
Not Just Another Genocide

The history of the human race is to a large extent a history of genocides. Yet the word *genocide* was not coined until 1944, when the Holocaust was at its peak.¹ The problem with words like *Holocaust* and *genocide* is that they are imprecise terms. *Holocaust* is an archaic term derived from Greek, which means “a sacrificial offering that is consumed *entirely* by flames.” *Genocide* means the killing of an *entire* race or people. Both words denote complete destruction, yet they have been modified in our time to mean *partial* murder of a people, presumably with the *intent* of achieving total annihilation. While the capitalized term *Holocaust* has been universally accepted as applying only to the German war of extermination against the Jews, the term *genocide* took on an international legal meaning in the Genocide Convention of the United Nations of 1948, wherein the term refers to both intent and physical action, yet its precise meaning has been heatedly debated by scholars and by governments ever since. In recent years several events have been legally defined as genocides, including the Srebrenica Massacre during the conflict in the Balkans, in which thousands of Muslim Bosnians were systematically murdered, and the massacres of the Tutsi minority by the Hutu in Rwanda where some eight hundred thousand died.²

The twentieth century has topped all other centuries in the numbers of people killed by human action, not only on the battlefield but in

1. The term *genocide* was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944.
2. A note on statistics: All figures of genocides are approximate. There is no way of obtaining exact figures regarding events that were the result of regime or group brutality, much of which is often covered up to remove the evidence.

premeditated genocidal assaults on unarmed civilians. The exact number is unknown, but it is estimated in the hundreds of millions. Interestingly, one of the first known genocides of the century was committed in 1904 by German settlers in the African country of Namibia, where the Herero tribe, deprived of its grazing lands, was driven into the desert where many died of thirst and starvation. A century later, in 2004, the German government made an official apology.



Herero tribe survivors of the genocide in Namibia, 1904

In 1915 the Namibian genocide was eclipsed by the genocide perpetrated by the Turks in which about one and a half million Armenians perished. Despite the urging of many countries, Turkey is yet to apologize for this historical crime. The indifference of the world towards the fate of the Armenian people was not lost on Hitler. In August, 1939, as he was preparing to invade Poland, Hitler said:

I have issued the command—and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad—that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formations in readiness—for the present only in the East—with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living

space [*Lebensraum*] which we need. *Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?*³

While he was speaking of killing Poles, which he did, what he specifically had in mind was Polish Jewry. Hitler firmly believed that the world would be even less interested in a genocide committed against the Jews than the world had been in the genocide committed by the Turks against the Armenians. In his foreword to the *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, titled “Why Is It Important to Learn about the Holocaust and the Genocides of *All* People?” Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa writes:

The compelling reason why we should learn about the Holocaust, and the genocides committed against other peoples as well, is so that we might be filled with a revulsion at what took place and thus be inspired, indeed galvanized, to commit ourselves to ensure that such atrocities should never happen again. It is sadly true what a cynic had said, that we learn from history that we do *not* learn from history. And yet it is possible that if the world had been conscious of the genocide that was committed by the Ottoman Turks against the Armenians, the first genocide of the twentieth century, then perhaps humanity might have been more alert to the warning signs that were being given before Hitler’s madness was unleashed on an unbelieving world.⁴



A Jewish child dying in the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto, c. 1942

Despite the United Nations’ Genocide Convention of 1948, genocides continued throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the

3. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obersalzberg_Speech/.
4. Charny, *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, lvii.

twenty-first. Perhaps the most gruesome of those was the one perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge communist regime under Pot Pol in 1975 against the Cambodian people. Here mass murder was utilized in the pursuit of creating a utopian society. It was the regime's belief that Cambodia had to be converted into an agrarian society and do away with its "decadent" urban lifestyle and its traditional Buddhism. What resulted was a weird and macabre combining of the Stalin-era forced collectivization and the Nazi methods of mass murder. Some two million people died by execution, poisoning, hard labor, and starvation. Today, Cambodia is in the process of recovering from this long nightmare.

Africa, where the first twentieth-century genocide took place, has been the scene of a succession of genocides since the end of World War II, and there is still no end in sight. Countries like Nigeria, Congo, Rwanda, and Sudan stand out but are by no means the only ones. More recently, the Middle East has been the scene of violent conflicts, most notably in Syria, where the regime under Bashar al-Assad has been massacring its own people, a grim reminder of similar actions by Assad's father thirty years earlier that resulted in the Hama massacre in which some twenty thousand people were murdered. Rounding out this grim record is the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in 1995 that pitted Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians against one another before the forces of NATO were able to put an end to the conflict.

The near extermination of the Jews of Europe during World War II by the Germans and their willing collaborators can certainly be classified as genocide, for it was an attempt to exterminate an entire people. But there was a fundamental difference between what we call the Holocaust and all the other genocides. Typically, genocide is the result of an escalation of a conflict between two or more groups of people that have conflicting interests and seek to resolve their conflict through violent means. The stronger group reaches the point of deciding that only by physically eliminating its adversary will it be able to achieve its goal, and proceeds to utilize all the means at its disposal to accomplish this elimination. This is not at all what the Holocaust was all about. When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, they had scores to settle with the Allies who defeated them in World War I. They were defeated in that war by an alliance led by France and Great Britain, who were later joined by the United States as well. German Jews as well as Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire fought on the side of Germany, many with distinction. German Jews, at least half of whom were intermarried and assimilated, were true German patriots. Polish Jews, whom the Nazis thoroughly despised, considered Germany the epitome of European culture. Yet the Nazi leadership was able to convince the German people that the Jews—all Jews everywhere, even in places like Shanghai or

Timbuktu—were the mortal enemies of Germany, and, miracle of miracles, were secretly plotting across the world to do Germany in. I once lived in Guatemala, where there was a small community of German Jews. One of them once told me that his old uncle was whisked out of Germany on the eve of World War II and taken to London. He used to listen to the BBC news reports on the radio, and each time Hitler scored a victory he would cheer. When his family asked him why he was cheering, he explained that he had always been on the side of Germany.

National Socialism, or Nazism, following the delusional *Weltanschauung* or worldview of Adolf Hitler enunciated in his book *Mein Kampf*, came to articulate that the Jews controlled two opposing world forces that ostensibly threatened Germany—namely, Bolshevism, which came to power around that time in Russia, and Western capitalism, represented mainly by the United States. Never mind that Stalin, who took full control of the Soviet Union, systematically eliminated all his Jewish associates, most importantly Leon Trotsky.⁵ And never mind that Roosevelt basically turned a blind eye to the plight of the Jews under Nazism and did little to help save them. The Nazis, who needed a visible and vulnerable victim to direct all their anger, frustration and hatred against, turned on that 1 percent of the Third Reich's population which they believed to be the “universal poisoner of all peoples,” and later on all the Jews of Europe, and proceeded to carry out an ever-expanding campaign that culminated in the murder of two-thirds of that Jewry.

In other words, the Holocaust lacked all the common reasons of all other genocides, past and future, and was a misplaced unleashing of murderous hatred not only against those who were not the enemies of Germany, but also against those who were mostly either loyal German citizens or residents of other European countries and who looked up to Germany as a beacon of civilization. The Jews of Poland, for example, would have expected Poles to turn on them much sooner than Germans. In Poland most Jews lived under miserable conditions, while in Germany before Hitler many did very well. Polish Jews never trusted the Poles, while they did trust the Germans. This was one reason why it was possible for the Germans, once they began to occupy Eastern Europe, to round up Jews with little resistance or mistrust, and make them believe they were simply being “relocated,” or taken to labor camps, when in reality they were being shipped to their death.

5. In the '30s, Stalin staged what has become known as “show trials” in which top leaders of Jewish origin in the Soviet Union, such as Kameniev, Zionviev, and so forth, were made to confess their “betrayal” of the revolution and were executed. Stalin effectively eliminated all of his Jewish comrades who had made the revolution possible.

So the Holocaust became an unprecedented event in human annals, and while it had its roots in traditional German and Christian anti-Semitism, its total impact by the time the war ended was beyond anything the world had ever known, and it is impossible to simply classify it as just another genocide.

It should perhaps be also pointed out that Nazi Germany, in looking to establish what Hitler called “the thousand-year Reich,” was not merely interested in exterminating the Jews. That was only the first step in establishing German world domination. It was to be followed with mass destruction of other “inferior” races, such as Slavs and blacks, among others.⁶

It was also to be followed by the elimination of other political systems—communism, socialism, and even capitalism, and, most important, democracy. In addition, it was to be followed by the elimination of the clergy and the institutions of Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, both of which were somehow seen as Jewish inventions and as enemies of the German Aryan state. When we consider this master plan of the Nazi regime, it becomes clear that the Holocaust as the first round of this plan (and the only one the Nazis were able to carry out before they were defeated) was an event unlike any the human race has ever known.

6. See Shirer, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 937.