Genocide isn't History – It's Part of the Long-Term Human Experience

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The purpose of this article is to explore several fundamental propositions that underlie my recent book manuscript, A World History of Genocide, which I hope will appear before the end of the year with Oxford University Press.

The general idea behind the book is to historicise genocide in the *longue durée* of world history, making it clear that mass killing of the sort experienced, for example, by the Armenians in 1915-16 (the centennial of which we mark this year), the Jews during the Holocaust, or the North American Indians (at the hands of European and American settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries), is part and parcel of human history, rather than standing outside the historical experience.

Moreover, the sources, the dynamics, and the consequences of genocide become clearer in light of comparison with other genocides.

The propositions about the character of genocide that are at the foundations of the book are not uncontroversial. Each of them requires a long and systematic explanation. But for the sake of keeping the article to size, let me simply enumerate them with the briefest of descriptions of their importance.

Genocide through the ages

Genocide has occurred throughout history, from the very beginnings of the social organisation of human communities until the present.

This approach is best exemplified by Ben Kiernan's masterful 2007 volume, Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide. In it, Kiernan explores the *longue durée* of the history of genocide based on four themes:

- the memory and recitation of classical cases of genocide into later periods of history
- the relationship between agricultural pursuits, land, and the mass murder
- the emergence of race thinking, racism, and the creation of the other, and
- expansionism, the seizure of territory and the killing of its inhabitants.

Kiernan, and after him Mark Levene, who has authored four impressive volumes on the history of genocide, make the case that the history of genocide can and should be broken down into general periods that reflect the stages of the development of state and society over the centuries.

Kiernan is ready to begin his history with the ancient world, the Old Testament, the Greeks, and the Romans, an approach I now share. Levene argues that genocide cannot be thought to have taken place before the foundations of the modern state, which he dates from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Many historians – I was once one of them – claim that one should not speak of genocide before the 20th century.

Wherever one begins his or her narrative, genocide both has a constant set of characteristics, yet also changes its aspects over time.

Genocide in the ancient world should be distinguished from genocide of the great conquerors from Alexander the Great to the Mongols.

Crusader genocide against the “Saracens” in the Middle East and the Cathars or Albigensians in southern France in the 13th century should be differentiated from the genocidal actions of the Spanish in the New World in the first half of the 16th century.

The category of settler genocide, which spans the murderous campaigns by European settlers against Aboriginal people in the Antipodes, against native Indian peoples in North America, and against the so-called “Bushmen” in southern Africa, among many others, has its own particular set of dynamics that only in part reproduce genocides of earlier and later periods.

The transition to modern genocide, which one might date from the German attacks on the Herero and Nama in southwest Africa, 1904-7 and the Armenian genocide of 1915, reflect aspects of both settler genocide and of modern genocide.

Finally, genocide in our own era – Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, eastern Congo – has its particular history, closely tied to changes in the norms of the international system regarding human rights and genocide prevention.

Genocide is global

Genocide has occurred in various parts of the world and in different types of civilisations and cultures. We will never know all of the genocides that have taken place in the past.

While working on this article, I happened to read a March 2015 article in The New Yorker on dying languages, which discusses the genocide of the Sel’knam, a “nomadic tribe of unknown origin,” which lived in Tierra del Fuego in Chile.

In an all too familiar scenario (think about the fate of the Yuki Indians in Mendocino County in the 1860s or of the Aborigines in Tasmania in the 1820s and 1830s), at the end of the 19th century gold prospectors and sheep ranchers coveted the Sel’knam’s lands, massacred them in large numbers, and reduced them from a population of approximately 400,000 to some three hundred.

Sometimes there are no records remaining of the elimination of peoples and even historical memory of past atrocities disappears. Sometimes genocidal events in history, like that of the Sel’knam, simply escape our gaze.

Lemkin's definition

The definition of genocide developed by the Polish Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in the 1930s and 1940s, which was codified in the December 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, is a useful one, especially as adumbrated since the 1990s in the international tribunals.

In his first stab at the concept of genocide – what he then called "barbarism" – in the early 1930s, Lemkin presented to a League of Nations sponsored conference of international lawyers the concept of the crime of mass murder that included social and political groups as potential targets, as well as ethnic and religious ones.

Lemkin coined the term "genocide" in his 1944 book Axis Rule in Occupied Europe. No doubt under the influence of the Holocaust, which had engulfed many members of his own family, he limited genocide to ethnic, religious, and national groups. As I argued in my 2010 book, Stalin's Genocides, it was primarily the influence of the Soviet Union on the deliberations connected with the December 1948 genocide convention that confined genocide to ethnic, national, religious and racial groups.

Genocide, in my view, should include such cases as the Cambodian genocide, where social and political groups were the main categories of victims, the mass murder of some 5-600,000 Indonesian communists in 1965-6, which was focused on a political group, and Stalin's elimination of "kulaks", Ukrainians peasants, "asocials", and a series of imagined groups of alleged political "enemies of the people" in the 1930s.

Overly politicised?

Some scholars believe that the term genocide has ceased to have serious meaning because of its overly-politicised use by victim groups of the most variable and diverse character. It is certainly the case that the word has the kind of resonance that makes many victim groups anxious to use the appellation as a way to underline their own suffering. But both the international courts and reputable genocide scholars continue to argue for the need for a "high bar" for genocide.

The intentionality of the perpetrators to eliminate a group in whole or in part, as defined by the genocide convention and the international tribunals, must be clearly demonstrated. The victim group must be the object of campaigns of mass killing, as well as other attacks on their very existence that are detailed in the 1948 convention.

As long as scholars and jurists continue to think about genocide as "the crime of crimes", there is every reason to think that it will continue to be relevant to scholarly research and judicial prosecutions.

Other scholars lament that the term genocide is too all-encompassing and too imprecise to be of much use. They prefer terms like ethnicide, democide, politicide, sociocide, or even genderocide as a way to focus more concertedly on the specificities of the victim groups. Recently the Italian scholar, Andreas Graziozi, has suggested the term "demotomy" to indicate the surgical nature of the removal of peoples, especially as experienced in Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1930s.

My own view is that Lemkin's term works - and works well - when rigorously applied, based on the 1948 definition, to events past and present. Using newly devised social science terms artificially separates the legal discourse about genocide - which has been influential and important to the evolution of our understanding of genocide - from scholarly discussions.

Moreover, it creates a gulf between the popular understanding of genocide and the academic. This can only confuse questions of "naming" genocide, like the contemporary problems associated with the Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide or in past debates (inside and outside of government) about intervention in Rwanda and Darfur.

After Lemkin, our problem is not naming the crime of crimes; it is to understand it and prevent it from happening.