

Definition: **genocide** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Systematic and deliberate destruction of a racial, religious or ethnic group in times of war or peace. The Holocaust during World War 2 is an example of genocide.



Image from: [Shoes of victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau... in Encyclopedia of Murder and Violent Crime](#)

Summary Article: **Genocide**

From *Encyclopedia of Transnational Crime and Justice*

For individual persons, in the context of criminal behavior, murder is considered the worst possible crime in those criminal justice systems that rank human life as having the most important value. In conjunction with this belief, genocide is probably the most heinous crime recognized by the civilized nations of the world, as it involves the mass murder of people for no legitimate reason. However, defining genocide is not simple. Indeed, there are many different definitions of genocide.

One aspect almost all definitions of genocide have in common is that the genocidal efforts are usually directed against one or more specific, identifiable groups of people. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide provides a definition of genocide as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group:

- Killing members of the group
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

This convention was signed in 1948 and marked the first time in history that the crime of genocide was defined.

The date of the signing of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide is important. World War II had just ended in 1945. It was in World War II that probably the most horrible example witnessed by human history of genocide occurred: the Holocaust. As every schoolchild learns, the Holocaust was the systematic extermination by Germany's National Socialist (Nazi) regime of the Jewish people. More than six million Jews in Europe were killed by the Nazi regime until its defeat in 1945. However, it must be realized that the Nazis were not only interested in exterminating Jews; they also sought to eliminate many other classes of people the Nazis considered inferior or undesirable: homosexuals, people with disabilities, religious groups, and people with opposing political beliefs. Thus, many millions more people were slain by the Nazis. In the aftermath of World War II, the nations of the world formed the UN and enacted the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide so that, at least in theory, recurrence of such genocide could be prevented.



Skulls of victims of the Rwandan genocide can be seen at the Rwanda Genocide Memorial. The Rwandan military and Hutu militia groups killed between 500,000 and 1 million people of the minority Tutsi people, with the intent of destroying the ethnic group.

(<http://Photos.com>)

The Convention limits genocide to national, ethnic, racial, and religious groups. Interestingly, however, it does not prohibit genocide based on political beliefs. The reason for this omission is that during the writing of the convention, the Soviet Union and several other nations objected to a prohibition of extermination of people based on political beliefs.

History of Genocide

Genocide, unfortunately, has a long and infamous reign in the history of humankind. Accurate historical records of genocide in ancient history simply do not exist, except as vague references to numerous episodes. However, modern history provides a horrifying litany of genocides, and some of them are briefly discussed below to demonstrate the prevalence of the phenomenon. It is depressing to note that such a universally condemned crime is so often repeated in human history.

One of the first genocides that is well established in history is a religious crusade. In the early part of the 13th century, the Catholic Church mounted the Albigensian or Cathar Crusade against the Cathars of southern France. The Cathars preached a doctrine of peace they held that the physical world was evil and that there were two gods, one good and one evil. The Catholic Church instituted a crusade and an inquisition to eliminate the heresy. It is estimated that more than 1 million people were slain.

In America, the treatment of the Native Americans since the landing of Christopher Columbus in 1492 is considered by many to constitute genocide, although some authorities argue that the decimation of the Native Americans was not an intentional, planned campaign and thus does not fall within the scope of a true genocide. However, the results are indisputable: Millions of Native Americans were exterminated by Europeans entering the Americas, both through military slaughter and by transfer of diseases, such as smallpox, against which the indigenous peoples had no immunity.

During World War I, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire engaged in the genocide of the Assyrian people. It is estimated that 750,000 Assyrians were killed or deported. During and after World War I, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire engaged in the genocide of the Greek people. It is estimated that several hundred thousand Greeks died. Also during World War I, the Turks of the Ottoman Empire engaged in the genocide of the Armenian people. It is estimated that approximately one and a half million Armenians were slaughtered or deported. The Turkish government denies that these historical events constitute genocide.

After World War I, the Bolsheviks, during the Russian Civil War, engaged in the genocide of approximately half a million Cossacks. Although it can be argued that it was a political act, the Cossacks were an identifiable ethnic group, so genocide would apply.

During 1932-33, the Soviet Union engaged in the confiscation of the entire harvest in Ukraine, which resulted in the deaths of more than 10 million people in the Soviet Union, 7 million of them in Ukraine. Many authorities considered this intentional act by the Soviet Union to constitute genocide, and in fact on January 13, 2010, a Ukrainian court found that Soviet premier Joseph Stalin and his supporters in this event were guilty of genocide.

In the late 1930s, in Turkish Kurdistan, the Turks engaged in the genocide of approximately 65,000 to 70,000 Kurds. The Turkish government denies this historical event was genocide.

The most famous genocide in modern history was the attempt by Nazi regime in Germany to eradicate the Jewish population prior to and during World War II. The war ended with Germany's defeat in 1945. By then, more than 6 million Jews had perished through persecution, starvation, and outright extermination in concentration camps across Germany and German-held territory. Many Nazi leaders were convicted of war crimes in connection with their treatment of the Jews.

In 1947, Pakistan separated from India to form a sovereign nation. Pakistan was primarily Islamic and India was primarily Hindu. Massive violence occurred before and after the creation of the Pakistani state. Unfortunately, millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were massacred depending upon on which side of the border they resided at the time of the partition. As the slaughter was based on the religion of the people, genocide applies to this historic event.

During the 1960s in Africa, Nigeria enforced a policy of starvation in certain regions, which ultimately resulted in the declaration of independence of the nation of Biafra. Nearly 1 million people are estimated to have died as a result of this event.

Also in Africa, the nation of Burundi obtained its independence in 1962. In 1972, Burundi's Hutu people were subject to genocide by the Tutsis; in 1993, the Tutsis suffered genocide at the hands of the Hutus.

In the late 1970s, in the nation of Cambodia, the political group known as the Khmer Rouge engaged in genocide that resulted in the deaths of more than 1.5 million people. Cambodian society was essentially destroyed by this historical event.

In the 1990s, after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia into several smaller nations, numerous acts of genocide were committed involving nations such as Bosnia and Serbia. A special tribunal was established by the UN in The Hague to prosecute the people responsible for the genocide.

In 1994, the genocides of Rwanda occurred involving the Hutu and Tutsi peoples. More than 800,000 people were slain. As noted above, other incidents of genocide had occurred between the Hutus and the Tutsis. The genocide was so horrific that the UN established a special tribunal to prosecute the persons responsible for the genocides.

The foregoing list of modern examples of genocide is incomplete, representing only a brief review to demonstrate that genocide occurs in all cultures, religions, and political systems.

Causes of Genocide

There are several theories of the causes of genocide. One theory, presented by Leo Kuper, lists five reasons: (1) the need for a scapegoat on which to blame economic or social troubles (which is how the Nazi regime rose in Germany prior to and during World War II), (2) the need to advance colonial interests (as happened in colonial America), (3) the need to justify political positions or policies (as the Soviet Union did during the Great Famine), (4) the need to justify government actions on biological grounds (again, as Nazi Germany did), and (5) the need to advance political or belligerent actions on religious grounds (as the Catholic Church did during the Cathar and other Crusades). Although these reasons might explain why genocide occurs, they can never justify it.

Genocide is firmly established in international law as a crime. There are a number of examples of genocide being prosecuted by special tribunals, usually established by the UN. Despite the universal acceptance of the categorization of genocide as a serious crime, it still occurs.

See also

Conventions, Agreements, and Regulations, Crimes Against Humanity, Deportation, War Crimes, War Crimes Tribunals

Further Readings

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