

# Ethnic Cleansing in World History: A Balkan Perspective

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The purpose of this report is to catalogue the arguments concerning the phenomena known as “genocide” and/or “ethnic cleansing,” and to propose a guiding principle for a consistent understanding of these two concepts in order to avoid confusion and misuse of these terms.<sup>1)</sup> The term “ethnic cleansing” first appeared in the Bosnian Civil War of 1992, and soon became favorite term of the western press in describing the atrocities committed, especially by Serbs, during this conflict. In this manner, it gradually came to be understood as a certain category of crimes against humanity, and is now frequently applied to similar phenomena in a variety of locations and time periods outside the context of the Yugoslav Civil Wars.

Nowadays, there is a widespread pattern of the understanding of the term “ethnic cleansing.” This type of understanding is to regard “ethnic cleansing” as a deliberate, calculated and organized political act committed by a given authority.<sup>2)</sup> I would like to denominate this as the “narrow understanding” of the term. Probably, the most conspicuous one is the stipulation set forth by the UN Special Committee on April, 1994.<sup>3)</sup> In this report, “ethnic cleansing” is defined as follows:

“Ethnic cleansing” is a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic group or religious group to remove by violent or terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographical areas. To a large extent, it is carried out in the name of misguided nationalism, historic grievances and a powerful driving sense of revenge.

This type of definition contains several shortcomings, since the phenomena known as “ethnic cleansing” comprise a wide range of war crimes and atrocities committed by a civil population. Firstly, the massacres in the Bosnian Civil War, for example, were not limited to a systematic act propagated by a given autonomous authority, but it contains killing, expulsion and pillage committed by “ordinary people” without any discernible order from above. As most of the sources agree, the initial military acts in the Bosnian countryside were waged by local people under their own volition. Especially during the first phase of the civil war, small military groups organized by municipal or parochial units played decisive roles, and the amalgamation of those activities, after all, became known as “ethnic cleansing.”<sup>4)</sup> Ethnic cleansing does not necessarily need the support or instigation of a government or nationalist political force. It can emerge quite voluntary from “grass roots.” We can find similar examples of popular violence in the modern history of the Balkans: the massacre of ordinary “Turks” by Greek revolutionaries

in 1821,<sup>5)</sup> “the Bulgarian massacre” in 1876,<sup>6)</sup> killing and expulsion of Bulgarian muslims in 1877-8,<sup>7)</sup> the Macedonian struggle in the 1890s,<sup>8)</sup> “comitaji” atrocities during the Balkan Wars,<sup>9)</sup> and the atrocities of Greek paramilitaries during the War in Asia minor in 1919.<sup>10)</sup> In retrospect, all these events can be classified as ethnic cleansing and the roles of “ordinary people” were crucial in escalating the violence. We can notice a “pogrom” type of popular movement in these events, and this is an important element that constitutes ethnic cleansing.

Secondly, ethnic cleansing is not a particular product of a peculiar nationalist obsession. Contrary to popular belief, the act of ethnic cleansing was not limited to Serbs. Though they were held responsible for a majority of the atrocities in this conflict, Croats, and even Bosnians, also committed war crimes that can be classified as ethnic cleansing. This fact clearly shows that the ethnic cleansing is not a by-product of Serb nationalism, but that militant nationalists are apt to commit ethnically motivated violence. In fact, one could even say that ethnic cleansing shares an affinity with ethno-nationalism, and has been a tacit factor in the constructing of modern states.<sup>11)</sup> The examples of ethnic cleansing in the modern Balkans that are listed above are all evaluated as a part of a “national liberation movement” by nationalist historians of each nation and this suggests that “national liberation movement” inevitably accompanies elements of ethnic cleansing.

Thirdly, phenomena known as “ethnic cleansing” are not confined to a one-sided game of hunters and hunted. As many scholars admit, genocide is characterized by a unilateral act of perpetrators with overwhelming power. Ethnic cleansing, however, tends to bear a kind of reciprocity between perpetrators and victims. We can find good examples for this matter again in the Yugoslav civil wars. In the war of Croatia, even though the first perpetrators should have been Serbs, Croats committed atrocities against Serbs in the latter phase of the war, and they finally succeeded in accomplishing their task of ethnic cleansing. Now, Croatia is one of the most ethnically “pure” states in Europe. During the Kosovo crisis, the Serbian police force and nationalist paramilitary persecuted the Albanian population in the first stage. When NATO rule sat in, the second stage started. This time Albanian nationalists began to expel not only Serbs, but also other non-Albanian populations from their territory, making Kosovo an ethnically pure Albanian land. These two examples eloquently demonstrate that ethnic cleansing need not be a unilateral act of persecution and slaughter, but rather a bilateral phenomenon in which one party can simultaneously become both perpetrator and victim. This is also an important element of ethnic cleansing.<sup>12)</sup>

Ethnic cleansing, however, does have some state oriented characteristics; Therefore. I have no opposition to the basic claims of the supporters who have a “narrow understanding” of the term. But, it is necessary to add an amendment to their definition. Ethnic cleansing is apt to be applied to war phases, and tend to be regarded as a kind of war crime. However, even during peace time, ethnic cleansing does occur. There are two types of ethnic cleansing that takes place in such conditions. One is a forced inner migration organized by government. We can find an example of this type in the expulsion of Chechen-Ingushs, Crimean Tatars, and other ethnic groups in the Central Asian area during the Stalinist period of the Soviet Union.<sup>13)</sup> Although the main component was not migration but cultural assimilation, the “national revival process” in Bulgaria in the 1980s also can be classified into this category.<sup>14)</sup> The second type of this category is an officially sanctioned but forced ethnic migration. It has been claimed that

such phenomena as the “population exchange” between Greece and Turkey in 1922, and, the expulsion of Germans from various Eastern European countries between 1946 and 1948 should be taken as constituting a form of ethnic cleansing.<sup>15)</sup> Adding these two types into the list of ethnic cleansing, it increases our appreciation of the association between nationalism and ethnic cleansing, and it turns out that ethnic cleansing has been employed as a tool for strengthening nation states.

From the discussions above, we can reach a comprehensive definition of ethnic cleansing. Thus, ethnic cleansing is a series of acts committed by a given group defined in terms of its ethnicity which expels other populations from certain geographical areas to establish, strengthen, maintain and expand its state; these acts are motivated and even claimed to be justified by self-styled understandings of the principles of national self-determination.

So, how is ethnic cleansing defined in these terms related to genocide? Until now, three arguments have been put forth concerning this matter. The first sees ethnic cleansing as one form of genocide. There are many discussants that understand “ethnic cleansing” as a euphemism of genocide.<sup>16)</sup> Those who adopt this view invoke the Genocide Convention, which states that “deliberately inflicting on any national, ethnic, racial or religious group conditions of life, calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part” is considered genocide, and takes the stance that under these rules, this amounts to removing “by violent or terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographical areas.” However, this position, as well as involving the technical problem of proving intent to exterminate the expelled group on the behalf of the aggressors, also entails the problem of tolerating such instances of ethnic cleansing as the population exchanges of Greece and Turkey, and the post-Potsdam Declaration expulsion of Germans, as being within the discretion of a sovereign state.

The second position asserts that ethnic cleansing is entirely unrelated to genocide. Those who adopt this stance consider genocide to be peculiar and exceptional instances such as the Holocaust/Shoah, in which the aim was the extermination of the Jewish people; while ethnic cleansing is a general phenomenon which can potentially occur anywhere given the necessary conditions.<sup>17)</sup> The problems with this argument are the implied uniqueness of the Holocaust and the vagueness of defining the qualitative difference between “elimination” and “extermination.”

The third position argues that genocide is a particular form of ethnic cleansing. This argument claims that extermination is a linear extension of the act of expulsion from a fixed region; in other words, ethnic cleansing takes on the form of genocide when expulsion becomes problematic or when no external area of land has been appropriated to accommodate those expelled.<sup>18)</sup> This argument reflects upon the debate over whether the Holocaust was the ultimate aim of the Nazis, or if it was an option chosen when the possibility of a successful war against USSR became dubious.

The three arguments outlined above are all one-dimensional, perceiving genocide and ethnic cleansing either as one being a subset of the other, or as being completely unrelated. It also seems possible, however, to consider that the two notions partly overlap each other. It is true that ethnic cleansing shares the element of extermination with genocide. But, the lower level of violence, entailed by such acts as expulsion and harassment, is a far more significant

component of this phenomenon. While genocide can be seen as an act of violence which emerges as a linear extension of nationalism and exclusivism, one can not ignore the fact that it has only become possible after the introduction of weapons of mass destruction and devices for mass slaughter in modern times. In both cases, the state plays an important roles, but the intensity of its commitment differs critically. Both the State and bureaucracy are strongly committed to mobilizing the modern technology of mass killings in the case of genocide. On the other hand in the case of ethnic cleansing, state and bureaucracy do not commit themselves so deeply to atrocity itself. They simply ignore or give tacit permission to the acts of the perpetrators. Though in some cases they commit more straightforwardly as in cases of population transfer, most typically, the act of ethnic cleansing occurs during the destruction of the state order. Openness is also an important point of difference. While the Nazis conducted a policy of execution deliberately concealing it from German masses, most of the Bosnian local population was well informed of existence of ethnic cleansing.

In conclusion, I would like to propose the following stance. Ethnic cleansing is not a sub-category of genocide. Though it contains a wide range variety of atrocities, the core of this phenomenon is to expel a population, not to exterminate them. Although expelling inevitably accompanies a significant scale of mass killing, (as far as we understand genocide as a mass-extermination), ethnic cleansing should not be categorized as genocide. Ethnic cleansing, however, is not an absolutely different act than genocide. There is a gray zone in which the two concepts overlap each other. In its most extreme case, ethnic cleansing fuses into genocide. But not all types of ethnic cleansing can leap into a form of genocide. Genocide is not a type of ethnic cleansing. It has its own context and mechanism of genesis, and is not a linear extension of ethnic cleansing.

It is important to bear in mind the above mentioned differences and similarities between ethnic cleansing and genocide, especially when one tries to participate in comparative genocide studies. There are several attempts to dilute the notion of genocide and apply it to a variety of historical events. But, even with good intentions, these kinds of endeavors risk demeaning academic discussion into political labeling. A generous application of genocide might also conceal some aspects of the crimes of the state, as it is not proper to apply the term genocide to such state policies that the international community admits to or gives tacit permission. Many types of state crimes have eluded the negative association of being considered as genocide: forced ethnic migration within the territory of a given state, population exchange, internationally sanctioned “revenge” against the members of a “criminal nation,” and the expulsion of an indigenous population from their homeland by colonists. But we can classify them as a kind of ethnic cleansing and have reason to denounce them.

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## Notes

- 1) I would like to begin by establishing the definition of the term “ethnic cleansing,” and leave the definition of genocide to Professor Ishida’s paper as for convenience.
- 2) We can see such type of discussions in these works: Petrović, Dražen, (1994), “Ethnic cleansing - An attempt at Methodology,” *European Journal of International Law*, 5/3, pp.342-359; Bell-Fialkoff, Andrew, (1999), *Ethnic cleansing*, 1st paperback ed. New York : St. Martin’s Griffin
- 3) UN.Commission of Experts, (1995), The final Report on the Evidence of Grave Breaches of the Geneva Conventions and Other Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia”, <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/comexpert>

- 4) The UN specialist report itself recognized this fact. Ibit.
- 5) During the first phase of the Greek war of independence, ordinary Greek peasants voluntarily attacked their muslim neighbors and occupied their lands. See McCarthy, Justin, (1995), *Death and Exile: the Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922*, Princeton, N.J. : Darwin Press.
- 6) The event known as the Bulgarian massacre was took place after a failed uprising of Bulgarian nationalists in 1876. In this event, several thousands of Bulgarians were reported to be killed. The most of atrocities were committed by "Bashibozouks," a paramilitary composed of local muslims. For the voluntary nature of Bashibozouks see: Vulčev, Angel (1973), *Tâmraš*, Sofia: Otečestven front.
- 7) Alp, ilker, (1990), *Belge ve Fotoğraflarla Bulgar Mezalimi, 1878-1989*, Ankara: Trakya Universitesi Yaynlar.
- 8) There seems to be no comprehensive work on the mutual slaughtering phase of the Macedonian struggle. Most of the works on this topic bear strong nationalist biases. Somewhat neutral assessment of the event can be found: Adanir, Fikret (2001), *Makedonya Sorunu, Olusumu ve 1908'e Kadar Gelisimi*, Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yaynlar; Lange-Ahund, Nadine, (1998), *The Macedonian Question 1893-1908 from Western Sources*, Boulder: East European Monographs
- 9) *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1914
- 10) Toynbee, Arnold J., (1922), *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey : a Study in the Contact of Civilisations*, London: Constable
- 11) Preece, Jennifer, (1998), "Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of Nation-State creation: Changing state practices and evolving legal norms," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 20, pp.817-842
- 12) We may be able to apply this typology to the case of Palestine / Israel conflict. In this case, the perpetrators (Sionists) claim themselves to be an absolute victim (that is the victim of Holocaust). And they use this stance as a tool to deny their atrocities against Palestinians.
- 13) Polian, Pavel, (2004), *Against Their Will: the History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*, [translated by Anna Yastrzhembska], Budapest & New York : Central European University Press.; Williams B.G.,(2002), "Hidden ethnocide in the Soviet Muslim borderlands: the ethnic cleansing of the Crimean Tatars," *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 357-373(17)
- 14) Yalûmov, Ibrahim, (2002), *Istorija na turskata obšnost v Bûlgarija*; Sofia : IMIR
- 15) Examples of such kind of discussion can be found in the following works: Naimark, Norman M., (2001), *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press.; Wolff Stefan, (2004). "Can forced population transfers resolve self-determination conflicts? a European perspective," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 12/1, pp. 11-29
- 16) A good example is the work of Norman Cigar. In this work, Cigar intentionally equalize ethnic cleansing with genocide and based on this assumption, he demanded military intervention to punish Serbs: Cigar, Norman, (1995), *Genocide in Bosnia: the Policy of "Ethnic Cleansing"*, College Station : Texas A&M University Press.
- 17) See: "Intoduction," in; Vardy, Steven Bela & T. Hunt Tooley, eds., (2003), *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-century Europe*, Boulder, [Colo.] : Social Science Monographs, New York : Distributed by Columbia University Press. p.3
- 18) Naimark, Op.cit.