War and Genocide: A Sociological Approach

The study of genocide has generally been framed by legal and historical, rather than sociological perspectives. Law provided the impetus to the definition of the crime, through the pioneering efforts of Raphael Lemkin and the drafters of the United Nations Convention; it has continued to provide much of the drive towards recognition of recent genocides, in the work of the international criminal tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Historical studies account for the vast majority of genocide research, and have provided the main foundations for our knowledge. Yet law often provides too narrow a focus, separating genocide from the “crimes against humanity” and “war crimes” with which it is intimately linked, and concerned with individual criminal responsibility rather than explanation. And historical studies tend to highlight the particularity of certain events rather than the commonalities that lead us to define a range of actions, by collective actors in situations separated by time and space, as “genocide.” Indeed, the majority of historical studies deal with a particular episode, the Holocaust, whose commonality with other genocides is often questioned by historians.

Genocide studies, therefore, require a sociological framework specifying that genocide is a type of social action and social relationship and explains its typical connections with other types of social action and structure. In recent books (Shaw 2003 and 2006), I have outlined a framework for understanding these two central and inter-related questions. My approach links genocide closely to war and it is this connection that is the primary focus of this article.

The loss of the connection between war and genocide

It is evident that genocide was first recognized in the context of war: the word was invented by Lemkin to describe atrocities against civilians under Axis Rule in Occupied Europe (the title of his foundational 1944 book). As he described it, genocide was “a concentrated and coordinated attack upon all the elements of nationhood” among the various occupied peoples. Genocide was a warlike campaign, occurring in the context of war, but fundamentally opposed to legitimate warfare:

“Genocide is the antithesis of the ... doctrine (...) [which] holds that war is directed against sovereigns and armies, not against subjects and civilians. In its modern application in civilized society, the doctrine means that war is conducted against states and armed forces and not against populations. It required a long period of evolution in civilized society to mark the way from wars of extermination, which occurred in ancient times and in the Middle Ages, to the conception of wars as being essentially limited to activities against armies and states.” (Lemkin, 1944:80)

This seminal statement pinpointed the fact that identifying genocide as a criminal activity distinct from war still depended on the modern distinction between “civilized” and “uncivilized” warfare. Only by distinguishing between “sovereigns and armies” on the one hand, and “subjects and civilians” on the other, could genocide be differentiated from war. Although genocide should be defined as a crime sui generis, which might occur at least exceptionally in “peacetime” outside the context of more conventional warfare, it was in effect a new, modern form of the historic “wars of extermination.”

These connections of genocide with war, in terms of context and meaning, remained central to the first legal uses of the idea. Only because genocide occurred in the context of an aggressive war did the United Nations consider themselves entitled to prosecute Nazi leaders for it at Nuremberg. Yet in the subsequent definition of genocide as the supreme international crime, the UN separated it from war. Thus, Resolution 96(I) of the General Assembly, adopted unanimously on 11 December 1946, defined genocide as “a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups, as homicide is the denial of the right to live of individual human beings.” As William Schabas (2000:46) commented, this formulation eliminated “any nexus between genocide and armed conflict”; for him this was “the
unfortunate legacy of the Nuremberg jurisprudence.” However, there is reason to question whether this was such a fortunate move. Although it was certainly important to emphasize the fundamental difference of genocide from legitimate war, and the difference between a deliberate attack on a civilian population as such and crimes (against civilians or soldiers) committed in the course of otherwise legitimate war, these formulations, culminating in the 1948 Genocide Convention, also mitigated understanding of the deep connections between these different types of action.

Connections of context and causality

These connections can be defined as ones of context, and therefore causality: but also, more deeply, of meaning. The contextualization of genocide by war is manifest in most historical studies. Beginning with Nazism, it is evident how fundamentally this genocidal movement was defined by the experience of war and militaristic ideology. From its earliest street-fighting days the Nazi party defined political and social groups - Communists, Jews, homosexuals - as enemies linked in gigantic geopolitical conspiracies, to be “destroyed” in a quasi-military sense. And although genocidal policies began as the Nazi regime consolidated its control over German society, it was only as it moved into aggressive war that the most generally murderous phases began. Only with the launching of war did the regime feel able to coolly terminate the lives of disabled Germans, freeing up hospital capacity for others deemed more essential to the fight. Only then, too, did Nazism gain a hold over large numbers of Poles, whom it regarded as inferior, and with them the largest Jewish populations in Europe. Under the cover of aggression and large military movements it was possible to destroy historic communities, herding Poles eastwards and Jews into ghettos. And only as total war became ever more extreme, in the invasion of the Soviet Union, did Nazi policy move towards physical extermination of enemies such as Communists, Gypsies and above all Jews.

Similar contexts apply in other major genocidal episodes. The Young Turk regime in the Ottoman Empire targeted the Armenians during the First World War, seeing them both as potential allies of the Russian enemy and as obstacles to the kind of Turkish nation they wanted to create. The Soviet regime destroyed the Chechen and Volga German peoples during the Second World War, seeing them as potential allies of the Nazi enemy. The Khmer Rouge concluded their war against the US-backed Lon Nol regime by instituting the first phase of genocide against urban and educated sections of the population, together with ethnic and national minorities. More recently, Serbian nationalists launched their wars in the former Yugoslavia by destroying Croat and Bosnian Muslim communities. Rwandan Hutu nationalists launched their genocide of the opposition and the Tutsi population while their regime was facing successful armed incursions by the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Serbia launched its destruction of the Kosovo Albanian community in response to Kosovo Liberation Army attacks, and especially NATO’s bombing.

These examples and others support the idea of close links between genocide and war. Certainly, genocidal episodes do occur outside the context of conventional war, although even these tend to be directed by militaristic regimes, such as the campaigns of Stalin’s Russia and Mao’s China against peasants and national minorities. These regimes had recent histories of civil war and viewed social groups in the fashion of armed enemies. However, these examples caution against any simple idea of “war” itself as a cause of genocide; indeed the many cases of genocide in wartime do not tell us why some wars see genocides and some parties in wars commit genocide, and others do not. All that these many cases do is to point overwhelmingly to the centrality of these linkages, underlining the misconception involved in trying to separate genocide from war, conceptually or causally, in any definitive way.

Connections of meaning

If it is not “war” itself that is causal, nevertheless, ideas of war are important in the production of genocide. It occurs when an organized, armed collective actor comes to define a social group or population as an enemy, not merely in a political but in an essentially military sense, i.e. as an enemy to be destroyed. Hence the continuing relevance of Lemkin’s early formulation of genocide as illegitimate war, and the significance of the common element of destruction in the definitions of war and of genocide. War, following Clausewitz, is the destruction by one armed actor of an armed
enemy, its power and its will to resist. Genocide is the destruction by an armed actor of an unarmed social group, its power and its will to resist. Hence the significance for understanding genocide of the distinctions (drawn from the law, philosophy and theory of war) between armed and unarmed (civilians), between organized military power and (militarily unorganized) social and cultural power, and between conventional military resistance and civilian resistance.

Genocide as action means something very similar to war, except that it is directed by one type of actor at another very different type - whereas in “normal” war the opposed actors are of the same organized military type, however else they may differ. But just as war is not merely something that one actor does to another, so genocide involves relationships between the armed and unarmed actors. Genocide is often thought of as something “perpetrators” do to “victims,” but in reality it is also a form of social conflict, however unequal and distorted, so that perpetrators must take account of victims’ responses, and vice versa. The idea of genocide without resistance of any kind, if only in the minds of “helpless” victims or through proxies, is absurd, a reductio ad absurdum of the “one-sided” character of genocide.

Changing structures of warfare and contemporary genocide

If we can map - with crucial differences - the ideas of war on to the forms of genocidal action and conflict, then clearly we must explore the ways in which specific forms of warfare, in different periods, are instrumental in creating possibilities of genocide. Moving from the meaning of genocide to its causality, the structures of war will be central. Except in the case of the most highly militarized regimes, and indeed often even in those cases, the operational destruction of a social group rarely takes place, or at least does not reach its most extreme phases, until the perpetrator state or movement is engaged in extensive armed conflict. Where armed forces, whether conventional or party/movement-based, are already mobilized and using violence, it is easier to re-direct them against civilians. Indeed, where armed men are already using violence against civilians in the pursuit of more or less conventional war against other armed forces, it is easier to mobilize them against particular civilian groups as such.

Historically this has suggested, of course, that modern total warfare, developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries through extensive physical, economic, social, cultural and ideological mobilization of populations, particularly facilitated genocide. Although, as Lemkin noted, the idea of a “war of extermination” has longer historical antecedents, modern genocide is the product of modern war. Although not all sides in all wars have practiced genocide, of course, the common structure of total warfare, in which mobilizing whole populations leads to these populations becoming targets, makes it easier for genocidal States and movements, in their ideologies, to designate specific groups of civilian populations as enemies in themselves.

Recognizing this important structural feature of twentieth-century warfare naturally leads to asking whether and how, as warfare has changed, patterns of genocide have also been modified. The decline of total-war mobilization in advanced industrial states, and indeed of war itself between major states in the international system, as well as the disappearance of classically totalitarian states, all appear to be associated with a decline in large-scale, ideologically intensive and multi-targeted genocidal episodes. On the other hand, the fragmentation of old empires into larger numbers of nation-states has been associated with an extension of the long-standing trend towards ethnic homogenization, so that genocidal expulsion (often recognized under the euphemistic label ‘ethnic cleansing’) may actually have become more widespread. The emergence of global surveillance warfare (Shaw 2005:Chapter 3) means that local States and armed movements have to engage with extensive international political, legal and media monitoring of their activities, but so far this has stimulated new practices of manipulation and denial by genocidal political forces, rather than any general inhibition of genocide. For example, the normalization of electoral democracy in the global order has generated an incentive to murderous expulsion, as regimes have sought to homogenize their electorates. Likewise, the global media impact of spectacular terrorist atrocities against unarmed populations has encouraged relatively weak armed networks to make civilians their prime targets, thus pushing contemporary forms of guerrilla warfare in ever-more genocidal directions.
Conclusion

Thus, my approach to genocide, informed by social theory, understands it as a fundamentally illegitimate variant of warfare - directed against civilian social groups as such rather than armed enemies - that most often takes place in contexts of more generalized, more conventional warfare. While it is true that genocide, once unleashed, often requires anti-genocidal military action to halt it, it follows that more profound policies to prevent and inhibit genocide must be closely linked with policies to reduce the possibilities of war in global society.

Bibliography


