THE STEPS AND STAGES OF GENOCIDE

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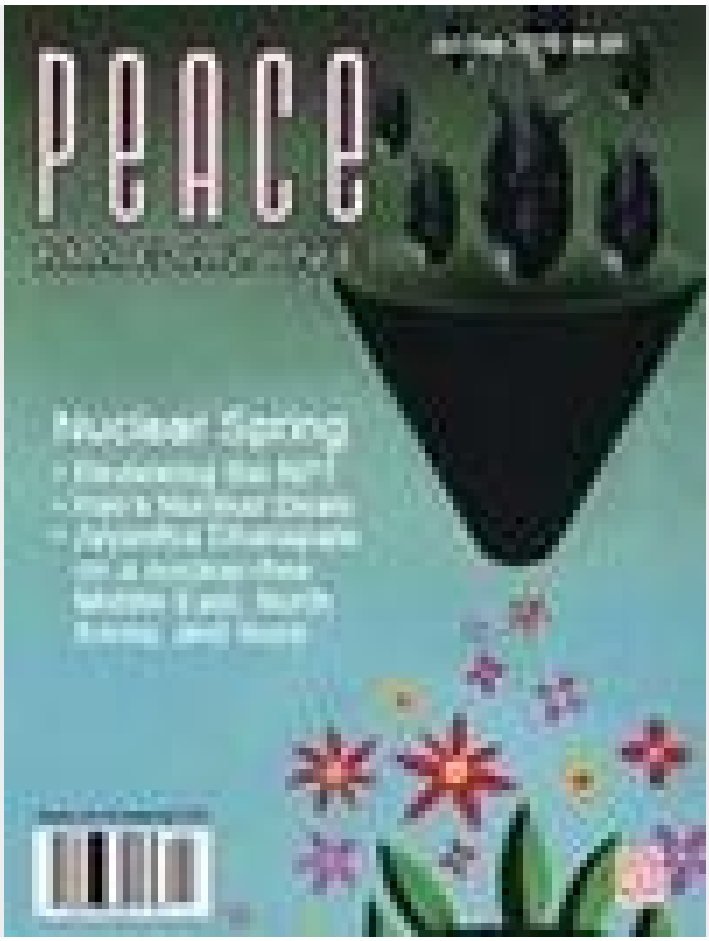

Category: Opinions

By Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Peace Magazine, July-Sep 2010

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The academic, government official, and activist Gregory Stanton outlined a framework of genocide with eight stages: *Classification, Symbolization, Dehumanization, Organization, Polarization, Preparation, Extermination* and finally *Denial*. He provides helpful details on aspects of each of these stages. We can explore each by listing the specific steps within it, adding some stages: *Stigmatization* and *Extreme Victimization*. Let's begin with the seemingly benign.

Classification

People classify all sorts of things— including other people. One easy way is to create dichotomous polar opposites (for instance, familiar/unfamiliar, high/low, strong/weak, like/dislike, friendly/hostile). Though this mental habit is ubiquitous across cultures, it can lead to the use of simplistic, dualistic stereotypes that ignore variations within each category, as well as overlaps.

Symbolization

People often employ verbal and visual shortcuts in classifying, ignoring diversity and labelling groups with a simplified name or symbol. Such a label can seize upon a group's characteristic clothing, behavior or alleged physiological features.

Stigmatization

One risk in such dualistic thinking is to unjustifiably slip from describing to judging. It is easy to go beyond describing "us in contrast to them" to judging that "we are better than them." Before long the differentiation between "us" and "them" becomes inequality. This is the beginning of stigmatization.

Structural inequality can have devastating consequences for relations between different ethnic, racial, or religious groups.

Dehumanization

It is natural to be apprehensive about that which we do not know, so we may slip into criticizing that which is unfamiliar. Making fun of others can easily turn from childish play to adult hate speech, cruel jokes and vengeful caricatures. The hazing of youth can become the mean taunting of adolescents and the victimization of adults. Prejudicial words can be reinforced by parents, school teachers, religious and political leaders. This process can be accentuated by a history of scapegoating or blaming a group for all of society's ills.

The minority group is portrayed as falling outside the main community and perceived as not belonging. Labels such as "enemy" are hurled, particularly if the group is thought to be consorting with a foreign power. Members of the minority are portrayed as "inferior" or as "infidels" and made a target of scorn and wrath.

The victim group is often portrayed in some sub-human category: perhaps as mere cattle or as dirty, disease-ridden, vermin, rats, snakes, bugs, parasites, or cockroaches that must be eradicated.

Organization

To kill humans on a massive scale, organizational coordination is required. There is mobilization of militia or vigilante groups. To prepare for this the centralized state manipulates media images. The victimizers are idealized, while the victims are vilified. State censorship blocks accounts of the victims' desperate pleas for assistance.

Polarization And Increased Inequality

The victim group's rights are stripped away: the political right to collective self-rule, the social right to collective autonomy, and even the right to exist are denied. The authoritarian state formalizes and magnifies legal inequalities, stripping the victim group of its citizenship rights. They are prohibited from state employment, particularly at the senior levels of government and forbidden from entering the military. It is easier to victimize an unarmed targeted group. The despotic regime denies the minority group's right to self-defence or to own weapons. Social organizations or political parties that might represent the vulnerable group are disbanded, leaving them powerless.

A genocidal regime seeks to augment the targeted group's social disadvantages. It uses confinement, restriction to certain regional locales, or urban ghettoes. They can be confined at specific times of the day (e.g. evening curfews) and marginalized into only lower caste jobs. The goal is to weaken them and move them closer to annihilation.

A genocidal state frequently engages in religious discrimination. For example, it may curtail the celebration of religious holidays or the wearing of religious symbols. Thugs may disrupt a minority group's religious services and the state may ban religious rites, close religious schools, monasteries, and places of worship, force the disrobing of religious leaders, and confiscate religious property.

A key early step is ethnic discrimination. Minority ethnic names are frowned upon or banned. Hiring practices and promotions to senior positions are limited by quotas or forbidden. In later stages members of the ethnic minority are dismissed from their jobs, have their savings and property confiscated, lose their pensions, state benefits, and means of livelihood. Closely related is linguistic discrimination, which begins by denying the uniqueness and importance of the minority group's language, but leads to banning the language from commerce, public discourse, books, and newspapers. Minority language schools are closed.

Banning an indigenous language in primary schools puts an ethnic minority at a huge disadvantage, which may be accentuated by preventing a group's access to higher education. Other forms of discrimination may also occur: extra taxes may be imposed, along with prohibition from high status jobs and the confiscation of personal property. This is a quick way to acquire wealth and satiate the envy of a rival group.

Another technique is dislocation. Removed from their jobs, homes, historic homeland, victims are separated from the rest of society and social support. Inter-ethnic, inter-racial or inter-denominational marriage is banned. Political figures who protest such measures are liquidated.

Preparation

Genocide requires substantial preparation. The intended victims need to be identified and located. Step by step, they are separated from the public and disarmed—especially men of military age. The regime heads the death lists with the names of leading persons who might rally resistance. All members of the victim group are forced to wear identifying symbols. Later, this will speed up the actual mass killing.

Extreme Victimization

Another stage involves extreme victimization, which can involve suffering and torture. Victims may be relocated to inhospitable locales, segregated into impoverished, crowded ghettoes or reservations. Later, they may be relocated yet again to even grimmer concentration camps. The survivors of these conditions are subsequently sent to extermination camps/sites for executions en masse. The weakened victims now offer little physical resistance. They have been prepared for death.

With increasing starvation and exposure, the victims are force-marched into inhospitable locales

with insufficient food, shelter, or medical care. Dedicated foreign humanitarian groups are denied access to them. The genocidal bullies taunt the victims before killing them. Ritualized humiliation takes place to further dehumanize the victims prior to death. Often this is achieved by stripping the young women, mothers, and even grandmothers naked. Sexual assault of pretty teenage girls occurs but can soon descend into gang rape of young innocent children and elderly women.

Before the killings violence ranges from minor assault to mutilation and torture. Other family members may be forced to watch the torture and killing before it is their turn for death.

Extermination

In the end, genocide is about mass killing, which usually begins by decapitating the leadership of the targeted group. Civic and religious leaders are swiftly killed. Prominent journalists, academics, literary figures, and business leaders are next, then teachers. Once the leadership has been eliminated, it becomes easier to exterminate the rank and file. The killing grows from small clusters to larger ones until the genocide becomes an assembly-line. At some point, a pause may occur—not because of remorse, but the temporary exhaustion of the executioners or the incapacity of the death camps to keep up the frantic pace.

Once the group's leaders are disposed of, the next sector is that of the males of military age. This precludes any possible revolt. Young children and pregnant women are murdered en masse. This ensures that the targeted minority has no future. Sometimes children, particularly pretty young girls, are kidnapped. Their names and identities are stolen and they are forcibly converted to the dominant religion. Their original roots are now hidden from them.

Those who actually do the killing can be former neighbors from a different clan who may be seeking material gain from the property suddenly available. More often, the killing is by fanatical vigilante groups, militias, or paramilitary special extermination units. Their work is facilitated by the police and the army. In particularly gruesome incidents, the killing is actually done by the victim's own family members, coerced into such acts by the genocidaires who threaten far worse, if their orders are not obeyed. For many, suicide is seen as the better option. Forced into a terrible "Sophie's choice," some parents lovingly spare their young children from further horror by choosing a swift, bittersweet act of deadly relief. The wailing of grieving mothers is a haunting sound never to be forgotten.

Mass killing can range from close use of hand-held weapons to remote, high-tech ones. In antiquity, there are numerous accounts of victor armies hacking to death tens of thousands of non-military persons from a defeated rival city or region. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this ritual continues with automatic weapons. It is easier now to kill entire villages. Genocidaires are fuelled by such hatred that mere killing cannot satisfy them. They want the victims to suffer. Scientists can now apply modern laboratory techniques of killing with greater precision, while claiming to be advancing scientific knowledge.

Denial

The killing, for the most part, occurs in an intense peak of mass slaughter over a relatively short period of time. By contrast, denial covers a much longer time and takes place before, during, and after the deadly deeds. It can occur even a century or more later.

Before the genocide begins, the conspirators deny any malevolent intent or the existence of secret plans. When rumors or intelligence reports first circulate of such possible intents, the public is usually assured that such fears are the work of alarmists.

During genocide, the state employs a screen of secrecy and censorship. Those who dare to defy its decrees are put to death. The propaganda apparatus launches a barrage of misinformation and public denials. Meanwhile, the regime blames the victims for disloyalty and even for supposedly committing genocide. It prevents foreigners' access to the killing fields. Outside observers, reporters, diplomats, or humanitarian aid workers are confined to the capital city or banned from the entire country.

Dying has both a physical and a spiritual component, so a genocidal regime refuses to allow any religious burial rights for members of the victim group.

The architects of genocide usually try to destroy documentary evidence of their misdeeds. They order the killing squads to conceal the bodies or move them to more remote locales. When the numbers are too vast to transport en masse, the regime orders the dismemberment or destruction of the corpses. This hacking takes place after the murders. Body parts are discarded as food for dogs, left for wild animals to devour, or burned, or destroyed chemically. If there is insufficient time for these permanent acts of obliteration, attempts can be made to camouflage or bulldoze mounds over the mass grave pits. Violent deeds are done to silence potential witnesses, immobilize potential rescuers, and destroy any documentary evidence.

In its final few days in power, the genocidal regime often works feverishly to destroy as much evidence as possible. Documents are shredded or burned. Places of religious worship and cemeteries are dismantled. Centuries-old historic libraries and sites are destroyed. Records of the names of the dead are discarded. Documentation, demographic files, and statistical tables on the group's location and size are altered in efforts to diminish the scope of the regime's crimes.

A genocidal state's successor regime may continue the denial. Many of the rank and file members of society wish to hang onto ill-begotten gains, to escape possible future imprisonment, to avoid costly reparations, or to avoid psychological guilt. To foster denial they engage in historical revisionism. Former genocidaires write memoirs denying deeds and justifying their actions as having been required, given extraordinarily difficult conditions at the time. These persons employ euphemisms to describe their violent deeds: "forced deportations" becomes merely "relocation", the "crime of murder" becomes the "victims died due to many causes." Senior state officials deny that the label

'genocide' is germane in this particular setting. Instead, other factors, such as famine and disease, are cited. The victims themselves are blamed, in large part, for causing the terrible times or triggering what befell them. Key to the denial is the disputing of the actual numbers of those killed.

Despite efforts at historical revisionism, a denialist regime may have to eventually realize that its efforts to rewrite history are not accepted by the world's scholars. Indeed, there is a risk of criminal prosecution. Accordingly, stonewalling is used by the state, which blocks international investigations of the killing fields. The regime denies the legitimacy of the international court's or tribunal's jurisdiction, hoping to "get away with murder."

Frequently, all positive references to the victim group have been removed from school history texts. Villages, towns, and regions are renamed and a legal ban is imposed on the journalistic or academic use of the term "genocide." Failure to obey such Orwellian legislation can mean severe prison sentences for those found "guilty" of trying to disturb the state's official orthodoxy.

A state can do more than just deny. It can actively promote and fund others in their denial activities and writings. Thus, such a state may direct significant financing to writers who are willing to follow such a lucrative path. Careers and institutes can be promoted for those academics who echo the government's denial strategy. In some cases, preliminary research, ghostwriting and stock templates can be provided for foreign authors. Media consultants can be hired and political advertising bought for newspapers or websites. Overseas foundations or institutes may be established, whose purpose is nominally education, but whose primary purpose is, in practice, to deny genocide.

In a world of power politics and military alliances, harsh forms of realpolitik may occur. Overseas, other foreign governments, which share in a joint alliance system, are warned of grave national security consequences, if they dare to recognize genocide. A high profile author, who defies threats and continues to write about genocide, is assassinated; thereby conveying a swift and grim warning to others.

The combination of intra-state and inter-state war can be too much for the autocratic regime to handle. It is thus not uncommon for genocidal regimes (e.g. Talaat's Ottoman Turkey, Hitler's Nazi Germany, Pol Pot's Kampuchea, and Bagosora's Rwanda) to be defeated by rival foreign armies—but too late for most victims. If the brutal regime is overthrown and there is risk of prosecution, the genocidal leaders, once full of bravado, now assume a false identity and go into hiding inside the country or flee into exile and request protection from a sympathetic foreign government. The goal is to avoid justice. In some cases, suicide is chosen by genocidaires.

If arrested and put on trial, they question the court's authority and claim that they did not know what was actually happening. Another tactic is to deny personal responsibility for the actual deeds. It is asserted that they were just taking orders from higher-ranking officials.

Conclusion

If anyone tries to suggest that genocide is an accident, prod them to consider how many steps and stages there are. It requires great effort to implement genocide. It is not just an accident of history or bad luck. Genocide is a result of ill will by a powerful group, which has the means of state-sanctioned mass killing.

Nevertheless, an analytical framework can assist us to recognize the steps and stages of genocide, to "Think About the Unthinkable." To understand genocide is the first step in eventually preventing it. It is essential if we are to live in peace and justice.

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