

What Are The Main Causes of Genocide?

Written by Dominique Maritz

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DOMINIQUE MARITZ, JUL 12 2012

As the Genocide Convention of 1948 states, “at all periods of history genocide has inflicted great losses on humanity” (Kaye and Stråth 2000: 24). Nevertheless, the twentieth century was termed the “century of genocide” because of the high number of cases of genocide during that time period (Bartrop 2002: 522). For the purpose of this essay, the definition of genocide will be taken from the Genocide Convention, which defines genocide as “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”. The genocide of the Armenians, the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda are the three genocides of the twentieth century that fit that definition (Destexhe 1994: 4-5). In this essay, the causes of modern genocide will be investigated using these three genocides as case studies. There are various reasons why genocide may occur and it is often a combination of circumstances that leads to genocide. The present essay will investigate the underlying conditions that make genocide possible, while leaving out catalytic events that may trigger genocide. The essay will firstly draw on the works of Horkheimer and Adorno in examining the relations between Enlightenment ideas and genocide. The correlations between war and economic crises will be subject to analysis in the second part of the essay. Finally, the creation of out-groups and in-groups will be explored. While these are certainly not the only causes of genocide, they may be deemed to be pre-conditions.

Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” in the 1940s with the Holocaust in mind, which for him signified the return of an enlightened people to barbarism (Freeman 1995: 210). Similarly, Foster (1980: 2) sees the Holocaust as an aberration of an enlightened and developed nation. However, there are other scholars who argue that genocide is not an exception of Enlightenment but in fact a result of it. Horkheimer and Adorno (1973: 3-4) argue that the ideals of Enlightenment, which are human emancipation and rationality, alienate humans from nature and result in men wanting to control nature and, in turn, other people as well. Bauman (1989: 91), continuing this idea over a decade later, proposes that since the Enlightenment, the extermination of a people serves to establish a perfect society. The Enlightenment brought with it the belief in an evolutionary development towards a better society through state engineering (Bauman 1989: 70; Kaye and Stråth 2000: 11). “Gardening” and “modern medicine” were used as metaphors for human tasks that would improve a society (Bauman 1989: 70). In the enlightened world, a state can become a “wonderful utopia” (Hamburg 2008: 44) through “designing, cultivating and weed-poisoning” (Bauman 1989: 13). It is a modern idea that everything can be measured and classified, even a “race” and its character (Bauman 1989: 68). This classification of races, coupled with the modern idea of a constantly improvable society, leads to Social-Darwinist ideas of the survival of the fittest (Kaye and Stråth 2000: 15).

Armenians (Balakian 2008: 160), Jews (Bauman 1989: 76) and Tutsi (Mullen 2006: 172) were seen as worthless groups standing between a population and the realisation of such a perfect society. Therefore, in the mind of the “rational and enlightened” thinker, they were legitimate targets for extermination (Kaye and Stråth 2000: 15). This “purifying” of the state through genocide is reflected in the language of the *genocidaires* (Stone 2004: 50). Armenians were termed “tubercular microbes” and a local politician asked rhetorically “isn’t it the duty of a doctor to destroy these microbes?” (Balakian 2008: 160). Hitler spoke of the “Jewish virus” and that “by eliminating the pest, [he would] do humanity a service” (Bauman 1989: 71). Not only medical terms were used to justify the killings. Gardening metaphors can also be found. In Rwanda, the chopping up of Tutsi men was called “bush clearing” and slaughtering women and children was labelled as “pulling out the roots of the bad weeds” (Prunier 1997: 142). These three examples support Bauman’s theory that the Enlightenment brought about the idea of being able to socially engineer a perfect state. Genocide was consequently justified by the idea of “purifying” the state through tasks that a

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doctor or a gardener would employ in order to improve an unhealthy body or a garden.

Naturally, not every enlightened nation will descend into genocide. There are other factors that influence a state's likeliness of genocide. According to Staub (2006: 98), an important indicator for the potential of future genocide is a difficult life condition, such as war or an economic crisis. He argues that during times of hardship, humans feel the need to protect themselves, which can result in losing respect for another group or blaming that group for the present conditions. Often, there is a history of long-standing animosities towards the group that is blamed, such as with the Jews in Europe and the Tutsi in Rwanda (Förster 2007: 73). However, Staub (2006: 99) says that people also feel the need to belong to something bigger during these times and therefore create an in-group together alongside an out-group. The parallels between war and genocide will now be examined, before the connection between economic crisis and genocide is made.

According to Bartrop (2002: 522), a strong link exists between war and genocide since the First World War. He argues that due to the war's destructiveness, people were transformed into commodities, a condition in which a "surplus population" could simply be eliminated. Shaw (2007: 464) supports this notion. He has discovered that "the major instances of genocide have clearly taken place in the context of war and militarisation". According to both Bartrop (2002: 528) and Shaw (2007: 465), the presence of war shapes the psyche of a population and makes their willingness to kill certain groups more likely. In the Ottoman Empire during the Second World War, Turkish leaders suspected the Armenians to be cooperating with Russia, which provided the rationale behind killing the entire group (Hamburg 2008: 27). In this instance, "war provided the context as well as the pretext to make Turkish nationalist dreams [...] come true" (Förster 2007: 77). The Holocaust, too, was used as a means to quietly destroy an undesired minority (Hamburg 2008: 27). Jews were blamed for every woe of Germany, just like the Armenians were seen as an enemy to the state. Nazis blamed the loss of World War I on the Jews, which made it legitimate to kill that group (Campbell 2009: 155). Fifty years later, in 1994, every Tutsi in Rwanda was accused of being part of the invading rebel army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which consisted primarily of members of the Tutsi minority (Hintjens 1999: 258). Exterminating this "enemy within" was therefore framed as a justifiable act of self-defence (Bartrop 2002: 526). War is an exceptionally difficult life condition during which innocent groups can be seen as threats; grievances towards that group are in rare occasions handled through genocide (Campbell 2009: 156).

The second difficult life condition Staub refers to is one of economic crisis. As with war, during times of a recession, people are inclined to find someone to blame for their misfortune (Hamburg 2008: 25). In Hamburg's (2008: 34) words, "a sharp economic downturn can create a sense of crisis that makes a population ready to scapegoat a vulnerable out-group and softens popular reluctance to kill others". Local leaders have learned that these feelings can be easily manipulated for their own goals, which may be the elimination of an unwanted minority (Hamburg 2008: 24). Victims are often portrayed as wealthy and as willing to take advantage of other groups, which justifies killing that group (Hamburg 2008: 27). With the World Economic Crisis in 1929, support for the Nazi party in Germany increased drastically (Foster 1980: 9). The party blamed Jews for the crisis, which appealed to the general public, who were in want of a scapegoat for their condition (Foster 1980: 13). Similarly, Tutsi in Rwanda were accused of bringing about the economic crisis in the 1980s, a crisis that had been brought about by plummeting coffee prices, in order for power and dominance to be restored (Hintjens 1999: 256). During times of an economic crisis people look for someone to blame. Turning towards a wealthy minority such as the Jews in Germany or the Tutsi in Rwanda is simple. If this is coupled with the local leaders who seek to exploit such grievances, it can lead to genocide.

It has been shown that people are likely to build an out-group during times of hardship. However, a further important factor is the need to belong to an in-group during difficult times such as war or recession. In the words of Hamburg (2008: 32), "perpetrators bond together as a community with a kind of sacred cause [...] in the ritual of genocidal killing". Being part of something larger is, therefore, provided through belonging to a group. The feeling of belonging is intensified through doing something extreme like the killing of people. Whole communities experience a form of ecstasy while partaking in the killing of others (Stone 2004: 55). This can be shown using the example of the genocide in Rwanda, where the militia group was called *interahamwe*, which translates to "those who fight together" (Hintjens 1999: 257). The construction of out-groups and in-groups is important for people during difficult times. When leaders exploit grievances towards the out-group, it can turn people into killers who experience happiness through belonging to an in-group that seeks to "purify" the state of a perceived evil.

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Incidents of genocide are not unique to the modern era; however, ideas of Enlightenment have led to humans' wish to continually improve their societies. If a certain group is seen as standing between the population and this goal, it can be seen as "rational" and legitimate to rid oneself of that group. The chances of genocide occurring against an out-group that is perceived as standing between society and utopia is more likely during times of hardship, such as those of war and economic crises. Humans feel the need to blame an out-group and eliminate that threat to society. Being part of a genocidal squad may give them the desired feeling of security during those times of instability. It is therefore imperative to monitor situations in countries, especially those where grievances against an out-group already exist, and to step in as soon as the country experiences changes in welfare. Genocide is not inevitable and the international community should *never again* fail to prevent it.

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*Written by: Dominique Maritz**
Written at: University of Queensland
Written for: Sebastian Kaempf
Date written: March 2011

*The author has since married and has changed her name to Dominique Fraser