REFLECTIONS ON GENOCIDE: 2024

Posted on January 7, 2025 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Kingston ON, 31 December 2024
Painting: **"Why?"** by **Nora Patrich**

The year 2024 was in many ways a difficult year dealing with genocide. The enormous impact of the 2023 forced displacement of the Karabakh Armenians continues even today in the South Caucasus. There has also been scholarly discussion about some academics reassessing the Armenian Genocide of 1915 in terms of its magnitude and duration. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, bitter ethnic and religious conflict continue unabated. Scholars debate about which legal terms to employ in their in-depth analyses. There seems to be a general consensus that war crimes and crimes against humanity have not only occurred, but continue. Applying the term genocide to current events in the region, however, is controversial to some commentators.

As academic experts, part of our collective academic responsibility is to assess and comment on such mass atrocity crimes. Accordingly, I have corresponded with a number of international genocide scholars and human rights specialists on these difficult, intertwined topics. Our frank email exchanges have on occasion become the catalyst for me to write several new genocide poems. Where the political scientist perhaps pauses to reflect further, the poet's pen flows urgently warning anew of unfolding man-made calamities. These genocide poems reflect my grave reflections on the current devastatingly conflict-filled times. I trust the poems also offer hope for a more just and peaceful future world. It will not be easy, but we must engage in challenging and frank discussions. These poems seek to explore the honest exchange that is necessary.

* Searching for the Words
* Words and Deeds
* When Does Genocide Stop?
* Genocide or Not?
* Revisiting the Warsaw Ghetto: Eight Decades Later
* Adding Up the Dead
* Counting the Dead
* One Dead Child Too Many
* A Child is Born
* Religion and Genocide
* Witnessing Genocide from Afar

December 23, 2024

Searching for the words

Genocide is a profoundly difficult topic,
which needs to be discussed with frankness.
We can infer intent from behaviour.
Humans do it all the time.

Many of us wear glasses to see more clearly.
Some of us may need better prescriptions.
Or even to change their glasses.

If not the term genocide,
perhaps crimes against humanity,
or even war crimes
are better lenses through which to see disturbing events.

In any case,
we should not close our eyes
or turn away.
The orphans of genocide deserve better.

May 14-20, 2024

Words and Deeds

Before the genocidal deeds
comes the hate-filled destructive words.
But even before that
comes the annihilationist ideas.

Genocide is not a simple or spontaneous act.

It takes time to formulate the malevolent ideas,
then to follow through with the barrage of terrible words,
and actually conduct the dreadful, violent deeds.

To stop genocide,
we need to change the words
and think more caringly.
Love and understanding need to prevail
over hate and prejudice.

We can do it.
We can do it,
if we really try.

November 8 - December 31, 2024

When does genocide stop?

When does genocide stop?
Is it when the last victim is killed?

Is it when the last stones of a church are removed,
perhaps for a warehouse or stable?
Is it after legendary locations and landmarks are renamed,
obliterating their original titles?
Is it when the official textbooks no longer make reference
to the original indigenous people,
who once inhabited these lands?
Is it when the genocide denials cease?
Or does it ever fully stop in the former genocidal regimes?
Do the perpetrators' kin continue to wash over their history of malevolent deeds?
And then suggest that it is time to move on and forget?
When does genocide stop?
I really want to know.

November 9 - December 25, 2024

Genocide or Not?

Imagine the following scenarios unfold:
A perpetrator in year one kills over a hundred thousand
and the same perpetrator in year two kills another hundred thousand or more.
But the perpetrator in year three kills only tens of thousands
and in the last year kills tens of thousands more.

Do we conclude that in the first and second year,
it was genocide because the numbers were so high?
But in the latter two years,
it was not,
simply because the numbers were significantly lower?
Do we somehow infer the intent was not there?

But perhaps the deadly efficiency and opportunity
were different in the first two years, in contrast to the latter two years.
It may be the malevolent intent was still present,
but unable to be fully achieved.

Genocide in whole or in part,
more successful or less.
Is it still genocide in each case?

In the end,
hundreds of thousands of persons died,
and too many souls perished

December 9 - 25, 2024

Revisiting the Warsaw Ghetto: Eight Decades Later

Was it genocide?
If so, when?
And by what means?
How do we determine genocidal intent,
particularly when genocidaires lie so profusely?
Did we fully realize the malevolent deeds at the time?
Or only later with hindsight,
after mass slaughter by other means?
Can starvation and imprisonment be a form of genocide?
It is slower and, to some, seemingly less violent,
but it is no less deadly.

November 8 - December 31, 2024

Adding up the Dead

Over 40,000 persons killed and 100,000 injured in Gaza.
More than 3,000 killed and 14,000 injured in Lebanon.
At least 1,200 killed and hundreds injured in Israel.
Over 45,00 dead overall in the Middle East
and still counting.
It is a grim tally of another brutal war and extensive human suffering.
When will it cease?
If at all?

Perhaps, one day archeologists will find the scattered bones.
Will it matter from which shattered community the fragments came?

March 19 - December 25, 2024

Counting the Dead

Deliberate killing of one person is murder.
Killing of three persons is characterized as multiple murders.
Killing of 30 persons can be labelled as a multitude of deaths
or perhaps even mass murder.

We are usually jolted when there is one death.
But are appalled at the killing of thirty individuals.

But what words do we use when there is a killing of a thousand?

Or even tens of thousands?

Crimes against humanity perhaps is the fitting term.
In conflict settings, war crime seems a plausible term.
If an ethnic, racial or religious group is maliciously targetted,
we can posit that it is genocide.

And so, I ask,
'How do we assess the horrific loss of a thousand Jews
or forty thousand Palestinians?'

Instead of Jeremy Bentham's optimistic calculus
'the greatest happiness for the greatest number',
we seem to be perversely counting
'the most misery for the largest number'.

We are definitely pursuing the wrong side of the equation.
We can do better.
We need to be better.
Much better.

April 9 - December 25, 2024

One Dead Child Too Many

A dead child is profoundly troubling.
My view is that one dead child is equal to any other.
They should all count in the tragic ledger.
Just because a nation suffered immensely in the past
does not permit it to engage in new wrongdoings.
But too many believe it does.
Thus,
we have historical rationales offered for further slaughter.
And so,
the bleak cycle of death begins anew.

November 7 - December 25, 2024

A Child is Born

Murder is still murder,
even if part of the population elsewhere continues to live.
Mass murder is still mass murder,
even if the overall population survives.

In apartheid South Africa,
repression and state sponsored mass murder occurred,
even though the black population overall continued to grow due to the birth rate.
But hopefully no one would say:
No mass atrocity crimes occurred in apartheid South Africa.

A child killed is still a dead child.
A thousand, targetted and killed children is still a mass atrocity crime.

One needs to be brutally frank in an assessment.
We need to be careful not to unintentionally drift into genocide denial.

A friend tells you when not to make a critical error.
A genocide scholar has an obligation not to turn away from the suffering victims.

And so,
even though a child is born,
it does not mean genocide did not occur.

December 28, 2024

Religion and Genocide

As an atheist,
the longer I study genocide
the more I realize religion is more of a problem than a solution,
by excluding others of different faiths.
Wars of religious conquest have been a key part of human history.
On the current humanitarian crisis in the Middle East,
the genocide scholarly community has been profoundly impacted.
Discussions are often quite intense.
Religious background often seems to be a factor in the positions taken.
Maybe if we were all atheists,
conversations would be calmer.
Or perhaps not…

December 11, 2023 - December 25, 2024

Witnessing Genocides from Afar

We listen further,
learn more,
write yet again,
continue to teach,

and speak out,
as best we can.
And as we age,
we begin to mentor others,
as others did for us.
We also give one another a hug,
as we shed a tear
for so many
that I cannot count

*****

Alan Whitehorn is an emeritus professor at the Royal Military College of Canada. He received his BA (York) in Political Science & History and his MA and PhD (Carleton) in political science. In the mid-seventies, he served as the research director on the David Lewis memoirs. From 1978 to 2011 he was a professor of political science at RMC. In the mid-1990s, he was the first holder of the JS Woodsworth Chair in Humanities at Simon Fraser University. He was also a cross-appointed professor at Queen's University. As an academic, he writes on the topics of genocide, human rights, political parties and elections. As an award-winning poet, he explores the issue of genocide and its impact on Armenian-Canadian identity. For further information click on The Writers' Union of Canada.

There are no comments yet.