

# The 8 Stages of Genocide

By Gregory H. Stanton [\[i\]](#)

The International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines "genocide."

"In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

## Acts of genocide

During the Rwandan genocide, the U.S. State Department's lawyers infamously directed U.S. diplomats to avoid use of the word genocide. Only "acts of genocide" were being committed, they said. It was a distinction without a difference.

The crime of genocide is defined by the Genocide Convention as "acts of genocide." It does not exist apart from those acts. A pattern of acts of genocide is frequently called "genocide" and evidence of such a pattern of ethnic, racial, or religious massacres is strong evidence of genocidal intent.

The Convention declares the following acts punishable:

- "(a) Genocide;
- (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide;
- (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;
- (d) Attempt to commit genocide;
- (e) Complicity in genocide."

The Genocide Convention is sometimes misinterpreted as requiring the intent to destroy **in whole** a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. Some genocides have fit that description, notably the Holocaust and Rwanda. But most do not. Most are intended to destroy only **part** of a group. The Genocide Convention specifically includes the intentional killing of part of a group as genocide. It reaffirms this definition when it includes as among the acts that constitute genocide "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole **or in part**". Those who shrink from applying the term "genocide" usually ignore the "in part".

## Intent

Intent can be directly proven from statements or orders by the perpetrators. But more often, it must be deduced from the systematic pattern of their acts, a pattern that could only arise out of specific intent.

Criminal law distinguishes intent from motive. A murderer may have many motives -- gaining property or eliminating a rival for power. But his intent is determined by the purpose of his act: Did he purposely kill the victim? Genocidal intent is determined by the specific purpose of the act: Did the killer purposely kill the victim as part of a plan to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, at least in part?

The motive of the killer to take the victim's property or to politically dominate the victim's group does not remove genocidal intent if the victim is chosen because of his ethnic, national, racial, or religious group.

A plan for genocide doesn't need to be written out. An act of genocide may arise in a culture that considers members of another group less than human, where killing members of that group is not considered murder. This is the culture of impunity characteristic of genocidal societies. In Burundi, Tutsis who kill Hutus have seldom been convicted or even arrested. Massacres are ethnic, intended to destroy parts of the other ethnic group.

Leo Kuper calls such mass killings genocidal massacres. They are acts of genocide even if only a part of a group (the intellectuals, officers, leaders) is targeted.

## **THE GENOCIDAL PROCESS**

Prevention of genocide requires a structural understanding of the genocidal process. Genocide has eight stages or operational processes. The first stages precede later stages, but continue to operate throughout the genocidal process. Each stage reinforces the others. A strategy to prevent genocide should attack each stage, each process. The eight stages of genocide are classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial.

### **Classification**

All languages and cultures require classification - division of the natural and social world into categories. We distinguish and classify objects and people. All cultures have categories to distinguish between "us" and "them," between members of our group and others. We treat different categories of people differently. Racial and ethnic classifications may be defined by absurdly detailed laws -- the Nazi Nuremberg laws, the "one drop" laws of segregation in America, or apartheid racial classification laws in South Africa. Racist societies often prohibit mixed categories and outlaw miscegenation. Bipolar societies are the most likely to have genocide. In Rwanda and Burundi, children are the ethnicity of their father, either Tutsi or Hutu. No one is mixed. Mixed marriages do not result in mixed children.

### **Symbolization**

We use symbols to name and signify our classifications. We name some people Hutu and others Tutsi, or Jewish or Gypsy, or Christian or Muslim. Sometimes physical characteristics - skin color or nose shape - become symbols for classifications. Other symbols, like customary dress or facial scars, are socially imposed by groups on their own members. After the process has reached later stages (dehumanization, organization, and polarization) genocidal governments in the preparation stage often require members of a targeted group to wear an identifying symbol or distinctive clothing -- e.g. the yellow star. The Khmer Rouge forced people from the Eastern Zone to wear a blue-checked scarf, marking them for forced relocation and elimination.

### **Dehumanization**

Classification and symbolization are fundamental operations in all cultures. They become steps of genocide only when combined with dehumanization. Denial of the humanity of others is the step that permits killing with impunity. The universal human abhorrence of murder of members of one's own group is overcome by treating the victims as less than human. In incitements to genocide the target groups are called disgusting animal names - Nazi propaganda called Jews "rats" or "vermin"; Rwandan Hutu hate radio referred to Tutsis as "cockroaches." The targeted group is often likened to a "disease", "microbes", "infections" or a "cancer" in the body politic. Bodies of genocide victims are often mutilated to express this denial of humanity. Such atrocities then become the justification for revenge killings, because they are evidence that the killers must be monsters, not human beings themselves.

### **Organization**

Genocide is always collective because it derives its impetus from group identification. It is always organized, often by states but also by militias and hate groups. Planning need not be elaborate: Hindu mobs may hunt down Sikhs or Muslims, led by local leaders. Methods of killing need not be complex: Tutsis in Rwanda died from machetes; Muslim Chams in Cambodia from hoe-blades to the back of the neck ("Bullets must not be wasted," was the rule at Cambodian extermination prisons, expressing the dehumanization of the victims.) The social organization of genocide varies by culture. It reached its most mechanized, bureaucratic form in the Nazi death camps. But it is always organized, whether by the Nazi SS or the Rwandan *Interahamwe*. Death squads may be trained for mass murder, as in Rwanda, and then force everyone to participate, spreading hysteria and overcoming individual resistance. Terrorist groups will pose one of the greatest threats of genocidal mass murder in the future as they gain access to chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons.

### **Polarization**

Genocide proceeds in a downward cycle of killings until, like a whirlpool, it reaches the vortex of mass murder. Killings by one group may provoke revenge killings by the other. Such massacres are aimed at polarization, the systematic elimination of moderates who would slow the cycle. The first to be killed in a genocide are moderates from the killing group who oppose the extremists: the Hutu Supreme Court Chief Justice and Prime Minister in Rwanda, the Tutsi Archbishop in Burundi. Extremists target moderate leaders and their families. The center cannot

hold. The most extreme take over, polarizing the conflict until negotiated settlement is impossible.

## **Preparation**

Preparation for genocide includes **identification**. Lists of victims are drawn up. Houses are marked. Maps are made. Individuals are forced to carry ID cards identifying their ethnic or religious group. Identification greatly speeds the slaughter. In Germany, the identification of Jews, defined by law, was performed by a methodical bureaucracy. In Rwanda, identity cards showed each person's ethnicity. In the genocide, Tutsis could then be easily pulled from cars at roadblocks and murdered. Throwing away the cards did not help, because anyone who could not prove he was Hutu, was presumed to be Tutsi. Hutu militiamen conducted crude mouth exams to test claims of Hutu identity.

Preparation also includes **expropriation** of the property of the victims. It may include **concentration**: herding of the victims into ghettos, stadiums, or churches. In its most extreme form, it even includes construction of extermination camps, as in Nazi-ruled Europe, or conversion of existing buildings – temples and schools – into extermination centers in Cambodia. **Transportation** of the victims to these killing centers is then organized and bureaucratized.

## **Extermination**

The seventh step, the final solution, is extermination. It is considered extermination, rather than murder, because the victims are not considered human. They are vermin, rats or cockroaches. Killing is described by euphemisms of purification: “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, “ratonade” (rat extermination) in Algeria. Targeted members of alien groups are killed, often including children. Because they are not considered persons, their bodies are mutilated, buried in mass graves or burnt like garbage.

## **Denial**

Every genocide is followed by denial. The mass graves are dug up and hidden. The historical records are burned, or closed to historians. Even during the genocide, those committing the crimes dismiss reports as propaganda. Afterwards such deniers are called “revisionists.” Others deny through more subtle means: by characterizing the reports as “unconfirmed” or “alleged” because they do not come from officially approved sources; by minimizing the number killed; by quarreling about whether the killing fits the legal definition of genocide (“definitionalism”); by claiming that the deaths of the perpetrating group exceeded that of the victim group, or that the deaths were the result of civil war, not genocide. In fact, civil war and genocide are not mutually exclusive. Most genocides occur during wars.

## **PREVENTION**

A full strategy for preventing genocide should include attack on each of genocide's operational processes.

**Classification** may be attacked either through devaluation of the distinctive features used to classify (e.g. amalgamation of regional dialects and accents by exposure to mass media, standardized education, and promotion of a common language) or through use of transcendent categories, such as common nationality or common humanity. Promotion of mixed categories, such as the financial incentives for inter-caste marriages in Tamil Nadu, India, may help break down group endogamy, but do not combat genocide in bipolar societies where mixed categories have no recognition. In bipolar societies, transcendent institutions like the Catholic Church should actively campaign against ethnic classifications. Special effort should be made to keep such institutions from being captured and divided by the same forces that divide the society, e.g. through hierarchical discipline from Rome for the Roman Catholic Church.

**Symbolization** can be attacked by legally forbidding use of hate symbols (e.g. swastikas) or ethnic classification words. "Nigger" or "kaffir" as racial expletives may be outlawed as "hate speech." Group marking like tribal scarring may be outlawed, like gang clothing. The problem is that legal limitations on hate speech will fail if unsupported by popular cultural enforcement. Though Hutu and Tutsi were forbidden words in Burundi until the 1980's, the prohibition had little effect, since other euphemisms and code-words replaced them. Prohibition may even become counter-productive, as part of an ideology of denial, which prevents people from naming, discussing and overcoming deep cultural divisions. However, without symbols for our classifications, they would become literally insignificant. Yellow stars became insignificant in parts of France and Bulgaria because many Jews refused to wear them and were not turned in by their Christian neighbors, who rejected the Nazi's classification system. In cultures that reject negative symbolization, resistance can be a powerful preventive tactic. In Denmark, the popular resistance to Nazi classification and symbolization was so strong that the Nazis did not even dare to impose the yellow star, and Danish "fishermen" smuggled ninety-five percent of Danish Jews to safety in Sweden.

**Dehumanization** should be opposed openly whenever it shows its ugly face. Genocidal societies lack constitutional protection for countervailing speech, and should be treated differently than democracies. Hate radio stations should be shut down, and hate propaganda banned. Although restrictions on free speech are not necessary in a healthy polity, even in democracies hate speech should be actively exposed and publicly opposed. Direct incitements to genocide should be outlawed. Incitement to genocide is not protected speech. Hate crimes and atrocities should be promptly punished. Impunity breeds contempt for law, and emboldens genocidists, who can literally get away with murder.

**Organizations** that commit acts of genocide should be banned, and membership in them made a crime. Freedom of association in a democratic society should not be misconstrued as protecting membership in criminal organizations. At Nuremberg, membership in the SS was itself prosecuted. Similarly the *Interahamwe* and other genocidal hate groups should be outlawed, and their members arrested and tried for conspiracy to commit genocide. The UN should impose arms embargoes on governments or militias that commit genocide. Because arms embargoes are difficult to enforce, for Rwanda, the UN established an international commission to investigate and document violations of the arms embargo. The UN may also require member states to freeze the assets of persons who organize and finance genocidal groups.

**Polarization** can be fought by providing financial and technical aid to the moderate center. It may mean security protection for moderate leaders, or assistance to human rights groups. Assets of extremists may be seized, and visas for international travel denied to them. Coups d'état by extremists should be immediately opposed by targeted international sanctions on their leaders.

**Preparation:** Identification of victims considerably speeds genocide. When ID cards identify victims' ethnic or religious group, or when victims are forced to wear yellow stars, the killing is made efficient. As soon as such symbolic markers are imposed, a Genocide Watch should be declared and diplomatic pressure should demand their abolition and impose targeted sanctions on regime leaders. When death lists are drawn up, the international community should recognize that genocide is imminent, and mobilize for armed intervention. Those identified should be given asylum, and assistance in fleeing their persecutors. Had the U.S. or Britain in Palestine accepted all Jewish immigrants, millions of lives might have been saved from the Holocaust.

**Extermination** whether carried out by governments or by patterned mob violence, can only be stopped by force. Armed intervention must be rapid and overwhelming. Safe areas should be established with real military protection. An intervention force without robust rules of engagement, such as UNAMIR in Rwanda in April, 1994 or UNPROFOR in Bosnia, is worse than useless because it gives genocide victims false hope of security in churches or unsafe "safe areas", delaying their organization for self-defense. In bipolar societies, separation into self-defense zones is the best protection for both groups, particularly if international troops create a buffer zone between them.

Experience with UN peacekeeping has shown that humanitarian intervention should be carried out by a multilateral force authorized by the UN, but led by UN members, rather than by the UN itself. The Military Staff Committee envisioned in Article 47 of the UN Charter has never been organized, and the UN does not have a standing army. The strongest member states must therefore shoulder this responsibility in conjunction with other UN members. The U.S. is now promoting the organization of an African Crisis Response Initiative composed of African military units coordinated and trained by the U.S., Europeans, and other powers. Regional forces such as those of NATO, ECOWAS, or the EU, or mandated by the African Union or Organization of American States may also effectively intervene if given strong support by major military powers.

**Denial**, the final stage of genocide is best overcome by public trials and truth commissions, followed by years of education about the facts of the genocide, particularly for the children of the group or nation that committed the crime. The black hole of forgetting is the negative force that results in future genocides. When Adolf Hitler was asked if his planned invasion of Poland was a violation of international law, he scoffed, "Who ever heard of the extermination of the Armenians?" Impunity - literally getting away with murder -- is the weakest link in the chains that restrain genocide. In Rwanda, Hutus were never arrested and brought to trial for massacres of Tutsis that began years before the April, 1994 genocide. In Burundi, Tutsi youth gangs have never been tried for killing Hutus. Burundi judges are nearly all Tutsis, as are the army and police. They seldom, if ever, convict their own.

Social order abhors a legal vacuum. When courts do not dispense justice the victims have no recourse but revenge. In societies with histories of ethnic violence, the cycle of killing will eventually spiral downward into the vortex of genocide. In such societies, the international community should fill the legal vacuum by creating tribunals to prosecute and try genocide. That has been done for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and will soon be done for Cambodia. We finally have the International Criminal Court (ICC) that will have world-wide jurisdiction to try genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. But the ICC still has no jurisdiction over genocide committed in nations that contain over half of the world's population because their nations have not become parties to the Rome Treaty of the ICC. The Court must be supported by effective institutions to arrest and imprison those indicted and convicted by the Court. Only such a permanent court will provide a deterrent to those planning future genocides.

The strongest antidote to genocide is justice.

\* This article was originally written in 1996 and was presented as the first Working Paper (GS 01) of the Yale Program in Genocide Studies in 1998.

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