

Imperialism, Anti-Imperialism and the Problem of Genocide, Past and Present

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Abstract

In recent years, there have been signs of a significant ‘anti-imperialist’ turn in genocide studies. Challenging what has been described as a hitherto predominantly liberal approach, a number of genocide scholars have adopted a more critical attitude towards the history of imperialism, and projected a broader arc of explanation, linking genocides committed by western states in the construction of their empires to genocides committed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is too much insight, undoubtedly, in an anti-imperialist approach to contemplate discarding it. It helps us understand why genocides undoubtedly committed by western imperialist states took place in the past. It provides important elements of a vital critique of the international order, fashioned by western imperialist states, within which some postcolonial states have been able to commit genocide. It helps us understand why some western states colluded with or facilitated genocide, as in Indonesia in the 1960s or Guatemala in the 1980s, or blocked intervention to halt or prevent it, as in Bangladesh in the 1970s and Rwanda in the 1990s. But it cannot do everything, and some of the difficulties identified here will arise when it is taken too far, when there is an attempt to fit everything within a framework of analysis that cannot bear the weight put upon it. Imperialism has been at times and in places central to the occurrence of genocide, but not everywhere, not at all times, and to a very large extent not since the Convention.

I

In recent years, there have been signs of a significant ‘anti-imperialist’ turn in genocide studies. Challenging what has been described as a hitherto predominantly liberal approach, adopted by the mostly North American pioneers in the field,¹ a number of genocide scholars have adopted a more critical attitude towards the history of imperialism, and projected a broader arc of explanation, linking genocides committed by western states in the construction of their empires to genocides committed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A liberal approach, from this perspective, placed too great an emphasis on the Holocaust and (both in this case and more broadly) on ideology and intent, obscuring the importance of structural factors.

¹ For short biographies of some of these, see *Pioneers of Genocide Studies*, ed. Samuel Totten and Steven Leonard Jacobs (New York, 2002).

Although this initial paradigm was challenged from various quarters, particularly by those seeking to show that the Holocaust was by no means as unique as some had claimed, such a 'post-liberal' approach had weaknesses of its own.² Not only was it too static, in laying one genocide or another against the Holocaust for comparison, but it could generate a regrettable and unhelpful³ competition over victimhood. This new approach by contrast places genocide in a broader historical framework, tracing the dynamics of imperial conquest, accompanied and legitimated by racist ideology, to show how genocides recur over time in a comprehensible pattern.

This approach has been adopted by scholars spread across many continents. There is for example what might be called an 'Australian school',⁴ developing insights from the study of genocide committed against aborigines. This work has been linked to that of some German scholars, working on imperial rule in south-west and east Africa.⁵ It also informs important analyses of the violence deriving from American hegemony in Latin America.⁶ Beyond these regional contributions, a focus on the impact of imperialism has helped shape more general reflections on genocidal processes and patterns, within which the Holocaust may now too be relocated.⁷

² The identification of both a 'liberal' tradition and a 'post-liberal' critique was first made by Dirk Moses in a seminal paper, 'Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the "Racial Century": Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust', *Patterns of Prejudice*, xxxvi (2002), 7–36.

³ Dan Stone, *Histories of the Holocaust* (Oxford, 2010) [hereafter Stone, *Histories*], p. 242.

⁴ Tony Barta, 'Decent Disposal: Australian Historians and the Recovery of Genocide', in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 296–322; Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 'Genocide: Definitions, Questions, Settler-Colonies', *Aboriginal History*, xxv (2001), 1–15; Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal for Genocide Research*, viii (2006), 387–409; idem, 'Structure and Event: Settler Colonialism, Time and the Question of Genocide' [hereafter Wolfe, 'Structure'], in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (Oxford, 2008) [hereafter Moses, *Empire*], pp. 102–32.

⁵ For example Jürgen Zimmerer 'The Birth of the *Ostland* out of the Spirit of Colonialism: A Postcolonial Perspective on the Nazi Policy of Conquest and Extermination', *Patterns of Prejudice*, xxxix (2005), 197–219 [hereafter Zimmerer, 'Birth of the *Ostland*']; Dominik Schaller, 'From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa', in Moses, *Empire*, pp. 296–324 [hereafter Schaller, 'From Conquest']. An important essay by Zimmerer on 'Colonialism and the Holocaust: An Archaeology of Genocide' appears in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. Dirk Moses (Oxford, 2004), pp. 49–76.

⁶ See for example Daniel Feierstein's important essay on 'National Security Doctrine in Latin America', in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Dirk Moses and Donald Bloxham (Oxford, 2010) [hereafter Moses and Bloxham, *Handbook*], pp. 489–508. See also Marcia Esparza, Daniel Feierstein and Henry Huttenbach, *State Violence and Genocide in Latin America: The Cold War Years* (Abingdon, 2009).

⁷ For example Stone, *Histories*; Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York, 2008) [hereafter Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*]; Christopher Powell, *Barbaric Civilisation: A Critical Sociology of Genocide* (Montreal, 2010) [hereafter Powell, *Barbaric Civilisation*]; Vinay Lal, 'The Concentration Camp and Development: The Pasts and Future of Genocide', *Patterns of Prejudice*, xxxix (2005), 220–43.

An anti-imperialist approach to genocide can take different forms, some more radical,⁸ others more nuanced and modest.⁹ Some have a more or less explicit political accent; others seek only to introduce empire and colony as key analytic concepts. What they share, however, is the view that modern genocide is a particular, historically located phenomenon. It goes back to the origins of the world order in which we still live (a world order dominated by western, imperialist states) – to the conquest by Spain of the ‘New World’, followed by the conquest of North America by Britain and France; by the expansion of the United States; and by the European conquest of Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and parts of Asia. This is by no means an exhaustive list but, in many cases, conquest involved not only the subjugation of indigenous peoples, the theft of their land and the pillage of their resources – but also the destruction of groups, in whole or in part.

II

This catalogue of destruction moreover includes the Holocaust which, on this argument, has mistakenly been seen as quite separate, or even worse, unique. It cannot be viewed as a consequence of German peculiarities, a *Sonderweg* whose fallacies have already been demonstrated.¹⁰ Nor is it only a Jewish event, because many millions of others were also killed by the Nazis. Rather, we need to see how and why these mass murders were connected – the murders that took place at the same time and the murders that preceded them.

An important link here may, nevertheless, be German – more specifically the conduct of German imperialists in Africa, particularly in the case of the genocide of the Hereros, connected by some scholars to the Holocaust in a number of respects.¹¹ There was, firstly, a common

⁸ Lal’s is perhaps the most radical position, arguing that ‘a proper study of genocide’ requires us to understand an ‘imperialism of the categories’ which has led to largely invisible holocausts being perpetrated on significant sections of the world’s population, through mass starvation, famine, concentration camps, killings and dispossession.

⁹ Wolfe (‘Structure’) for example distinguishes between conditions facilitating genocide and genocide itself.

¹⁰ Famously by Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn in *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in 19th Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). Not everyone shares this view. Jürgen Kocka, for example, has insisted that ‘in the end we should not and may not be distracted from the fact that Germany was the leading country of European fascism, and that World War II and the Shoah came from Germany . . . and the questions the *Sonderweg* thesis sought to answer remain’ (Jürgen Kocka, ‘Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German *Sonderweg*’, *History and Theory*, xxxviii (1999), 40–50, at p. 47).

¹¹ See for example, Zimmerer, ‘Birth of the *Ostland*’; Benjamin Madley, ‘From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe’, *European History Quarterly*, xxxv (2005), 429–64; Jon Stratton, ‘“It Almost Needn’t Have Been the Germans”: The State, Colonial Violence and the Holocaust’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vi (2003), 507–27. But see also the detailed critique of this argument by Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz’, *Central European History*, xlii (2009), 279–300.

rhetoric involving the notion of *Lebensraum* for Germans, in which others were depicted repeatedly as subhuman, and which was expressed through a legally institutionalized racism. There was, secondly, in both Africa and in eastern Europe, a genocidal military strategy with explicit orders to commit mass murder: the famous ‘Annihilation Order’ of General von Trotha was, on this argument, a precedent for the *Kommissarbefehl*, given for Operation Barbarossa. There were, thirdly, significant personal connections through such figures as Ritter von Epp (subsequently a leader of the counter-revolutionary Freikorps after the First World War when he first sponsored Hitler) and the experience of those involved directly or indirectly in two genocides separated by only forty years. There is, fourthly, a connection in terms of the concentration camps developed by Germans in south-west Africa in which people were worked to death in an organized, timetabled manner.¹²

After defeat in the First World War, and the resultant loss of overseas colonies, the German state concentrated on creating an empire in eastern Europe, which is where the Holocaust occurred. The latter was then, on this argument, part of a wider programme of imperialist conquest, in which many millions were slaughtered and many more would have been if the Nazis had been victorious. The crucial context for this killing was an imperialist one in which the Nazis sought to conquer *Lebensraum*, to take the land, to plunder resources, to exploit the indigenous population.

It can be conceded, nevertheless, that there was a more radical genocidal project with regard to the Jews than that carried out against others. This, it has been suggested, was for four main reasons. Firstly, because their elimination was in a sense the prelude to the full imperialist exploitation of eastern Europe. The continuing presence of Jews (seen as alien by both the Nazis and local nationalists) complicated the matter because they were seen to cause extra, additional problems for German plans for the region, as (purportedly) carriers of disease, as organizers of the black market, and because of their supposed stranglehold on the economy.¹³ The Jews had to be removed entirely before the ‘proper’ work of settlement and exploitation could be undertaken. Secondly, it was because the Jews were seen by the Nazis both as colonizers of Germany itself from within and as the colonized, inferior ‘other’ in eastern Europe, ‘combining contempt and fear in a lethal cocktail’.¹⁴ Thirdly, it was because the Jews were seen as a security threat to the imperialist project as, in the Nazi imagination, in 1918 when they had supposedly ‘stabbed the nation in the back’. Finally, it was because

¹² On this especially, see Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘War, Concentration Camps and Genocide in South-West Africa’, in *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War of 1904–1908 and its Aftermath*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer and Joachim Zeller (Monmouth, 2008), pp. 41–63 [hereafter Zimmerer, ‘Colonialism and the Holocaust’].

¹³ See David Furber and Wendy Lower, ‘Colonialism and Genocide in Nazi-occupied Poland and Ukraine’ in Moses, *Empire*, pp. 372–402 [hereafter Furber and Lower, ‘Colonialism’], at p. 384.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

Germany's effort to create a European empire, driven to a large extent by the need to compete with other imperialist powers, Britain and America,¹⁵ was blocked by Jews. In the Nazi mind, it was the Jews who stood behind both, manipulating their governments, just as they stood behind the other power that could prevent Germany establishing its continental empire – the Soviet Union.

The entire Nazi imperialist project, however, was not on this argument dissimilar to that of Germany's imperialist predecessors or rivals, as Hitler himself repeatedly pointed out. 'What India was for England, the eastern territories will be for us . . . the natives will have to be shot . . . Our sole duty is to Germanize the country by the immigration of natives, regarding the natives as Redskins'.¹⁶ What distinguished this project is that it took place in Europe. If Germany was to create an empire, it could only do so in the east, which is where the Holocaust took place. What, then, shocked their fellow-Europeans was not so much that the Germans committed mass murder as that they committed it in Europe. As Aimé Césaire (a writer frequently cited in this context¹⁷) famously argued, the reality is that Europeans 'tolerated Nazism before it was inflicted upon them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples'.¹⁸

III

But what is it exactly about imperialism that makes genocide so possible or likely? One central reason has to do with what Jürgen Zimmerer has identified as the master concepts of 'race' and 'space'.¹⁹ What imperialist powers wanted was space for their 'race' to expand into and develop, space that was identified as either empty or wasted by inferior others. Encroaching on others' land and space, however, they sooner or later encountered resistance which had to be crushed.

Some versions of this argument draw important distinctions. Dirk Moses, for example, distinguishes carefully between empire and colony, and between colonization and colonialism. The latter is, he argues, a 'specific form of colonial rule, and as a process supplements colonization'. There are then differences in turn between forms of colonial rule: 'the greater the intensity of colonial rule, the greater the likelihood

¹⁵ See especially Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (2006) [hereafter Tooze, *Wages*] and Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*.

¹⁶ Cited in Enzo Traverso, who argues that the 'logical and factual precedent' for Nazi crimes is to be found in colonial wars' (*The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York, 2003), pp. 71–3).

¹⁷ See, for example, Stone, *Histories*, p. 202; Mazower, *Hitler's Empire*, p. 585; Dirk Moses, 'Empire, Colony, Genocide: Keywords and the Philosophy of History', in Moses, *Empire*, pp. 3–54, at p. 39; Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford, 2009), p. 20.

¹⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, 2000), p. 36.

¹⁹ Zimmerer, 'Colonialism and the Holocaust'.

that it is genocidal'.²⁰ Some of this intensity would come from resistance to conquest in the first place; some from security concerns about the loyalty of the subjugated population, particularly on the periphery. The wars of conquest waged by colonizing powers and subsequent efforts to repress uprisings could easily become total (and thus genocidal) in nature, as indigenous resistance had to be smashed.

But genocide was not just the consequence of direct colonial rule; it was the outcome too of settler violence against those whose land they sought to annex, even where the imperial state far away claimed to want only peace. For Patrick Wolfe, whatever the stated intent may have been, the outcome was likely to be genocidal because 'invasion is a structure not an event', setting in motion what he calls a 'logic of elimination'.²¹ If this logic is not itself identical with genocide (since in his view elimination can also encompass assimilation), settler-colonialism is not only a very powerful indicator but has a clear 'genocidal dimension', best captured through the use of the term 'structural genocide'.

This term not only helps to clarify the necessary links between removal, mass killing and assimilation, but also to counter any putative distinction between state-led and societal genocides.²² The violence of the settlers took place within a context in which imperialist states had asserted their sovereignty over other people's land, arrogantly assuming that indigenous peoples had no such rights and were inherently incapable of using it properly.²³ When settlers engaged in violence against those who resisted their annexation, imperialist states would invariably side with them, legitimating their actions after the event. They had a profound structural interest in doing so, because the land and resources so acquired were essential to their own survival in the competitive global international capitalist system.

This has implications not just for explaining genocide but also for making judgements about what counts as genocide, since the Convention, as is well known, insists that there must be an intent to destroy a group. Some have suggested that it is not necessary to find intent because the structure of the situation is inherently genocidal,²⁴ or that the consequences were genocidal, even if not explicitly intended, and were quite foreseeable.²⁵ Others are more cautious, arguing that there

²⁰ Moses, *Empire*, pp. 22, 23.

²¹ Wolfe, 'Structure', pp. 102–3.

²² A distinction made earlier by another Australian scholar, Alison Palmer, in 'Colonial and Modern Genocide: Explanations and Categories', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, xxi (1998), 89–115.

²³ Benjamin Madley, 'Patterns of Frontier Genocide 1803–1910: The Aboriginal Tasmanians, the Yuki of California, and the Herero of Namibia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vi (2004), 167–92, at p. 168.

²⁴ Tony Barta, 'Relations of Genocide: Land and Lives in the Colonization of Australia', in *Genocide and the Modern Age*, ed. Isidor Wallimann and Michael N. Dobkowski (New York, 1987), pp. 237–51.

²⁵ Schaller, 'From Conquest', p. 310.

were more clearly identifiable and not random ‘genocidal moments’ in which intent is more or less clear. If imperialist states did not necessarily set out to commit genocide, their policies were, as Moses argues, ‘pushed in an exterminatory direction by the confluence of their underlying assumptions, the demands of the colonial and international economy, their plans for the land, and the resistance to these plans by the indigenous’ population.²⁶

The genocidal consequences of imperialism continue to be felt when imperialist powers are forced formally to withdraw, and postcolonial states take their place. The logic of violence set in motion by imperialist annexation can continue to play itself out as previously oppressed groups turn upon those who were either their colonial tormentors or colluded with them. These are cases of what have been defined as *subaltern* genocides, ‘cases in which subaltern actors – those objectively oppressed and disempowered – adopt genocidal strategies to vanquish their oppressors’.²⁷ But there remains an important sense in which imperialism may still be held largely responsible, because it set up the structure within which, to use the title of Mahmood Mamdani’s influential book on Rwanda, its ‘victims become killers’,²⁸ driven to do so by, amongst other things, a deep sense of humiliation.²⁹

All this may have significant implications in turn for how to respond to genocide now. If it is western imperialism which was fundamentally responsible for generating the possibility or likelihood or inevitability of genocide, then it would make little sense to imagine western states as some kind of ‘cavalry that rescues victims from genocidal elites and their militias’.³⁰ The causes of genocide lie in the past, (and indeed present) behaviour of such states. Their intervention now would only hide their fundamental responsibility for genocide, perpetuating a fiction that only other, ‘rogue’ states commit genocide, when they themselves have been intimately involved in it throughout their own history.³¹

Taken together, these insights can form a very powerful line of argument, one which could combine explanation, evaluation, judgement and prescription in a very effective way, with an appeal at once intellectual, political and moral. It might appear to provide the basis of an overarching explanation, part of whose appeal would lie in the way in

²⁶ Dirk Moses, ‘An Antipodean Genocide? The Origins of the Genocidal Moment in the Colonization of Australia’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, ii (2000), 89–106, at p. 92.

²⁷ See especially, *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice*, ed. Adam Jones and Nicholas Robins (Bloomington, Ind., 2009) [hereafter *Genocides by the Oppressed*].

²⁸ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, 2001), whose title is taken by Jones and Robins to be ‘as succinct a summary of the dynamics of subaltern genocide as exists in the literature’ (*Genocides by the Oppressed*, p. 8).

²⁹ Adam Jones, ‘When the Rabbit’s Got the Gun’, in *Genocides by the Oppressed*, pp. 185–208.

³⁰ Dirk Moses, ‘Towards a Theory of Critical Genocide Studies’, in *Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence*, iii (<http://www.massviolence.org>, accessed 13/11/2008).

³¹ Powell, *Barbaric Civilisation*, pp. 99–100.

which it could open our eyes to what we might have previously been blocked from seeing. The basis for identifying genocide would be both broad and sophisticated, enabling us to see that genocide is not an accident, that it is systematically produced, and that it is a consequence of a structure which already commands widespread opprobrium.

There would, however, be some significant difficulties with pursuing such a line of argument too single-mindedly. One has to do with some important genocides in the past that this approach misses out. Another is to do with how well such an approach can deal with the most radical case of genocide, the Holocaust. Another, however, is to do with the recurrence of genocide since the Holocaust, and with where the threat of genocide appears largely to come from today. This turns out to be not so much from imperialist states, but from their postcolonial successors, a development not so easily recognized from this angle. An overriding focus on imperialism may ironically make it more not less difficult to respond to genocide in the present.

IV

One obvious difficulty in tracing the modern history of genocide back to 1492 is the fact that these were clearly not the first genocides. As Ben Kiernan showed in his wide-ranging history, genocides committed in the ancient world by Sparta and Rome played an important role in the history of genocide long before western states emerged on the world stage. Both these genocidal states played a critical role in fashioning what he calls early modern memory and powerfully influenced western nation-states that sought to present themselves as legitimately following in their footsteps.³²

On the other hand, if Sparta and Rome were indeed such precursors, it is hard to argue that western states were embarked on a wholly new project. But this is not just a question of ancient history. There is also the question of the many states outside the orbit of western imperialism that were engaged in genocide *after* 1492, long before western states were significantly present in the relevant region. Among the examples Kiernan provides are Vietnam's Confucian project against its neighbours (1390–1509); Japan's murderous onslaught on Korea (1567–98); Javanese expansion and violent repression of Islam (c.1570–1670); and major genocidal projects in Burma (in the seventeenth century) and in Cambodia (in the eighteenth century). Rather than explaining genocide in terms of the interests of only western imperialist states, Kiernan himself looks to a much broader dynamics: bringing together cults of antiquity, ethnic chauvinism and aspirations to universal rule, with

³² Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, 2007), pp. 45, 490.

territorial expansionism, close control of commerce, and a preoccupation with land and agricultural settlement.³³

There is then the question of the genocides committed by the regime in the Soviet Union, responsible on some counts for the slaughter of even more people than Nazi Germany. That communist state conducted a series of strategically organized³⁴ violent assaults against its own people from the 1920s onwards (if not from 1917³⁵): against peasants, workers, suspected political opponents and non-Russian ethnic groups. Much of this killing could not, of course, have been prosecuted under the Genocide Convention; indeed the latter was arguably drafted as it was partly for that reason.³⁶ But many would argue that it must include the genocides committed against Ukrainians in the catastrophic famine of 1932–3, and against Chechens, Ingush and Crimean Tatars in vicious deportations, which knowingly resulted in immense numbers of deaths.³⁷ What drove all this murderous violence has been the subject of considerable debate, but few would argue that western imperialism is primarily at fault for this immense catalogue of killing.

It is possible to construct such an argument of course. It can be argued, for example, that as a late entrant to modernity, isolated by capitalist states, faced with a mortal threat from Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union had no alternative but to industrialize swiftly and was driven to use extreme violence in this context. ('We must catch up in ten years or perish', as Stalin famously said.) A more persuasive argument might be to see the Stalinist regime as engaged in an attempt to restore, albeit in a new form, the old tsarist empire. This would retain the analytic centrality of empire, but at the expense of diminishing to some extent the role of the west, although it could still be argued that inter-imperialist rivalry, in which the west was by now so much more successful, in a deeper sense shaped Soviet policy.

But the danger with this kind of argument is that it could end up taking Stalinist reasoning too seriously. It would risk obscuring not only the extraordinary irrationality of Stalin's policies but perhaps more fundamentally the central role of this specific genocidal ideology, the particular political structure of this genocidal state, and the paranoid

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁴ See Nicholas Werth, 'Strategies of Violence in the Stalinist USSR', in *Stalinism and Nazism: History and Memory Compared*, ed. Henri Rousso (Lincoln, Nebr., 2004).

³⁵ On the mass killing already taking place under Lenin, see Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe* (New York, 2007).

³⁶ The Soviet Union was not, however, alone in objecting to the inclusion of political groups, as William Schabas has shown in *Genocide in International Law* (Cambridge, 2000) [hereafter Schabas, *Genocide in International Law*], p. 140. Both Poland and Venezuela objected too. Even Raphael Lemkin was opposed to their inclusion at the time. See David Nersessian, *Genocide and Political Groups* (Oxford, 2010), p. 104.

³⁷ On the latter, see Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). Most recently on the Ukraine, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London, 2010), ch. 1.

mentality that increasingly saw enemies everywhere, who had to be eliminated.

This matters partly because the numbers involved in killing by this state were so immense but also because of the precedent that it set, which others, inspired in many ways by the same ideology, then followed. One of the most important cases of genocide remains, even today, the ‘auto-genocide’ conducted in Cambodia by Pol Pot’s regime, which clearly derived some of its inspiration from the Stalinist example.³⁸

V

Some have argued that these cases of mass destruction are the most serious, both because of the numbers of people killed but because they were conducted in the name of an ideology (communism) that promised a better life for all, and that this illusion made it harder to recognize and respond to genocide than it should have been.³⁹ The danger with such arguments in turn, however, is that they can be used to downplay the significance of the Holocaust, which for many remains the most radical case of genocide to date, the case in which the intent (whenever it was arrived at) was to eliminate the group in whole, not just in part.

The question that then arises is how helpful an anti-imperialist perspective is in understanding this case. Despite the recognition that the Holocaust was indeed more radical than other genocides, the argument seems to run up against some serious obstacles. The claim for example that the Jews were seen by the Nazis as internal colonialists might seem to fall at the first hurdle for one obvious reason – the Jews had no nation-state of their own from which to develop any project of conquest. But perhaps more importantly, the notion that the Jews had colonized Germany was a paranoid Nazi fantasy. It was a *delusion*, even if it came to be shared by many Germans. There is an important difference between this and a case of actual imperial conquest. The struggle for national liberation is to remove the political, social and economic stranglehold of imperialism, and in the case of settler-colonialists, sometimes to remove them physically. To describe Nazism itself as a ‘national liberation’ movement⁴⁰ seems rather misplaced, as is the argument that the Holocaust represented a case of subaltern

³⁸ On this connection, see Eric Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, 2003); also (from a different angle which lays less stress on ideology and more on elite strategic calculations), Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Ithaca, NY, 2004). Karl D. Jackson has argued that Maoism rather than Stalinism was more of an inspiration for Pol Pot, although these two ideologies were of course closely related. See his *Cambodia 1975–1978* (Princeton, 1989).

³⁹ See, for example, Tzvetan Todorov in *Hope and Memory: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2003). For a recent critique of such arguments, see Carolyn J. Dean, *Aversion and Erasure: The Fate of the Victim after the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY, 2010).

⁴⁰ Furber and Lower, ‘Colonialism’, p. 375.

genocide in which a key driver for the Nazi assault on the Jews was resentment at how they had supposedly oppressed the German *Volk*.⁴¹ It is difficult to see how ethnic Germans could be described meaningfully as a subaltern group, given that they were a majority which was, in reality, dominant socially, culturally, economically and politically.⁴²

Secondly, the Jews were not 'just' killed in eastern Europe. Large numbers were *brought* to that region from far afield *to be* killed there. Bringing them all that way surely 'complicated' the supposed Nazi project still further, in a way that makes little sense if the project was to 'simplify' the colonial project by pitting German conquerors directly against an indigenous population, without large numbers of Jews supposedly somehow in the way. If the murder of the Jews took place before the full imperialist exploitation of eastern Europe, which was certainly accompanied and underpinned by a racist ideology which dehumanized many groups and not only the Jews, this was not just a chronological or sequential issue. Their murder had a rather different, more radical significance. One of the great strengths of Wendy Lower's impressive study of the Holocaust in the Ukraine is that even as she locates it so clearly in its local context, she shows the very significant differences between the assault on the Jews and the treatment of Ukrainians. As she says, 'Nazi racial anti-Semitism was aimed at the entire Jewish population'; 'the level of consensus' amongst the Nazis was far greater; and 'no other section of the population was singled out and destroyed with such unabashed and calculated cruelty'.⁴³

Thirdly, there was no resistance from Jews that posed any remotely significant threat to Nazi rule. There was nothing (tragically) from that quarter sufficient to *provoke* the genocide. On the contrary, as Christopher Browning has argued, the moves to killing on a mass scale began not when the Nazi project ran into difficulties but when they thought they were about to triumph on all fronts, at a moment of what he calls 'euphoria'.⁴⁴ What violent resistance did, heroically, take place was a last-ditch effort when the genocide was well under way.

Fourthly, the killing that took place was on an extraordinary scale. It was to be a total extermination, the killing of every Jew, not just from Germany, not just in the east, not just in Europe. This aspect of the Holocaust seems somehow peculiarly difficult for some anti-imperialist

⁴¹ Dirk Moses, 'The Fate of Blacks and Jews: A Response to Jeffrey Herf', *Journal of Genocide Research*, x (2008), 269–87 [hereafter Moses, 'Fate'].

⁴² The majority of Jews inside Germany viewed German culture as inherently superior. That they could not in the end become a fully accepted part of that culture led (albeit belatedly) to great disappointment, as Shulamit Volkov has argued in her *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials in Emancipation* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁴³ Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust* (Chapel Hill, 2007) [hereafter Lower, *Empire-Building*, p. 43], pp. 158, 160, 70.

⁴⁴ Christopher Browning, *Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy 1939–1942* (2005), p. 427. Lower makes exactly the same point: 'the genocide began . . . in the euphoria of victory' (*Empire-Building*, p. 43).

writers to accept. Moses, for example, refers somewhat disparagingly to ‘this chestnut of the intentionalist literature’, insisting ‘it is time to deprovincialize this branch of the Holocaust historiography’. He claims that it is by no means so ‘singular as it appears when one considers that the Jews were a diasporic people, many of whose communal leaders regarded themselves as a single people spread around much of the world. Their opponents, the anti-Semites thought of them in the same terms’.⁴⁵

But it was not the Jewish diaspora that was the problem but a deranged fantasy about Jewish power, which in Hitler’s mind explained not just why Germany lost the First World War, but also Britain’s refusal to capitulate and America’s entry into the Second.⁴⁶ Beyond this, Jews were responsible for all the evils that beset Germany, the Aryan race and humanity itself. This was not just any form of anti-Semitism but, as Saul Friedlander has compellingly argued, a *redemptive* form, in which only the annihilation of the Jews would suffice.⁴⁷ As Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassen noted some time ago, this was new. ‘Even veteran anti-Semites found it hard to imagine that the Nazi regime seriously intended to make the Jewish people extinct’.⁴⁸

VI

The problem with pursuing an anti-imperialist line of argument too single-mindedly, however, extends beyond the Holocaust to what happened after that event and to what is happening today. For one consequence of the Holocaust was the passing in 1948 of the Genocide Convention. There were, of course, many well-known problems with the Convention from the outset – in, for example, defining intent, in the possible equivalence of the different acts of genocide listed, in identifying victim groups, in specifying likely perpetrators, and in leaving so open how and where to prosecute them. Nevertheless it did mark a significant step forward in identifying genocide as a crime in international law, the ‘crime of crimes’, as a later tribunal was to call it.⁴⁹

Although there was a great delay (during which time genocide recurred with alarming frequency), the Convention did lead eventually to the setting up of international criminal tribunals to prosecute the crime in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. This was followed by the establishment of the International Criminal Court, which significantly adopted,

⁴⁵ Moses, ‘Fate’, p. 280.

⁴⁶ On this, see especially Tooze, *Wages*.

⁴⁷ Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York, 1997); idem, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (2007).

⁴⁸ Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassen, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven, 1990), p. 324.

⁴⁹ William Schabas makes this the subtitle of his authoritative legal study (*Genocide in International Law*).

unchanged, the Convention's definition. The tribunals and the court have conducted or sought the prosecution of some perpetrators, and have secured some convictions, although arguably nowhere near enough. In the course of these judgements, some of the problems with the Convention have been effectively resolved. The difficulty of having to prove explicit, documented genocidal intent has been overcome by sensibly inferring such intent from action. The definition of acts of genocide has been extended, now rightly including rape, which was not articulated clearly in the Convention as a central element in the genocidal process.⁵⁰ The defence of perpetrators that they were 'only' targeting political groups and dealing with a challenge to the authority of the sovereign state has been effectively rebutted.

It is interesting then to note the sceptical response of some prominent anti-imperialist writers to such developments. In the case of Darfur for example, when the prosecutor of the ICC, Luis Moreno-Campo, for the first time took the initiative in charging a head of government with genocide, he came immediately under attack from Mahmood Mamdani, who argued that this constituted a dangerous politicization of justice which would do nothing to resolve the 'crisis [sic] in Darfur'. It should rather, he argued, seriously alarm the governments and peoples of Africa as a renewed neo-imperialist effort to reimpose control and domination, in which the ICC acts merely as 'a Western court to judge African crimes'.⁵¹

Mamdani's own earlier book on Rwanda had of course played a major role in developing an anti-imperialist approach to genocide. Demolishing portrayals of that genocide as the outcome of supposedly deeply rooted 'tribal' conflicts in Africa, he had shown how the construction of reified distinctions between Hutus and Tutsis should be traced back to western colonial discourses and state practices. He provided a compelling analysis of how western states imported racist ideas into Rwanda, how German anthropologists deliberately invented absurd physiological distinctions between Hutus and Tutsis, and how these were then used as the basis for identification by the Belgian state as it sought to divide and rule. It was against this toxic historical backdrop and in this precise postcolonial context that many Hutus could be mobilized by racist nationalists against Tutsis.

The potential difficulty, however, with this otherwise compelling account is that it can lead to a downgrading of the role of those actually doing the killing. For it was not Germans (long gone from the scene)

⁵⁰ On the role of the tribunals in explicitly recognizing rape and on inferring intent, see Caroline Fournet, *The Crime of Destruction and the Law of Genocide: Their Impact on Collective Memory* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 42, 73.

⁵¹ Mahmood Mamdani, 'Le Nouvel Ordre Humanitaire', *La Revue Internationale des Livres et des Idées*, Novembre-Décembre 2008, pp. 21–5. Mamdani subsequently developed this argument more extensively in his *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror* (New York, 2009). For a different view, see John Hagen and Wenona Rymond-Richmond, *Darfur and the Crime of Genocide* (Cambridge, 2009).

nor Belgians, still present to a limited extent but no longer in direct control, who organized and committed the genocide. Whatever the historic role of German or Belgian imperialism, it was Hutu racial nationalists who chose to plan and organize the genocide⁵² and mobilized many Hutus to kill their fellow citizens, directly, day after day. This is not to deny the continuing and vital role of other states, especially the French (neo-imperialist successors to the Belgians), who helped organize and arm the Hutu nationalist state, who colluded with the genocide and who intervened only in its latter stages, effectively protecting the perpetrators.⁵³ It is not to deny the disgraceful refusal of other western states to act to halt the genocide when it began, particularly Britain and the United States.⁵⁴ All of these are grave and culpable sins, but they are predominantly sins of aiding and abetting (in the case of the French), and of omission rather than commission (in the case of others). Those who planned and carried out the killing were Rwandan. It was the postcolonial Rwandan nation-state which was the active genocidal agent and not western imperialist states.

This is not an isolated case. In fact, a very large proportion of genocides committed since the Convention have been carried out by postcolonial states of one kind or another. In addition to the Rwandan case, any list of post-Convention genocides would have to include at least the following perpetrators (some of them serial killers): the Indonesian state against 'communists' (1965); the Nigerian state against the Ibos (1966–9); the Pakistani state against Bengalis (1971); the Burundi state against Hutus (1972); the Paraguayan state against Guayaki Ache Indians (1974); the Cambodian state against Cambodians (including Vietnamese and Cham) (1974–9); the Indonesian state (again) against the East Timorese (1975–8 and again in 1999); the Guatemalan state against Mayans and leftists (from the 1960s onwards and especially in 1982–3); the Sudanese state against the Dinka, Nuer and Nuba (from 1983 onwards and again in 2011–12); the Iraqi state against the Kurds in 1987; the Iraqi state (again) against the Marsh Arabs in 1992; the Serbian state against Muslims in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995; the Serbian state (again) against Albanians in Kosovo in 1998–9; and the Sudanese state (again) against the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit (from 2003 onwards).⁵⁵

It is clearly important to understand that the structure within which postcolonial states operate is one bequeathed to them by imperialism, and that western states continue to pressure them in all sorts of ways to follow policies that will continue to meet their material and geopolitical interests. Many postcolonial elites found themselves ruling over societies

⁵² This is definitively demonstrated by Linda Melvern in her *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide* (2004).

⁵³ See Daniela Krosiak, *The Role of France in the Rwandan Genocide* (2007).

⁵⁴ See Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (2000).

⁵⁵ A fuller list can be found in Barbara Harff, 'No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955', *American Political Science Review*, xcvi (2003), 57–73, at p. 62.

marked by significant internal divisions, of ethnicity, religion or 'race', shaped and fashioned by imperial rule. For Leo Kuper, in what was the first systematic effort to think about genocide since the Convention, such persistent and pervasive cleavages, upon which were superimposed systematic inequalities, provided 'the structural basis for genocide'.⁵⁶ It is important too to understand that the international order, within which postcolonial states have to survive, is an inherently competitive and, arguably, inherently violent one.⁵⁷ It can even be argued that those states set an 'example' in this respect for their postcolonial successors to follow.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the choice to commit genocide within this structure has been theirs alone. However significant the precedents, whatever the pressures bearing down upon postcolonial states, there is no inevitability about genocide. It requires a deliberate choice, careful planning and organization. There have to be those who are not just in a position to commit genocide but who want to do so, and who do actually carry out their decision to destroy the targeted group, in whole or in part. Not all postcolonial elites make such a decision; indeed the large majority have not. There was genocide in Rwanda but not in Tanzania; there was genocide in East Pakistan but not in India; there was genocide in Cambodia but not in Vietnam.

This is not to argue that an explanation of any of these cases (or the many others) can be reduced to intent, any more than to structural factors alone. In each case, structure and agency play their part. But an overriding emphasis (on the one hand) on the structures created by imperialism carries, or the extent (on the other) to which postcolonial regimes themselves are an extension of imperial rule, can carry with it the danger that we turn our attention too far away from the actual agency of killing, and from key questions of responsibility. This danger may be increased by the way in which postcolonial elites who have perpetrated genocide have so often flaunted their anti-imperialist credentials, and sought to hide their crimes behind the banner of anti-imperialism, as they have pursued their own autonomous destructive agenda.⁵⁹ The Sudanese government (at the time of writing the most

⁵⁶ Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1981), pp. 57–8.

⁵⁷ For different versions of this argument, see Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State* (2008), and Powell, *Barbaric Civilisation*.

⁵⁸ Mohammed Ayoob, for instance, has argued that there are certain levels of violence which have to be accepted from 'new and weak states struggling to establish themselves as fully-fledged members of the international community' ('Humanitarian Intervention and State Sovereignty', *International Journal of Human Rights*, vi (2002), 81–92, at p. 92).

⁵⁹ It is clearly beyond the scope of this article to analyse this agenda (or rather agendas) in any detail, but it is worth noting how important at least some forms of nationalism (easily masked as a form of anti-imperialism) appear to be in many post-1948 genocidal projects. Robert Cribb's suggestion that a desire to reconstruct the national community was very important to the Indonesian genocidal project may be applicable to many others. ('Political Genocides in Post-colonial Asia', in Moses and Bloxham, *Handbook*, pp. 445–65). This is not to deny that some forms

recent perpetrator) has done so repeatedly, for example, arguing that it is no business of the west to interfere in the internal affairs of the sovereign nation-state, that the charge of genocide is nothing other than a continuation of past imperialist practice. That this comes so uncomfortably close to the argument put forward by Mamdani is somewhat disconcerting, but it indicates why it might be difficult, from a single-mindedly anti-imperialist perspective, to address directly a genocidal threat emanating from this quarter.

None of this, of course, is to argue for any particular kind of intervention, particularly of a military kind, about which there has been so much debate in recent years. This is a complex question which is clearly well beyond the scope of this article. But it is worth recalling that the question of intervention, like the question of prosecution, was posed not by genocides committed by western imperialist states but by two of the states in that limited list above – Serbia and Rwanda.

VII

There is too much insight, undoubtedly, in an anti-imperialist approach to contemplate discarding it. It helps us understand why genocides committed by western imperialist states took place in the past. It provides important elements of a vital critique of the international order, largely fashioned by western imperialist states, within which some post-colonial states have been able to commit genocide. It helps us understand why some western states colluded with or facilitated genocide, as in Indonesia or Guatemala, or blocked intervention, as in Bangladesh and Rwanda.

But it cannot do everything and some of the difficulties identified here will arise if it is taken too far, if there is an attempt to fit everything within a framework of analysis that cannot bear the weight put upon it. Imperialism has been at times and in places central to the occurrence of genocide but not everywhere, not at all times, and to a significant extent not since the Convention.

This may not be an accident. Genocide was never only connected to western imperialism. Other states committed genocide, for their own reasons, before and after 1492. Other states have been the main perpetrators since the Convention which, for all its faults, was decisive in changing not just the legal but also the moral context. Those who commit genocide after the Convention are, after all, now in a different position from their predecessors. They now know that they commit a crime, which is the ‘crime of crimes’ not least because it is, as Hannah

of nationalism of course can become quasi-imperial in their own right, as was arguably the case for Nigeria, Pakistan and Serbia, amongst others.

Arendt pointed out long ago, committed against not just the immediate victims but against humanity as a whole.⁶⁰

This throws one final light on the strengths and limitations of an anti-imperialist perspective. There is arguably an important sense in which the Convention, for western states, can be seen as a kind of rebuke, with both a historic and contemporary significance. In defining genocide as an 'odious scourge', which 'at all periods of history has inflicted great losses on humanity', the Convention issued a historic rebuke to all states (including western ones) which had committed it in the past. It was a rebuke too for having failed to halt or prevent the Holocaust, the radical case which forced the need for the Convention itself. The contemporary force of that rebuke means that no western state may commit genocide now with the impunity it may have had before. This is arguably a fundamental reason why western states do not figure as primary or direct perpetrators in any list of genocides since 1945. If a key contribution of the anti-imperialist approach to genocide is that it reminds us of how often western states committed genocide in the past, it needs to be matched by the understanding that it is generally postcolonial states which have done so since, for reasons which cannot be reduced to the impact of western imperialism. To develop that understanding further, to be able to respond more effectively to the threat such states can pose, it will be necessary to go beyond the limitations of a too narrow anti-imperialist approach to genocide, past and present.

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1965), pp. 268–9.