

Genocide: Dueling Arguments

Directions: After reading the article “[Genocide isn’t History](#)” by Norman Naimark, read the two dueling arguments over labeling the Columbian Exchange as a “genocide” below. Based on your readings, do you agree with the “expanded” definition of Naimark, or think a narrow definition of genocide is better? Explain your opinion by summarizing both arguments presented and then making a case for which definition is more historically accurate and why.

Document 1

Source Context: *American studies scholar David E. Stannard argued in 1992 that what happened to Native Americans at the hands of Europeans was genocide.*

Note: This definition of genocide is still the official one, adopted in 2002. A total of 104 nations now support the International Criminal Court’s right to try cases of genocide according to it.

The term “genocide” was coined by Raphael Lemkin in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944. ... Under [his] definition, “genocide was the coordinated and planned annihilation of a national, religious, or racial group. ...” Finally, in 1948, the Genocide Convention of the United Nations was adopted. ... [It gave a definition as follows:] [G]enocide means ... acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: killing ... [or] 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; ... imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” ... In light of the U.N. language ... it is impossible to know what [happened] in the Americas during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and not conclude it was genocide.

Source: *David E. Stannard, American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 279-81.*

Document 2

Source Context: *American historian James Axtell in 1992 urged caution about using “genocide” to describe what happened to Native Americans at the hands of Europeans.*

The latest and most inclusive definition of genocide [from *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, 1988] is simply “a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator.” ... “Genocide” ... is historically inaccurate as a description of the vast majority of encounters between Europeans and Indians. Certainly no colonial government ever tried to exterminate all of the Indians as Indians, as a race, and you can count on one hand the authorized colonial attempts to annihilate even single tribes. ... The vast majority of settlers had no interest in killing Indians—[they] were much too valuable for trade and labor. ... [T]he vast majority of Indians succumbed, not to colonial oppression or conquistador cruelty—as real and pervasive as those were—but to new and lethal epidemic diseases imported inadvertently by the settlers. ... Genocide, as distinguished from other forms of cruelty, oppression, and death, played a very small role in the European conquest of the New World.

Source: *James Axtell, Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 261-3.*