

"Ethnic Cleansing" is a Euphemism Used for Genocide Denial

By Dr. Gregory H. Stanton

["Ethnic cleansing"](#) is a term invented by Slobodan Milošević and Serbian propagandists as a [euphemism](#) for forced deportation and genocide. It is history's most successful euphemism used for genocide denial. Milošević is laughing from his grave.

"Ethnic cleansing" has become the dominant term used to describe genocidal crimes without using the word, "Genocide." It has invaded the legal lexicon, statements by the United Nations, reporting in the press, policy making by governments, and even judgments by the International Court of Justice.

"Ethnic cleansing" in common usage means forced deportation. But unlike the crime against humanity of [deportation](#) or forcible transfer of population, and the crime of [genocide](#), it is not a term that appears in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). It has no legal meaning in international law. There is no treaty outlawing it.

Ethnic cleansing is not even a crime. No national legal codes prohibit it. No prosecutor can charge anyone for committing it. The term is a license for impunity.

Because Article 1 of the Genocide Convention implies the obligation to act to prevent genocide, avoiding use of the term "genocide" has the same practical outcome as genocide denial. Policy makers who use the term "ethnic cleansing"—like genocide deniers—are absolved of their duty to prevent genocide.

"Ethnic cleansing" has become the dominant euphemism used to deny genocide.

Since the Serbo-Croatian term "ethnic cleansing" was [first used](#) by the Western press in 1992, it has become the dominant term used by the press, governments, U.N. lawyers, and even by human rights groups for both forced deportation, and also for genocidal massacres. [William Safire](#) prophetically warned that the term "ethnic cleansing...is likely to be with us for a while."

The term "ethnic cleansing" was first applied to the crimes against humanity and genocide in Bosnia - Herzegovina. The world press and U.S. called the massacres "ethnic cleansing" from 1991 until 1995.

Does it make any practical difference if crimes are called "genocide" rather than "ethnic cleansing?" The answer is a resounding yes.

In 2007, three epidemiologists (Rony Blum, Shira Sagi, and Elihu Richter) and I conducted a study of the political effect of using the words "ethnic cleansing" rather than "genocide" during four recent genocides: Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Darfur. Researchers counted the number of times the terms "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" were used in The New York Times, U.N. press releases, major law journals, and statements by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch from 1990 through 2005. We published our findings in the European Journal of Public Health as "[Ethnic Cleansing Bleaches the Atrocities of Genocide](#)."

Our study came to three conclusions:

1. Use of the terms "ethnic cleansing" or "genocide" has no relationship to the number of people who have been killed.

In 1994, U.S. State Department lawyers would not permit the mass murders in Rwanda to be called "genocide" for three months while over 500,000 people were massacred.

8000 men killed at Srebrenica in 1995 was ruled "genocide" by the ICTY. But over 100,000 Bosnian Muslims killed from 1992 to 1995 by Bosnian Serb forces with the direct support of Serbia was not sufficient evidence for the International Court of Justice to find that Serbia had violated the Genocide Convention.

In Kosovo in 1999, lawyers quarreled over whether 10,000 Kosovar Albanians killed should be called "ethnic cleansing" or "genocide." Many peace activists protested that any intervention should be authorized by the U.N. Security Council, in spite of a certain veto by Russia.

In Darfur, a U.N. Commission of Inquiry led by Judge Antonio Cassese ruled that over 50,000 killed in Darfur (now over 400,000) was insufficient evidence of intent by the government of Sudan to accuse it of genocide.

2. Choice of whether atrocities are called "ethnic cleansing" or "crimes against humanity" instead of "genocide" is determined by willingness to take forceful action to stop the killing.

When the terms "ethnic cleansing" or "crimes against humanity" are used, it indicates unwillingness to take forceful action to stop the crimes. The term "genocide" is avoided because the decision against the use of force has already been made.

For three months in 1994, lawyers in the State Department led by Joan Donoghue, George Taft, Ted Borek, and David Stewart, ordered that the word "genocide" should not be used to describe the massacres in Rwanda due to "insufficient proof of intent." Instead, the State Department's spokesperson, Christine Shelly infamously told reporters that "acts of genocide" was the formulation approved by State Department lawyers.

Could the U.S., U.K., France, and U.N. have acted to stop or substantially reduce the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda?

Within a week, France and Belgium sent in over a thousand troops to evacuate their citizens and even their pets. But none of these European powers would risk a single life to save Rwandan human beings.

The U.S. had thousands of U.S. Marines on ships just off the coast of East Africa when

the Rwandan genocide began on April 7, 1994. The ships carried large helicopters and other aircraft that could have airlifted thousands of U.S. Marines into Rwanda within weeks. [This capability was Top Secret until U.S. records were recently declassified. But I knew this in 1994 because I worked in the State Department and had Top Secret Codeword clearance.]

This fact is still ignored by apologists for American failure to intervene like Alan Kuperman in "[The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda](#)," a book refuted by [Alison Des Forges](#) of Human Rights Watch and by Gregory Stanton in "[Could the Rwandan Genocide Have Been Prevented?](#)"

The U.S. Peacekeeping Task Force (Susan Rice, George Ward, and Sarah Sewell, with resistance from Prudence Bushnell) recommended withdrawal of UNAMIR rather than risk getting the U.S. involved in "another Somalia." The U.S., joined by the U.K., led the U.N. Security Council to vote on April 21, 1994, to withdraw over 2000 UNAMIR troops, rather than send in reinforcements to stop the genocide, as requested by General Roméo Dallaire, the UNAMIR commander.

From 1992 to 1995 in Bosnia, Yasushi Akashi, the pacifist head of the U.N. mission refused to authorize UNPROFOR bombing of Serb forces, or even counterattacks against Serb snipers who murdered Bosnians going to market in Sarajevo.

In 1999 in Kosovo over ten thousand Kosovars were killed by Serb militias and hundreds of thousands were driven out of their homes. The U.S. publicly announced it would not send U.S. troops to stop the Serbian Army's occupation of Kosovo.

In Darfur in 2004, U.N. Security Council Resolutions called on the government of Sudan to prevent Janjaweed militias from murdering tens of thousands of Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa people and destroying over 400 of their villages, in full knowledge that the Sudanese government armed and financed the militias and used the Sudanese Air Force to bomb the villages.

3. It was not until the term "genocide" was applied to the crimes that force was used to stop them.

Recognition of the "genocide" in Rwanda only occurred three months into the massacres. But recognition of "genocide" came too late. In June 1994, the U.N. Security Council re-authorized sending in U.N. peacekeepers. By July 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front had defeated the genocidal Rwandan army, Presidential Guard, and Hutu militias. By that time 800,000 Rwandans had already been slaughtered.

On July 11–13, 1995, Bosnian Serb forces under [Radko Mladić](#) murdered 8000 Bosnian men from Srebrenica. That crime provoked a NATO conference on July 21, 1995, during which the mass murders were finally called "genocide." NATO bombing of Serb forces began on August 30, 1995. The bombing brought Serbia to Dayton to agree to a ceasefire, division of Bosnia, and a NATO peacekeeping operation. The Bosnian civil war came to an end.

Kosovo was called “ethnic cleansing” until U.S. War Crimes Ambassador David Scheffer noted “[indicators of genocide](#)” on April 7, 1999. His statement was followed within a week by bombing of Belgrade, which brought Serb surrender and NATO occupation of Kosovo. NATO peacekeepers are still in Kosovo.

Use of the term "genocide" is necessary but not sufficient to motivate forceful action to stop it.

After a careful empirical survey of evidence of genocide among Darfur refugees, on September 9, 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared, “[Genocide has occurred](#) and may still be occurring in Darfur.... We believe the evidence corroborates the specific intent of the perpetrators to destroy ‘a group in whole or in part.’” Unfortunately, Secretary Powell also said, “However, no new action is dictated by this determination.”

The U.N. resisted the American finding and refused to invoke the G-Word: “genocide.” The U.N. appointed its own [Commission of Inquiry](#), led by Antonio Cassese, who as President of the ICTY never handed down a conviction for genocide.

Insiders report that even before his Commission left for Sudan, Cassese told them it was unlikely that it could find evidence of genocidal intent by the Sudanese government. The Commission detailed many “crimes against humanity” in Darfur, but it refused to call them “genocide.”

All that followed were ineffective increases in a joint U.N./African Union monitoring force without a mandate to fight the Janjaweed and Sudanese military forces that massacred Darfuris and forcibly displaced them. To this day there has been no forceful intervention by U.N., NATO, or African Union troops to stop the genocide. The Darfur genocide continues to this day. Genocide denial has resulted in continuing genocide.

Since our 2007 study of the effects of use of the terms "ethnic cleansing" or "genocide," several other genocides have occurred that illustrate how the euphemism "ethnic cleansing" is used to deny genocide.

ISIS Genocide Against Yazidis, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and other religious minorities

ISIS provided another example of the importance of calling genocide by its proper name. For two years, the press, the U.S. State Department, the European Union, human rights groups, and the U.N. refused to call the ISIS crimes “genocide,” except for the massacres against the Yazidi. Even the [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) denied that Christians and Shi’a Muslims were also victims of genocide.

In 2015, Genocide Watch, the Hudson Institute, the Knights of Columbus, Catholic University, and Congressional staff from both parties formed the Genocide Working Group in Washington, DC. The group drafted resolutions that were introduced in Congress and in the European Parliament declaring that ISIS was committing genocide against the Yazidis, Christians, Shi’a Muslims and other religious groups. The [resolution](#) passed unanimously in the

United States Congress and nearly unanimously in the European Parliament. U.S. Secretary of State [Kerry](#) overruled his legal advisors and declared that ISIS was committing genocide.

The U.S. and coalition response was immediate. Military action against ISIS was intensified. ISIS was militarily defeated in Iraq and Syria. [Laws](#) were passed to support resettlement of the victims of ISIS in Iraq.

Myanmar's genocide against the Rohingya

Genocide is precisely what the Myanmar government and supporting militias have committed against the Rohingya since 2012. Myanmar committed both forced displacement [“ethnic cleansing”] and genocide. The crimes often go together. Genocidal massacres are used to terrorize a victim group into fleeing.

Over 700,000 Rohingya fled into Bangladesh in 2017 to escape systematic massacres by the Myanmar army that killed at least 10,000 Rohingya and burned over 400 Rohingya villages to the ground. Yet the so-called “international community” (which exists only in popular [imagination](#)s) still avoids using the word “genocide.”

The [UN](#), [press](#), [human rights groups](#), and many [governments](#) still call the Myanmar Army's aggression, genocidal massacres, and forced deportation against the Rohingya “ethnic cleansing.” Since 2012, the term “ethnic cleansing” has been the dominant term used for the Rohingya genocide in articles in the [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), the [Guardian](#), in statements by [United Nations officials](#), in statements by [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#). and in statements by the [U.S. State Department](#).

Why do certain groups insist on using the euphemism "ethnic cleansing" to deny that "genocide" is underway or has occurred?

“Ethnic cleansing” is used by the press because reporters consider genocide a legal word that can only be validly used by lawyers. Members of the press are reluctant to use legal terms they are unsure about.

Diplomats speak of “ethnic cleansing” rather than genocide to avoid offending other diplomats or U.N. member states, and to avoid implying that their nation or the U.N. has a duty to take preventive action.

Lawyers are reluctant to use the word “genocide” for several reasons:

Lawyers have gutted the word “genocide” of its preventive effect by insisting on judicial standards of proof of specific intent beyond a reasonable doubt rather than a prosecutor’s preponderance of the evidence.

Lawyers sometimes think that statements by the perpetrator are necessary to prove specific intent. But the only thing “specific” about specific intent is that the intent must be to destroy a group. As in ordinary criminal law, perpetrators seldom announce their intentions.

Actions are the normal way to prove intent. A systematic campaign of killings and destruction should be enough proof of the specific intent to destroy a group, in whole or in part.

British Foreign Office, E.U., and U.N. lawyers even claim that only a court can invoke the word “genocide.” This view is profoundly wrong. It ignores the very name of the International Convention for the **Prevention** and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Courts judge cases after genocide is over—too late for prevention.

Following Schabas, legal advisors to governments and tribunals argue that it is equally damning to call the crimes “ethnic cleansing,” “atrocities,” or “crimes against humanity.” Prison sentences for crimes against humanity in international tribunals have been equal to sentences for genocide. Therefore, charging perpetrators with “crimes against humanity” is as effective as charging them with “genocide.” Such reasoning may apply in trials of individual perpetrators after a genocide is over. But it gives policy makers an easy way out so they can deny their nations' legal duty to prevent genocide.

Lawyers for human rights groups like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International avoid using the word genocide because they share Schabas' narrow view of genocidal intent and because they usually oppose military intervention to prevent genocide. They seldom use the word until after a genocide is over.

Some lawyers like Schabas and lawyers at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, Human Rights Watch, and elsewhere avoid using the word “genocide” because they do not want to de-value its special application to the Holocaust.

They limit use of the word to genocides “in whole,” where the intent is to destroy a whole group. Schabas refuses to apply the word “genocide” to most genocides “in part.” Schabas denies that genocide occurred in Cambodia, Darfur, the Holodomor, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other genocides “in part,” even though these are considered genocides by most other genocide scholars. On April 20, 2021, writing with Jeffrey Sachs, Schabas also denied that the word “genocide” should be applied to the Chinese crimes against the [Uyghurs](#) in Xinjiang.

Policy makers who do not want their nations to be involved in forceful military action avoid using the word “genocide.” They often even oppose deployment of U.N. peacekeeping forces with strong enough mandates and rules of engagement to aggressively protect civilians against genocidal militias and armies. This is a dominant reason that the State Department's Office of the Legal Advisor and the British Foreign Office avoid the word “Genocide.”

Raphael Lemkin invented the word “genocide” because “extermination” or “barbarism” did not express the horror of the Armenian Genocide or the Holocaust. He meant it to apply to partial genocides as well as genocides intended to destroy “in whole.”

Genocide consists of acts of genocide intended to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Genocidal massacres are acts of genocide.

Conclusions;

“Genocide” is a more powerful word than “ethnic cleansing.”

When the term “genocide” is used instead of “ethnic cleansing,” use of force to stop it becomes possible. When the crimes are called “ethnic cleansing” or “crimes against humanity,” it is an indicator of lack of political will to use force to stop them.

"Ethnic cleansing" is a term used to avoid forceful action to prevent genocide.

Since 2000, the term “atrocities” (which also has no status in international law) has become another euphemism that indicates the absence of political will to take forceful action to stop genocide.

The term "ethnic cleansing" is a euphemism used for genocide denial.

"Ethnic cleansing" should be expunged from the legal and journalistic lexicon.