perpetrators of violence, the murderers, thieves and rapists, whose diverse and complex motives have been and continue to be the subject of explanatory approaches.

Conclusion

Genocide, in its legal definition, describes the intentional destruction of a group. Yet as social and political analysis reveals, it should be understood less as an act of physical annihilation than as a project of *identity transformation*. The prohibition of “being who one is and where one is” captures the essence of such acts. Whether expressed through massacres, forced assimilation, or long-term cultural erasure, genocidal violence ultimately serves state or imperial agendas of homogenisation and control. Recognising this broader pattern allows for comparative understanding of cases from the Armenian genocide to the Uyghur persecution and the destruction of Dersim’s cultural world. What unites these events is the systematic attempt to restructure humanity itself through the destruction of plurality.

Endnotes

[1] The author is aware of such cases, although (to his knowledge) no research has been published on this subject. One example concerns the five children of the Kreikbaum family from Hannover (Germany), all of whom were placed with families in Burgenland and Wachau for more than six years. Affidavits are available in this regard.

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