Genocide's Definition Revisited

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If you think you know what Raphael Lemkin, the originator of the term *genocide*, thought about genocide think again. A dissertation-in-progress on Lemkin and the history of the United Nations Genocide Convention by Douglas Irvin-Erickson, a doctoral student in global affairs at Rutgers University-Newark, is likely to change how we think and talk about genocide.

As Irvin-Erickson writes in an article (“The Romantic Signature of Raphael Lemkin”) scheduled to appear in the *Journal of Genocide Research*:

Lemkin used the work of an art historian to define nations as “families of minds”…. Lemkin intended the word genocide to signify the cultural destruction of peoples, which could occur without a perpetrator employing violence at all. In his 1944 *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Lemkin wrote that genocide was “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.” A colonial practice, genocide had two phases: “One, the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.”

Genocide, in other words, is not, in Lemkin’s understanding, about mass killing per se, but about the destruction of nations qua nations. Mass killing is, thus, a means to the end of genocide, and not its goal.

Lemkin adopted his definition of a nation as a family of minds in the context of his writing on the French genocide against Algeria, where he believed that the French colonial power was breaking the “bodily and mental integrity” of the Algerian people…. The goal of the genocide, Lemkin wrote, was to integrate Algerians into the French Republic and prevent Algeria from emerging from colonial rule.

Keep in mind that here, too, genocide for Lemkin is not the bloody and brutal war fought between France and the Algerians in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the entire French colonial project that attempted to destroy the Algerian “family of mind.”

Lemkin believed the political regimes led by Hitler and Stalin both committed genocide…. [T]hese two regimes shared the defining characteristic of attempting to destroy the national patterns of the oppressed groups and replace it with a “Sovietness” or “Germanness.” Lemkin argued that the Russian and Soviet attack on the Ukrainians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Jews, the Crimean and Tatar Republics, the Baltic nations of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, and the total annihilation of the Ingerian nation, were all genocides, before and during Stalin’s reign.

Genocide, Lemkin asserted, was a long-term element of the Kremlin’s internal policy and “an indispensable step in the process of ‘union’ that the Soviet leaders fondly hope will produce the ‘Soviet Man,’ the ‘Soviet Nation.’” Just as the Nazi genocide sought to eradicate the national patterns of the occupied territories and install a distinct “Germanness” to consolidate state control, “the leaders of the Kremlin will gladly destroy the nations and the cultures that have long inhabited Eastern Europe.” The Ukrainian genocide was “an essential part of the Soviet program for expansion, for it offers the quick way of bringing unity out of the diversity of cultures and nations that constitute the Soviet Empire.”

It follows from the above that, according to Lemkin, the Holodomor—the famine of 1932-1933—was only one of the means employed by the Stalinist regime to Sovietize and Russify the Ukrainian nation. The actual genocide was Sovietization and Russification, processes that were initiated during the Civil War of 1918-1921, revived by Stalin in the late 1920s, and then vigorously pursued by him and all his successors, including Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, into the early 1980s. It was only under the liberalizing rule of Mikhail Gorbachev that the Russificationist project, and hence genocide, was abandoned.

The genocide was not that Stalin’s regime killed so many people, but that these individuals were killed with the purpose of destroying the Ukrainian way of life, an argument in line with his writings on how the French colonial state sought to eradicate Algerian national consciousness through state terror, political disenfranchisement, and poverty…. The most devastating aspect of the genocide for Lemkin was not the death of individuals, but the potential loss of a cohesive group who shared a common belief in their unity through language, customs, art, or even a sense of shared history.
Irvin-Erickson here raises the intriguing possibility that the cultural policies of the current Yanukovych regime would qualify as genocidal in Lemkin’s eyes. After all, there is little doubt that their purpose is: “One, the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor.” In this case, “the Ukrainian way of life” would, in the Yanukovych regime’s scheme of things, be replaced with the “Donbas pattern of the oppressor”—a way of life that is Soviet, criminal, and Lumpen-Russian. As the pesky Ukrainian “family of mind” gives way to a “family” of, as Czeslaw Milosz might have put it, “captive minds,” what’s left of Ukrainians as a “cohesive group who shared a common belief in their unity through language, customs, art, or even a sense of shared history”?

Naturally, you needn’t reach this conclusion—but only if you disagree with Lemkin’s views on genocide.