

5.3. Excerpt from “The Scourge of Genocide: Issues Facing Humanity Today and Tomorrow” by Samuel Totten

Most responsible world leaders decry the act of genocide, but seem to do so only after the fact. The complex and varying causes of genocide and the effects on victims are examined, as are proposals for remedying these human tragedies.

Source: Social Education, March 1999, pp. 116–121. Copyright 1999 National Council for the Social Studies. Used with permission.

More often than not, the international community has failed either to intervene when genocide was being perpetrated or to subsequently hold the perpetrators accountable for their actions. While one cannot be sanguine about the prospects for ending genocide, there are at least glimmers of hope in the commitment of some individuals and groups to staunch the mass bleeding of humanity. At the same time, there are counter forces—some subtle and some overt—that are bound to pose barriers in any attempt to come to grips with the problem.

Barriers to Ending Genocide

Most responsible world leaders decry the act of genocide. The problem is that they seem to do so after the fact, that is, after an act of genocide has been committed and members of the targeted group are lying dead in the tens to hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Indeed, during those periods when genocide is actually being carried out, it almost seems as if world leaders—including those at the United Nations—are time and again playing out a deadly and scurrilous game of "see no evil, hear no evil."

Undoubtedly, there are numerous reasons why world leaders, both individually and collectively, persistently ignore both the early warning signs of an impending genocide as well as the actual genocidal events. These include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) the concept of so-called "internal affairs" and the related issue of the primacy of national sovereignty, which cause many nations to hesitate before becoming involved in another nation's internal affairs; (b) the hesitancy to commit one's troops to a dangerous situation; (c) the lack of care regarding the problems of a nation whose geopolitical status is deemed "insignificant"; (d) the wariness of many nations at entering into agreements that could, at some point, subordinate national sovereignty to international will; and (e) a myriad of other reasons related directly to the concept of realpolitik.

Not surprisingly, the issue of "internal affairs" is often used by genocidal nations to keep "outsiders" at bay, and by "bystander" nations as an excuse for not acting to prevent the genocide. In effect, the group perpetrating genocide is asserting, "This is our business, not yours [e.g., the international community's], and we will handle our problems as we wish." Conversely, and while possibly sickened by the actions of the genocidal state, the onlooker nations are, in effect, saying, "As disturbing as the situation is, it [the perpetration of genocide] is their problem, not ours." Left unsaid but subsumed under the latter is the notion that "We don't want other nations poking their noses in our business, and thus we won't poke our nose in theirs."

The trouble with this attitude is that it ignores the central tenet of the Genocide Convention that genocide is a crime under international law. More specifically, Article 1 of the Convention states: "The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish. The problem, as Kuper notes, is that "The doctrine of humanitarian intervention, [which] may be defined as 'the right of one nation to use force against another nation for the purpose of protecting the inhabitants of that other nation from inhumane treatment by their governing sovereign,'" is clearly in conflict with the cardinal principles of respect for national unity, territorial integrity, and political independence." Until this thorny issue is resolved, the intervention of outside nations to prevent genocide is bound to remain problematic.

Hesitancy on the part of a nation to commit its own troops to a dangerous situation (e.g., where genocide is taking place in another nation) also acts as a deterrent vis-a-vis intervention. A classic case of late was the Clinton Administration's decision not to intervene in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia because of the so-called "Somalia factor." As Neier explains:

[I]n October 1993, the Somalia factor reappeared when eighteen Americans were killed in battle with the loyalists of a Somali warlord.. .Amid cries that America could not be policeman to the world, the episode gave Washington an additional reason not to deploy Americans in Bosnia...[R]etreat from the plan to intervene with force in Bosnia left the new president looking weak and inept. Accordingly, supporting the idea of a war crimes tribunal became...opportune to the Clinton Administration. It was a way to do something about Bosnia that would have no political cost domestically.

The same situation was reportedly at work regarding the Rwandan genocide:

The United States... heard early warnings of the slaughter but resisted getting involved until it was far too late ... It was the Americans, stinging from their failed peacekeeping operation in Somalia in 1993, who put up the most resistance to getting involved in Rwanda in the spring of 1994, aides to Mr. Annan [Secretary-General of the United Nations] said privately.

As cynical as it sounds, nations may also ignore genocide when it is perpetrated in a locale deemed of little or no geopolitical significance. Again, the genocide in Rwanda provides such an example.

There is also the wariness of many nations to enter into agreements that could, at some point, subordinate national sovereignty to international will. A case in point is the fact that the United States did not ratify the UN Genocide Convention until 1988, due to the fact that within the United States "suspicion of international law has remained a potent political force." This issue is obviously tied to interest in preserving one's own internal affairs from interference by other nations.

Finally, there is a wide array of other reasons for nations to act tentatively about preventing and/or intervening in genocide that relate to perceived national interest, or realpolitik. As Charny trenchantly notes:

Without doubt, one of the greatest obstacles to progress is the fact that, with few exceptions, leaders and governments employ self-interest cruelly and unashamedly... [For example, as of 1988] the United States remained a supporter of Pol Pot [the architect of the Cambodian genocide

between 1975-1979] as the vested leader of the Cambodian people so as to undermine the standing of the Vietnam-supported government of Cambodia. This left the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Cuba trying to unseat the Pol Pot representation.. .Prior to the time that Vietnam fought against Pol Pot, the same Soviet Union was supporting the "Agrarian People's Government" of Pol Pot despite the reports of massive genocidal killing, while the United States was bringing to bear impassioned spokesmanship for human life and liberty against him.

Up until the mid-1990s, the international community's record on bringing perpetrators of genocide to justice was nothing short of dismal. The examples are many and include those leaders responsible for genocide in Uganda (Idi Amin), Cambodia (Pol Pot, Leng Sary, Khieu Samphan, and Non Chea), and Bosnia Herzegovina (Radovan Karadzic and Rakdo Mladic). However, the Cambodian government did recently arrest Ta Mok, a top military commander in the Khmer Rouge, and plans to try him.

Early Warning Systems

As humanity moves into the 21st century, it is still struggling to determine the most effective means for intervening in and/or preventing genocide from being perpetrated. As previously noted, numerous scholars are examining situations and signals that need to be monitored in order to detect whether various geopolitical situations are likely to erupt into genocidal acts.

Some of the specific signals that may come into play include: (1) ongoing civil and human rights violations, particularly those that target specific groups of people (as was common during the Nazi reign of reign of terror during the Holocaust years); (2) newspaper articles or radio commentaries that systematically disparage, malign, or attempt to ostracize a particular group (again, this use of media for organized propaganda was common during the Holocaust); (3) radio reports that incite violence against a particular group of people (as happened in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide); (4) sporadic and violent attacks against a particular group of people by government or government-sponsored forces; and (5) "ethnic cleansing," wherein a targeted group is forced en masse from their homes, communities, and region (as took place in Cambodia in the mid-1970s and the former Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s).

Among the many ideas that have been proposed as possible means for preventing or intervening in genocide are:

- the establishment of a Genocide Bureau (or genocide early warning system) that would monitor "hot spots" around the globe that have the potential to explode into genocidal acts;
- a Committee on Genocide that would periodically report on situations likely to result in genocide and/or actual genocidal actions, and that would be "empowered to indict a State against which charges of genocide were raised";
- the convening of mass media professionals to examine and develop more effective ways of disseminating information about genocidal acts;
- a specially organized and systematic effort to collect first-person accounts of targeted groups, relief workers, and journalists in areas where a potential genocide was brewing; and
- the development of a World Genocidal Tribunal that would have the authority to try individuals as well as governments that have committed genocide.

Although some of these ideas were spawned as early as 1982, none of them have as yet been implemented.