

The Evolution of Field of Genocide Studies

Anna Marko

Abstract

As the field of genocide studies has expanded, so have the available tools to prevent and recognize genocide. The once small field of genocide studies has evolved to the point of having four emerging subfields: examination of current and past cases of genocide, genocide prevention, post-genocide studies, and comparative genocide. This paper serves as an examination of the expanding subfields and how they have evolved in this new cycle of scholarship.

The term ‘genocide’ can mean a variety of things to different people. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew, first coined the term in 1944 by combining the Latin word *cide* (killing) with the Greek word *genos* to create a word to adequately describe the events that transpired in Armenia and the Holocaust.¹ For many, the term is specifically and solely associated with the Holocaust. The Holocaust and genocide are often taught as one entity rather than an example, or case study of genocide. This is problematic as the field of genocide studies continues expanding to become more comparative. With the Holocaust being the prime example of genocide, it becomes increasingly difficult to adequately recognize and compare genocide as not all genocides follow the same patterns or methods used by Nazi Germany. Additionally, it can be contentious to apply the term genocide to ongoing conflicts because of the emotional association with the Holocaust. Furthermore, some people also hold fast to the idea that genocide should only be applied to the Holocaust or other extreme cases, such as the Rwandan genocide. Historically, ‘genocide’ has only been applied after the mass killings have concluded. This inherently inhibits one of Lemkin’s chief motivations in his work—to prevent future genocides. The more something is talked about, the more mainstream it becomes. This should be the approach of genocide scholars and those who seek to prevent mass killings. Proactively examining and prosecuting potential

¹ “Raphael Lemkin: A Brief Biographical Sketch,” Pacific Lutheran University, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.plu.edu/holocaustconference/wp-content/uploads/sites/717/2023/12/lemkin-bio2.pdf>.

genocides with the available tools on the international stage as they occur does more to prevent genocide than debating whether or not the term genocide is being weaponized for political gain. Preservation of human life and victimized populations should be the priority.

After the term was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, states were reluctant to encourage the use of the term due to its legal status under international law and the implications of possible international intervention that could undermine a state's sovereignty. Consensus internationally would prompt intervention per the Genocide Convention through the UN or the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which was established in 1945. This is one of the reasons that states such as the United States (US) were reluctant to sign the Genocide Convention despite participating in the drafting of it. For example, the Soviet Union and the US tailored the definition of genocide under the Genocide Convention to reduce the applicability of the definition to their past genocides such as the Holodomor and the attempt to systematically erase Native Americans from North America, respectively. While the Genocide Convention does not encompass every component of Lemkin's conceptualizations due to the manipulations of the definition by the Soviet Union and the US, the ratification of the Genocide Convention is the result of his tireless efforts to prevent future genocides.

Adherence to the Genocide Convention, or lack thereof, can be challenged between states at the ICJ, thus bypassing the reluctance of other states to intervene through the other UN bodies. Two cases of this are currently at the ICJ. The first, *South Africa v. Israel*, alleges that the crime of genocide is unfolding in the Gaza Strip following military operations by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) after the Hamas attack on Israel in October of 2023.² The second, *Nicaragua v. Germany*, alleges Germany's violations of the Genocide Convention based on their failure to

² "The Republic of South Africa Institutes Proceedings against the State of Israel and Requests the Court to Indicate Provisional Measures," The International Court of Justice, December 29, 2023, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203395>.

prevent the genocide in Gaza through their continued export of arms to Israel and their suspension of funding to the United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA).³ This is unprecedented litigation within the ICJ, as a state has never been charged with complicity in genocide, only in perpetration. This is demonstrative of the expanding willingness of states to enforce compliance with the Genocide Convention. While there are historic ties between Israel-Palestine and South Africa on the practice of apartheid,⁴ there is no such relationship between Nicaragua and Germany, indicating that there is no political motivation. Regardless of whether one considers either filing to be politically motivated, it is the only available tool that can be used to end the violence being perpetrated by Israel due to the repeated use of the veto power within the UN Security Council to prevent a temporary or permanent ceasefire.⁵

The interest and dedication to the prevention of the crime of genocide is not only the result of Lemkin's efforts but also the now multi-generational field of scholars who have joined the cause. The field is growing as more scholars join the field and challenge the predominant narratives of past genocides and work with developing cases. As the field has grown, it has split into four emerging subfields: examination of current and past cases of genocide, genocide prevention, post-genocide studies, and comparative genocide.

Until recently, the field of Genocide Studies was defined by work produced by Lemkin and the wave of scholars who documented the atrocities committed against the Armenians and the study of the Holocaust. These original pioneers in the field of genocide have enabled future

³ "The Republic of Nicaragua Institutes Proceedings against the Federal Republic of Germany and Requests the Court to Indicate Provisional Measures," International Court of Justice, March 1, 2024, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203822>.

⁴ Oren Yiftachel, "Deepening Apartheid: The Political Geography of Colonizing Israel/Palestine," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2023), doi:10.3389/fpos.2022.981867.

⁵ Michelle Nichols, "US Blocks Ceasefire Call with Third UN Veto in Israel-Hamas War," *Reuters*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-casts-third-veto-un-action-since-start-israel-hamas-war-2024-02-20/>.

scholars today to study accepted genocides and make the case for other instances to be included, such as forgotten or ongoing genocide. For example, scholars have studied the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Bosnian genocides in great detail, furthering scholarship and depth in the field. Recently, new cycles of scholarship have begun to study the ‘forgotten’ or understudied genocides including the first genocide of the 20th century of the Herero and Nama peoples in Germany Northwest Africa (1904-1908); the Burundi Genocide (1972); and the Congolese Genocide (1994-1997). Scholarship has expanded to consider modern-day genocides are also actively being studied such as the Uighurs, Rohingya, Darfur, and Gaza genocides. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to illustrate the growing depth and breadth of scholarship.

While genocide prevention has been a desired focus of study since the field was created, it has made progress only recently. Due to the combined efforts of scholars, NGOs, and human rights watch groups observing evolving instances of human rights abuses to prevent the escalation of genocide, tangible progress has been made. For example, the Lemkin Institute provides alerts on escalating violence that has the potential to escalate into genocide.

Another emerging subfield is that of post-genocide studies. This subfield includes the study of how victimized populations are removed from the tragedy of genocide and begin to live life again. Additionally, there is a focus on perpetrators—including both the punishment and reconciliation of perpetrators with their victims. The efforts of denazification or the *Gacaca Courts* in Rwanda are examples of reconciliatory efforts in a post-genocide setting.

One of the most recent subfields to gain momentum is comparative genocide which seeks to establish a theoretical framework that can be applied to all or most instances of genocide. The two frameworks that have been produced by this subfield are the ‘Ten Stages of Genocide’ and the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide.’ The ‘Ten Stages of Genocide’ was first developed in 1987 by

Genocide Watch and is presented as a timeline of events that led to genocide based primarily on the Holocaust. Conversely, the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide,’ developed by the Lemkin Institute, are informed by a comparative approach based on a variety of different genocides. This pattern was only published last year and demonstrates how the theoretical frameworks are enriched through comparative study. The timeline model was developed almost solely on the understanding of the Holocaust therefore this theoretical framework loses its validity when applied to contexts that deviate from a pattern that emerged in the Holocaust. Both frameworks aim to prevent genocide. The ‘Ten Stages of Genocide’ claim:

Genocide is a process that develops in ten stages that are predictable, but not inexorable. At each stage, preventative measures can stop it. The later stages must be preceded by the earlier stages, though earlier stages continue to operate throughout the process.⁶

Comparatively, the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide’ assert:

Genocide is a process, not a singular event. A key feature of the genocidal process is that it is not only a systematic but also a patterned form of attack on a group. This means that in the short term, we can often identify the emergence of intent at its early stages when genocidal patterns are played out in localized ways.⁷

The following section of this paper will consider the applicability of the two theoretical frameworks to illustrate how a comprehensive framework is more informative than a timeline model by examining the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Using a more linear framework, such as the ‘Ten Stages of Genocide’ will result in the conclusion that the genocide in Gaza is *not* a genocide, however, if we use a comprehensive theoretical framework, like the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide’, then the opposite conclusion will be made: genocide is currently unfolding in Gaza.

⁶ Gregory Stanton, “Ten Stages of Genocide,” The Genocide Education Project, accessed March 18, 2024, https://genocideeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf.

⁷ Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, “10 Patterns of Genocide,” Lemkin Institute, 2023, <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/ten-patterns-of-genocide>.

To apply both the ‘Ten Stages’ and the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide’ to Gaza, it is important to establish what each of the ten stages or patterns are. The ten stages/patterns of genocide are as follows:

Ten Stages of Genocide

(1) Classification, (2) Symbolisation, (3) Discrimination, (4) Dehumanization, (5) Organization, (6) Polarization, (7) Preparation, (8) Persecution, (9) Extermination, (10) Denial.

Ten Patterns of Genocide

(1) Gender-Neutral Mass Murder, (2) Mass Murder of “Battle-Aged Men” & Atrocities Against Women and Children, (3) Sex-Selective Mass Murder “Gendercide,” (4) Mass Rape/Widespread Sexualized Violence, (5) Gross Human Rights Violation & Mass Cultural Destruction, (6) Man-Made Famine/Blocade “Genocide by Attrition,” (7) Environmental Despolition “Ecoside” & Land Alienation, (8) Appropriation/Destruction of Biological Resources, (9) Denial and/or Prevention of Identity, (10) Direct Killing of Women & Killing Men Through Work.

Even at first glance, the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide’ provides a more nuanced understanding of how genocide may unfold. This genocide theory shows patterns that can happen when genocide is occurring rather than the “stages” that genocide would progress through. Based on the timeline model, presented by the ‘Ten Stages of Genocide,’ only the direct and intentional killing of a people group can be examined. The ‘Ten Stages’ neglect to take into consideration that genocide can happen in the absence of mass killing by causing the destruction, in whole or in part, of a

people group through serious bodily or mental harm, inflicting conditions on the victimized population to calculate its physical destruction, and imposing measures to prevent birth.⁸

In the ‘Ten Stages,’ academics can argue that stages nine and ten are happening in Gaza. Through the intentional starvation and bombing of Palestinians in Gaza, the extermination stage is playing out in real-time. This is problematic as the stages suggest that later stages “must be preceded by earlier stages.”⁹ It can be argued that stages one through eight are not easily identifiable in Gaza—leading to the conclusion that genocide is *not* happening. This conclusion is made because of how faulty the theoretical framework is when applied to situations that deviate from the pattern established by the Holocaust. As previously stated, this framework was developed in 1987. Genocide studies have evolved immensely since then and the field of study has surpassed only examining aspects of the Holocaust. When a theory is developed with only one or two case studies in mind rather than a comprehensive list of case studies, the framework will fail to conclude that genocide is occurring unless it follows the same framework as the ones used to develop it.

The flaws in the ‘Ten Stages of Genocide’ theory do not seem to be evident in the ‘Ten Patterns of Genocide’ theory due to it being developed with a comparative genocide lens. When examining the ongoing genocide in Gaza through the ten patterns of genocide framework, it is evident that patterns one, two, five, six, seven, eight, and nine are all explicitly seen, and documented in Gaza. This genocide theory was developed by looking at a multitude of genocide case studies. Genocide is incapable of being boiled down to “stages” because that implies that genocide is linear. Genocide is nuanced and messy—genocide is the opposite of linear. This is

⁸ John Cox, *To Kill a People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (S.I., New York: Oxford University Press US, 2017), 5-6.

⁹ Stanton, “Ten Stages of Genocide.”

why the 'Ten Patterns of Genocide' provides a better theoretical framework to classify mass atrocities as genocide.

When forcible transfer is no longer an option, genocide often becomes the solution. The first wave of genocide scholarship relied on an intensive examination of Armenia and the Holocaust. The field of Genocide Studies has gained momentum by evolving into four subfields. As a new cycle of scholars enters the field, we must reevaluate the practice that the original field of study uses. As the field begins to evolve, so must the tools we use to prevent and determine genocide. We must also be open to looking at evolving patterns of violence elsewhere in the world, even if it makes us uncomfortable to acknowledge that people who have been victimized in the past are still capable of committing acts of atrocity. Gatekeeping the label of genocide is counterintuitive to the intended use by Lemkin. Selective application only benefits those who seek to perpetuate mass killings, it does nothing for past or future victims. There is power in the application of the genocide label thanks to the efforts of Lemkin and the courageous states seeking justice for victims at the ICJ and ICC.

Works Cited:

- COX, JOHN. *To Kill a People: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. S.I., New York: OXFORD UNIV PRESS US, 2017.
- Joeden-Forgey, Elisa von. "10 Patterns of Genocide." Lemkin Institute, 2023.
<https://www.lemkininstitute.com/ten-patterns-of-genocide>.
- Nichols, Michelle. "US Blocks Ceasefire Call with Third UN Veto in Israel-Hamas War." *Reuters*, February 20, 2024.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-casts-third-veto-un-action-since-start-israel-hamas-war-2024-02-20/>.
- Stanton, Gregory. "Ten Stages of Genocide." The Genocide Education Project. Accessed March 18, 2024.
https://genocideducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf.
- "The Republic of Nicaragua Institutes Proceedings against the Federal Republic of Germany and Requests the Court to Indicate Provisional Measures." International Court of Justice, March 1, 2024. <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203822>.
- "The Republic of South Africa Institutes Proceedings against the State of Israel and Requests the Court to Indicate Provisional Measures." The International Court of Justice, December 29, 2023. <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203395>.
- Yiftachel, Oren. "Deepening Apartheid: The Political Geography of Colonizing Israel/Palestine." *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2023).
doi:10.3389/fpos.2022.981867.