

# Genocide

Concept: Genocide

Author: Rhoda Howard-Hassmann , Wilfrid Laurier University

Date Entered: 2005-05-06

Description The United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide entered into force on 9 December 1948. It defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical [sic], racial or religious group, as such."

The term "genocide" was first coined in 1944 by the Polish-Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin. The Genocide Convention was a reaction against the Nazi extermination of six million Jews during World War II. Its focus on national, ethnic, racial, and religious groups excludes mass murder of political groups ("politicide"). It makes no specific reference to the ethnocide of indigenous peoples ("ethnocide" means destruction of a society's cultural and material basis, without actually killing its individual members). It also does not refer to groups that might be subjected to mass murder on other grounds, such as gays and lesbians.

The first modern genocides were of indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia. The twentieth century was the age of genocide. It began with the extermination of about 65,000 Herero tribes people in Namibia by German colonists, followed by the murder of one million Armenians by Turkey during World War I. "Politicides" under Communist rule included the murders of 20 million Soviet citizens, 65 million Chinese citizens, and two million Cambodians. There were also many "smaller" genocides, such as the murder of half a million Communists and other leftists in Indonesia in the 1960s, and the murder of over 100,000 indigenous Mayans by government death squads in Guatemala in the 1980s and 90s.

The international community paid very little attention to genocide until the end of the Cold War in 1989. In the early 1990s, a genocidal tri-partite war occurred in the former Yugoslavia, with fighting among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. The murder of 7,000 Muslim men and boys by the Serbian army in the town of Srebrnica in 1995 was an act of genocide. World revulsion at Srebrnica was one reason that troops of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) attacked Yugoslavia in 1999 when it appeared that the Serbian government might be planning a genocide of ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo.

In 1994, about 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis, and some moderate Hutus, were murdered by a small group of Hutus in control of the state and armed militias. United Nations troops were present in Rwanda at the time but instead of reinforcing them and giving them the mandate to protect potential victims, the United Nations reduced the number of troops in the

country. This generated a great deal of international controversy.

As a reaction to the Yugoslavian and Rwandan genocides, the United Nations established the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). These Tribunals tried individual perpetrators for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. A notable innovation was the inclusion of rape as a crime of genocide. In 2002 the International Criminal Court was established as a permanent body to try such crimes.

In the 1990s, a debate began on the international obligation to protect citizens from crimes committed against them by their own governments. In certain circumstances, it was argued, the principle of state sovereignty should be violated: these circumstances were summarized in the idea of the "responsibility to protect." But the United Nations and many governments were still unwilling to label these criminal situations as genocide, as this might mean that foreign governments must intervene. In 2004, this debate resumed over the genocidal treatment of residents of the Sudanese territory of Darfur by government-backed militias.

Genocide is a worldwide phenomenon. It predates globalization, and so far, there is no evidence that globalization increases its likelihood. Global laws and global norms of justice may possibly decrease its likelihood in the future. The idea that state sovereignty is not absolute when states murder their own citizens is a step in this direction. There is a developing international consensus that any state that wishes to preserve its (autonomous) sovereignty must refrain from genocide. Any notion of autonomy which permits a state to persecute its own citizens, despite international norms prohibiting such persecution, is likely to protect those who commit genocide.

Suggested  
Reading:

**Charny, Israel W.** 1999. *Encyclopedia of genocide, Vol. I and II*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

**Niezen, Ronald.** 2003. *The origins of Indigenism: Human rights and the politics of identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

**Courtois, Stéphane, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, and Jean-Louis Margolin.** 1999. *The black book of communism: Crimes, terror, repression*. Trans. Mark Kramer and Jonathan Murphy, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

**Lemkin, Raphael.** 1944/2002. Genocide. In *Genocide: An anthropological reader*. ed. Alexander Laban Hinton, 27-42. Oxford: Blackwell.