

## Genocide in Namibia, Turkey, Croatia and Germany: Searching for the common features and the historical connections

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This year (2004) marks ten years since the Tutsi massacres in Rwanda, but in fact, it is also one hundred years since Africa witnessed another massacre; that of the Herero and the Nama in present-day Namibia. In January 1904, just before the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War, an incident occurred in what was at the time German controlled South West Africa, in which the indigenous Herero revolted, reclaimed their land and their livestock, and killed German settlers. There did exist, under the locally based German Governor-General, the “Schutztruppe”, or “Protection Troops”, but they struggled to contain the uprising due to a combination of factors, including their poor number, the supervisor military tactics and local knowledge of the Herero, and the spread of typhus amongst the German troops. Eventually, the Imperial Government in Berlin dispatched a force of some 15,000 troops, under the leadership of General von Trotha, who had distinguished himself by suppressing the Boxer Rebellion. It took them three years to subdue this uprising.

This war became extremely brutal. Originally, the German government’s management of their colonies was a relatively temperate one, similar to that of the United Kingdom, with a fundamental basis in the division of authority and co-operation with tribal chiefs, but von Trotha arrived with a very different attitude. In order to confuse the German army, who were armed with modern weaponry, the Herero escaped to the high veldt (Waterberg), and for a while sought for a peaceful resolution, but von Trotha ignored these moves, surrounding the Herero and moving in to eliminate them. In October, he issued an ‘eradication order’ to the effect that all Herero found in German territory were to be indiscriminately shot on sight. Those Herero who survived were left nowhere to flee to but the drought-ridden Kalahari Desert. Many tens of thousands perished there of hunger and thirst.

Just as these massacres reached a peak in December 1904, von Trotha received a directive from the Imperial Chancellor von Bülow to construct “concentration camps for the temporary holding of the remaining Herero”. This may be taken as an effort by a government embarrassed at von Trotha’s brutality and fearful of the creation thereby of a negative image for the Empire, to prevent the total elimination of the Herero, but the result was no different. Approximately 15,000 Herero were held in two camps and were forced to work on such projects as the construction of a railway, but the terrible food and hygiene conditions in the camp meant that the vast majority died.

The Nama, who rebelled slightly later than the Herero, suffered the same fate. Those who

survived were initially placed in concentration camps, but were then sent to a small island, where again the vast majority perished. Before the uprisings, the two tribes had a combined population of approximately 100,000, which eventually dipped to around 20,000.

In Germany, the suppression of the Herero and the Nama was welcomed, and was received as a part of the glorious history of the Empire. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which objected to the excessive cost of this difficult act of suppression, did succeed in defeating a budget proposed in the Imperial Parliament, but paid for this act by suffering a crushing defeat in the 1907 elections (“Hottentot elections”).

The Herero/Nama massacres were the first incidence of genocide in modern German history, and were typical examples of genocide committed by the Western European powers in their colonies during the imperial era. Like the massacres of the Native Americans which accompanied the pioneering trail into the West of the USA, these massacres were justified by being carried out “in God’s name”, that is, in the name of Christianity. It can also be said that this was a genocide driven by an imperialist drive to expand and secure land.

## 1. Genocide in Turkey, Croatia and Germany: Searching for the common features

The reason that genocide in Turkey, Croatia and Germany were chosen as topics for this paper, was because it was considered relatively easy to perceive common themes through the three separate incidents. Summarized below are four or five of the common features.

The first point worthy of note is that in a certain sense they were all triggered through the process of the creation or re-establishment of a modern nation state (“nation state type genocide”).

In Turkey’s case, the Young Turkish Party, especially the Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter CUP), who held power in the final phases of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, rejected the previous tolerance of religious and ethnic differences, and sought to create a more homogeneous, united, ethnic nation state of Turkey. In this process, they deliberately highlighted previously unproblematic religious and ethnic differences, and sought to eliminate those elements of society which did not share their own characteristics. That is, the Armenians.

In the case of Croatia, also, a multi-ethnic state dissolved – the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which broke into Serbia, Croatia and the Kingdom of Slovenia – and, with the protection and assistance of Nazi Germany, Croatia emerged as an “independent” state. However, the fact that “foreign elements”, notably Serbs, still existed in their territory, led to a movement to eliminate these elements and create a “pure” Croatian state.

In Germany, the systematic structure of the nation state was already in place but under the Treaty of Versailles Germany had lost its “own” land, and was not permitted ethnic self-determinism. Resistance against these moves was strong, and calls were heard from certain right-wing extremist groups to strip Jews of their citizenship rights. Hitler reconfigured and modified a Germany responsive to his ideas along the new lines of “race”, and at the same time sought territorial expansion. Those who did not fit the racial criteria were designated as foreign elements and eliminated.

The second point is that all of these cases of genocide were carried out in conjunction with forced migration of certain ethnic groups. While it is not possible to claim that in all three cases forced migration led directly to genocide, it is not an exaggeration to posit that forced migration as a means of attempting to create or reconfigure a nation state, reinforced by what was in a sense a “rational analysis” of the situation, helped to create an environment conducive to genocide.

In Turkey, for example, the Ministry of the Interior Talaat Pasha, who was heavily involved in the execution of genocide, was also responsible for the “ethnic relocation committee”. Under his direction, not only Armenians, but also Assyrian Christians and Greeks were forced to migrate. In Croatia, too, under an agreement with Nazi Germany, the government expelled Serbs into German-controlled Serbia, in exchange for accepting a certain number of Slovenians. In Germany, in the stage before genocide itself took place, plans to return “ethnic Germans” – “Volksdeutsche” – from Soviet regions were in place, as part of a secret agreement in the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.

As to the third point, of “total war”, and the fourth, “political dictatorships” all three cases of genocide took place in conditions of total war, and under dictatorships. In the case of Turkey, the beginning of World War I not only contributed to the establishment of the CUP dictatorship, but also allowed Armenians to be portrayed as a still more dangerous element, that is, a force which could destroy Turkey from within by joining forces with the enemy Russia.

In Croatia, the Ustase, whose power base was weak, whipped up a latent anti-Serbian sentiment and linked it with Croatian ethnic nationalism, hereby seeking to unify and solidify the “Croatian” people. It is needless to say that come wartime, the Serbs were presented as enemy elements.

As for Germany, since the Nazi dictatorship regime was already well established by the start of the war and all opposition factions had been forcibly eliminated, there were practically no forces remaining to criticize or prevent the illegal actions of the state. With the beginning of the war itself, the streamlining of society became still more desirable and those who were considered unnecessary to the war effort were eliminated. “Operation T4”, a political policy whereby physically and mentally disabled people and those with “terminal” illnesses were systematically killed, began with the war. Further, while many Jews had already left the country by the start of the war, those who remained were subject to segregation. One of the reasons for this was that Jews were considered to be dangerous as they liaised with the enemy.

I have thus summarized the four common factors in these three incidences of genocide: the concept of the nation state, forced ethnic migration, total war and dictatorships. There may be those who claim that there are many more similarities; these may include fanatical ideologies and enthusiastic participation by the masses.

Sometime ago, the American political scientist Daniel Goldhagen sparked a major controversy by asserting that the massacres of the Jews by the Nazis was the realization of a long held German ‘national project’. Like most historians, I reject this assertion. The reason for this is that when one looks back upon the history of the relationship between Jews and Christians in Germany, it is not only a history of prejudice and persecution, but also a history of long periods of harmonious co-existence. While it is true that equality for Jews in terms of civil rights was not achieved in Germany until 1871, many years after France, the vast majority of

Jews in Germany considered Germany to be their homeland. On this matter, Viktor Klemperer's diary from the Nazi era, *I Will Bear Witness*, is a valuable reference tool. The same is generally true of the relationships between Muslims and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, and Croats and Serbs in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

What must be noted here, however, is the spread of "temperate" enmity and prejudice in these societies; that is, the existence of a certain "lukewarm" anti-Semitism, anti-Armenianism and anti-Serbianism. Because such prejudices were so lukewarm, they have generally gone unnoticed, but under incitement from above or due to external factors such as war, these lukewarm prejudices often became activated.

Another noteworthy issue is the fact that entirely unrelated to the hostility felt towards these "foreign elements", there were people at all levels of society who benefited from their elimination. In both Germany and Turkey, a certain group of scientists benefited substantially from the genocide perpetrated in their countries. Amongst ordinary citizens also, there were many who received assets and property which had been stripped from the persecuted. Incited from above by the CUP, Muslims contributed directly and indirectly to the carrying out of genocide, often profiting through personal improvement in the looting.

In fact, there were probably only double figures, maybe a few hundred and at most a few thousand from the leadership group involved in the actual conceptualization and planning of these three incidences of genocide. However, added to this number were many scientists and scholars who completed a system for the execution of genocide. This is the fifth common factor.

Until now I have stressed the common features of these three incidences of genocide, but I would like to briefly touch upon one distinctive feature of the Nazi genocides: that is, that Nazi Germany was a major invading force. While both Croatia and Turkey did nurse territorial ambitions – Turkey in particular was pressing for the return of land that had been taken by Russia, – these ambitions were not on the scale of Nazi Germany's. The Nazi leadership put into practice, in its most radical form, the concept of "Lebensraum", or a nation's "living space", which had been conceived as far back as the imperialist era. Through this, they aimed at the realization of an ideal nation state in the "new territories" of eastern Europe and Russia.

In terms of the seizure of land and the expansion of a country's sphere of influence, there are similarities between this and the genocide in Namibia. The invasion and thorough exploitation of the human and material resources of foreign countries in a quest for new territory, combined with a national reconfiguration plan, in a racist sense, was what led to the Nazi genocides.

## 2. Genocide in Namibia, Turkey, Croatia and Germany: Searching for the historical connections

Next, I would like to include the case of Namibia, and consider all four incidences of genocide together. I will make three points.

The first issue is that of the concentration camps which were established after the battles with the Herero and Nama tribes. Concentration camps form a major element of twentieth century genocide. Their origin is said to be from around 1830, when the United States Army constructed camps to hold the Native American Cherokees, so that they could later force them to migrate. In the latter nineteenth century, Spain erected camps in Cuba during the Cuban War of Independence, and Britain did likewise in their Cape Colony during the Boer War. The camps constructed in South West Africa by Germany were based on these British camps. There were also many camps built in Turkey and Croatia, but it was Germany under Hitler which first organized and unified, functional camp system, involving camps of many different uses, such as labour camps, forced internment camps, and extermination camps. Thus, concentration camps, which began as European inventions set up outside of Europe, appeared in the very centre of Europe in the 1930s. Of course, it is a well-known fact that by this point, camps had been constructed in the Soviet Union of the Stalinist regime and to imprison those of Japanese descent in the USA and Canada.

The second issue concerns eugenics and epidemiology. The Herero uprising and their powerful resistance had a profound effect upon Germany's subsequent management of its colonies. In Namibia, the division between whites and the native inhabitants grew more marked, and a political policy was adopted that would foreshadow the later policy of "apartheid" in South Africa.

At the same time, the powerful resistance and excellent military ability displayed by the native inhabitants in the uprising, aroused the interest of German scientists, and led to the flourishing of mixed-race research and racial anthropology. Eugen Fischer, who travelled to Namibia after the uprisings had been suppressed, developed an interest in the strength of the Herero people, and posted a theory that this was due to their genetic mixing with white people. Later, Fischer continued his anthropological research, and fostered the development of many scientists in the disciplines of anthropology, genetic biology and racial hygiene from his position as head of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. Some of those whom he supervised would later be responsible for the Nazi racial policies.

Further, the outbreak of typhoid which caused such problems for the Schutztruppe created an opportunity for the development of strategies to counter such epidemics in the future.

Among German epidemiologists, Robert Koch is widely known of the discoverer of the cholera bacterium, but the eradication of epidemics was one of the greatest areas of concern for the German Empire at the time. Since the establishment of the imperial government in 1871, quarantine examinations were routinely carried out on arrivals from overseas in harbour towns such as Bremen and Hamburg, but the outbreak of cholera in Germany in 1892 threw the government into a state of panic. Later, several quarantine centres were established along the border with Russia, as part of a comprehensive "epidemic prevention system" for the protection of the German people. At this time, the influx of immigrants from the east, and from

the Russian Empire in particular, was increasing rapidly, and this tendency was linked to the outbreak of epidemics. In other words, it was thought that refugees from eastern Europe were bringing deadly bacteria with them. Under this line of reasoning, the “Ostjuden”, or Jews living to the east of Germany, were considered to pose the greatest threat.

Epidemics were terribly feared in the military also. Already, during the Balkan Wars, Germany and Austria had dispatched a number of experts to assist the army of their ally Bulgaria in countering epidemics. The dispatch of German military doctors and hygienists to Turkey during World War I was likewise part of a counter-epidemic effort. Counter-epidemic centres were established in Constantinople, Aleppo, Adrianople and Smyrna; the number of antiseptic facilities was increased; and while the “depth of moral virtue of the Muslims, who refused to kill even a louse”, was surprising to the Germans, they also overcame this reluctance.

The poverty and lack of hygiene in urban Turkey during World War I was terrible, and it was apparently a common sight to see beggars infested with lice being rounded up by officials, and disinfected under the direction of German hygienists. These efforts, however, had little effect, and disease was of almost epidemic proportions. This situation was used, by the Turkish government, which had begun to talk of such notions as “public hygiene”, as an excuse to attack the Armenians. The Armenians, in other words, were portrayed as the carriers of disease. Once the massacres began, there were also cases in which Armenians held in Turkish hospitals were injected with deadly bacteria in the name of science. It is said that the German doctors frowned upon this practice, but among their number were those who believed that “the Armenians were ruining Turkey’s efforts at public sanitation”, and that “the poor Armenians in the cities are bringing in the typhus bacterium”. These doctors, therefore, pressed for the expulsion of the Armenians. One of these doctors was Peter Mühlens, who at the same time, along with Rodenwalt, Zeiss and others, who had been sent to Turkey, was beginning along the path to becoming one of the “Nazi genocide scientists” involved in the use of Zyklon-B in Auschwitz.

The third issue is one which has already been discussed: the theory of “modernization” and its use for the justification of forced migration.

The ideology of the leaders of the CUP, who carried out the massacres against the Armenian people, was extremely modern and scientific, and in that respect were quite western European. Most of their number had studied in France or Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century, and had become attached to the concepts of racism and eugenics which were popular at that time. Indeed, the military medical school which served as the home of the CUP was often visited by such German scientists as the aforementioned Mühlens.

The elite of the CUP, led by Reshid, set about devising forced migration plans for groups they believed had no part in the new nation state. These decisions were based upon a previously conducted dynamic population survey of the Ottoman Empire. In order to make the under-developed nation of Turkey into a modern nation state in one swift process, the CUP leadership tried to adopt methods that could not have been easily adopted in countries of western Europe. This policy was continued after World War I by Kemal Atatürk. The massacre of the Armenians was a barbaric tactic adopted by individuals who, influenced by western European ideas, aimed at the modernization of Turkey, all the time under pressure from the western European powers eating away at the Ottoman Empire from all sides.



In recent years, historians have tended to focus on the “advancement” realized by the CUP elite. Concepts of “social engineering”, which suggested that the fabric of society could be redesigned at will with the aid of technology, were prevalent among technocrats in Turkey at this time. In the past, the German historian, Ernst Nolte in an essay which sought to relativize the Holocaust, insinuated that the Armenian massacres were “conducted with Asian methods, completely alien to European civilization”. Further, he suggested that Hitler himself was “a latent victim of this Asian-style barbarism”, and that this later led him to indulge in such “Asian-style barbarism” himself.

I disagree with this point of view. Aside from instinctively disliking Nolte’s use of the word “Asian” in this context, I also believe that rather than being a manifestation of “Asian barbarism”, the Armenian genocide was an act triggered by European modernism, and by a Turkish elite obsessed with this modernism. If I were to be so bold as to go further, hopefully not at the risk of being misunderstood, I would even venture to say that although it was conducted in a non-European region, this was in fact a very “European-style genocide”.

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