

The Eight Stages of Genocide

Classification

All cultures have categories to distinguish people into “us and them” by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality (German and Jew, Hutu and Tutsi), and bipolar societies that lack mixed categories, such as Rwanda and Burundi, are the most likely to have genocide.



Symbolization

We give names or other symbols to the classifications. We name people “Jews or Gypsies” or distinguish them by colors and dress, and apply those symbols to group members. Classification and Symbolization are universally human and do not necessarily result in genocide unless they lead to the next stage. When combined with hatred, symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups; the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule, or the blue scarf for people from the eastern zone in the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia.

Dehumanization

One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Dehumanization overcomes the normal human revulsion against murder.

Organization

Genocide is always organized, usually by the state, though sometimes informally, (Hindu mobs led by local RSS militants) or by terrorist groups. Special army units or militias are often trained and armed. Plans are made for genocidal killings.

Polarization

Extremists drive the groups apart. Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda. Laws may forbid intermarriage or social interaction. Extremist terrorism targets moderates, intimidating and silencing centrists and moderates.

Preparation

Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity. Death lists are drawn up. Members of victim groups are forced to wear identifying symbols. They are often segregated into ghettos, forced into concentration camps, or confined to a famine-struck region and starved.

Extermination

Extermination begins, and quickly becomes the mass killing legally called “genocide.” It is “extermination” to the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human. When it is sponsored by the state, the armed forces often work with militias to do the killing. Sometimes the genocide results in revenge killings by groups against each other, creating the downward whirlpool-like cycle of bilateral genocide.

Denial

Denial is among the surest indicators of further genocidal massacres. The perpetrators of genocide dig up the mass graves, burn bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses. They deny that they committed any crimes, and often blame what happened on the victims. They block investigations of the crimes, and continue to govern until driven from power by force, when they flee into exile. There they remain with impunity, like Pol Pot or Idi Amin, unless they are captured and a tribunal is established to bring them to trial.