



Eric D. Weitz. *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 360 pp.

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Conceptualizing Race in the Study of Genocide

Eric Weitz seeks to move scholarship on genocide away from a focus on individual cases to a cross-case, comparative analysis. Towards these ends, Weitz, in his work *A Century of Genocide*, thoughtfully examines and compares how ideologies of race and nation contributed to four twentieth-century genocides: the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, Nazi Germany, Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, and Serbia during the Bosnian War. One central conclusion of the book, that these genocides were not inevitable, is well supported by the cases. Weitz paints a complex picture of how a number of factors had to combine in order for these regimes to move from discriminatory practices to mass murder in their desire to reshape society. He argues that these regimes ordered killings during times of extreme social instability and crisis; that the regimes were supported by the public and the destructive input of lower-level officials; and that most of the killings took place under the cover of war.

Working from recent scholarship on race and racial formation, Weitz argues that by the twentieth century, history and race had become “the most prevalent and powerful forms of articulating the differences among people and of organizing political and social systems” (p. 32). Due in part to initial categorizing of groups under colonial expansion and the formal categorization of human groups with the development of anthropology, race became the “hardest and most exclusive form of identity” in the modern period: “indelible, immutable, and trans-generational” characteristics, thought to be transmitted through blood, were assigned by outsiders to every member of the “different” race (p. 21). Race, however, cannot be reduced to skin color; it is “the assignment of indelible traits to particular groups.” Weitz contends, then, that *any* group can be “racialized” in “particular historical moments and places” (p. 21).

European nations, to avoid granting political rights to colonial subjects, turned to culture as the “the defining element in the formation of the nation” (p. 31). German theorists argued that nations were constituted by the primordial ties of people through language and culture. Groups with similar pasts became races by virtue of land and language separate from others. Thus racial exclusion bound the nation. The exploitative and public acts of brutalization that accompanied imperialism, along with eugenics, served to rationalize the domination of subject races; lesser races were to serve the strong. By the start of World War I, race and nationalism “had become predominant and pervasive in the West” (p. 50). Moreover, the essential features of the war—disrespect for human life, the use of political violence, the tolerance of wholesale death and destruction, and the ideology of race and nation that attached to powerful states during World War I—are all features of the genocides Weitz studies.

World War I, then, with its creation of an “aesthetics of violence” (p. 52), provides the crucial backdrop for the first two cases, the Soviet and German genocides. Weitz’s study proceeds chronologically and each case is compared across five main factors: power and utopia; the categorization of the population; history up to the genocide; the trajectory of the genocide; and finally, how each case meets the UN definition of genocide. The case studies are designed to allow the reader to compare across cases and Weitz directs the reader to similarities and differences among cases.

Weitz argues that the Soviets committed genocide because the conditions of ethnic group deportation/resettlement would, in accord with the UN definition, destroy these groups in part. The Soviet’s utopian vision required the massive overhaul of society into a powerful modern state. Workers, peasants, and

“lishentsy” (political enemies and the “Kulaks”) were the first groups targeted for mass deportations between 1919 and 1933. During the Great Terror of 1936-1938, Soviet policy and the unchecked rise of Stalin, which combined to engender massive societal chaos exacerbated by the start of World War II and the Nazi invasion, moved “population politics [to a] more radical level” (p. 72). Under the cover of war, the Soviet’s Russification policy provided the rationalization for the removal of nationals through the identification of non-ethnic Russians with collectivities beyond Soviet borders as “enemy nations” (p. 84). Weitz argues that until 1937 the Soviets believed that deportees could be reformed through camp labor. For ethnic nationals, however, the Soviets jettisoned the idea of reform after 1937, and attempted to erase all visible traces of the groups’ existence after removal. Weitz concludes that these removals, which were “more total in nature” (p. 91), meet the UN definition of genocide because the Soviets “imposed conditions of life that they knew would result in severely high mortality rates” (p. 101).

The genocide in Nazi Germany, Weitz argues, was the clearest case of the UN definition of genocide to destroy physically a group in whole (p. 140). The Nazis envisioned a racially pure society of domination and subordination (p. 109). The Nazis viewed race conflict as the motor of history, so they “required race purification that could be accomplished only through war since the Aryan race could flourish only through war” (p. 113). Unlike the Soviets, therefore, for the Nazis the “link between ideology and population removals” was immediate and direct (p. 59). Yet Weitz contends that the Holocaust, despite eight years of Nazi discrimination against the target populations of Jews and Romas as well as the blanket group of “asocials,” was not detectable even as late as 1941. The order to destroy all Jewish people was given in 1942, *after* the systematic killings in Eastern Europe had already begun. According to Weitz, with this order the Nazi regime became genocidal: the violence reached a level where “the actual physical annihilation of defined population groups moved to the very core of state policies, and all the normal aspects of governance retreated to the shadows” (p. 12). Thus, Weitz argues that it was the twin processes of the euphoria of victory in World War II and recognition of defeat in the Soviet Union that “created the Holocaust” (p. 132).

Weitz suggests that a clear “vision of a communist utopia” was integral to the Cambodian genocide of ethnic nationals between 1976 and 1979 (p. 158). The Khmer, also classified as a genocidal regime by Weitz, sought to create a “homogeneous, perfect society” (p. 145) that was

self-sufficient and modern. The killing began with the forced removal of all city-dwellers or “new people” into the countryside, which was intended to level the population and provide labor for farming collectivization. The result was widespread suffering, starvation, and the deliberate murder of thousands of new people by lower-level cadres who thought they were working on behalf of a higher command. Like the Soviets, Khmer policies led to social dislocation and economic suffering in the first two years, that intensified after 1977 when war with Vietnam loomed on the horizon and the regime set out to destroy all those who held to their traditional beliefs and ways of life. Khmer ideology constructed the Vietnamese, the Chams, and the Chinese as incapable of reform so these groups had to be removed. Weitz suggests also that the Khmer began to view the removal of the “enemy” groups as redemptive: “only through the elimination of the Vietnamese would Khmers be able to reach utopia” (p. 173). In the end, over fifty percent of all ethnic nationals were killed. This genocide of part of Cambodia’s ethnic peoples resulted in the largest population decline of any country since 1945.

The Serbian genocide against Muslims in Bosnia in the early 1990s “revolved around the desperate measures of an old elite to stay in business” (p. 230). The Serbs, with the living memory of genocide perpetrated against them in World War II, argued that their fate in a multi-ethnic state would be genocide. Weitz contends that in the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia Serb nationalism was the “most explosive” (p. 201) and that the Serbs were “the driving force behind the dissolution of Yugoslavia” (p. 209). Therefore, the Serb goal, to establish a homogeneous state, was to be accomplished through the violent, forced removal of Muslims and Croats from Bosnia. Serb activists and the military and political leadership in Belgrade pushed each other into new extremes of violence by “supporting one another ideologically and materially” (p. 212). The Serb genocide, like that of the Khmer Rouge, was stopped by outside forces; however, not before the Serbs had killed thousands of Muslim Bosnians—an act that brought into common use the term ethnic cleansing.

Unfortunately, *A Century of Genocide’s* framework for analyzing genocide and the UN framework for classifying genocide may be based on different understandings of race. Weitz’s definition, which moves away from mid-twentieth-century understandings of race as phenotype, allows him to argue that groups can be racialized by the hierarchical assignment of indelible traits. The UN’s definition of race appears to be wedded to phenotype: political classes and groups cannot be victims of genocide

and the categorization of the four identified groups—race, religion, nationality, and/or ethnicity—presumes that the categories are analytically distinct. If we accept the argument that all groups can be racialized at specific moments then Weitz appears to be arguing *against* the Convention’s definition. Thus Weitz’s understanding of race has profound implications for his expressed purpose of using his analysis “as a guide to other cases and warning signs for the future” (p. 15). How can this be done? Weitz convincingly shows how each case moved from discrimination to mass murder to cross the Convention’s threshold for genocide. He also shows that states’ attitudes toward racialized groups are an early warning sign for genocide. But before Weitz’s framework can be applied we need to attend to the problems that arise from differences in racial group classification.

For example, in the Soviet case Weitz chooses not to define deportations of the Cossacks as genocide, yet he clearly classifies them as a racial group and there is sufficient evidence in his work to show that the Soviet intent was to destroy in part. Weitz writes: “Cossack” came to mean anti-Soviet, a synonym for ‘enemy’ that carried an implicit racialization of a group defined not even by ethnicity but by its special service relationship to the czarist state” (p. 69). Noting that between 1919 and 1920, 300,000-500,000 Cossacks out of three million were killed or died through deportation, Weitz suggests only that “A barrier had been broken ... which demonstrated how easy it was to condemn a particular group in its entirety and to presume that every single member of the group was a real or potential opponent, no matter what actions an individual had undertaken” (p. 69). But by Weitz’s framework, this broken barrier should count as genocide.

This curious reticence is also present in Weitz’s rich detailing of the Khmer Rouge’s murderous policies. City-dwellers could not escape their classification, and were purged and murdered on that basis. However, Weitz states only that “The Khmer Rouge racialized class *and* nationality, making all members of the three [main eth-

nic] groups bearers of identical characteristics, no matter what they had done” (emphasis added, p. 175). Moreover, he suggests that “once the Soviet state defined every single Korean as a security risk, once the Khmer Rouge began to treat all Chinese and Vietnamese in Cambodia as, ipso facto, enemies of the state, then those states had ‘racialized’ identities that initially were ‘merely’ class or ethnic in origin” (p. 238). Yet again, this does not in of itself exclude groups from being racialized that do not meet the UN definition of a racial group.

What traits, then, are shared by the groups that Weitz designates as genocide victims given his expanded definition of race? The common denominator appears to be that the state determined at *a particular moment in time* that certain groups were no longer amenable to reform. Even the Nazis, Weitz contends, initially transported Jews, Roma people, and “asocials” for reeducation with the caveat that those incapable of reform were to be “annihilated through labor and euthanasia” (p. 122). Why certain groups were deemed beyond reform was specific to the circumstances of each case, although again Weitz highlights some similarities: the exigencies of security policy under war (the Soviets, the Nazis, and the Khmer Rouge); historical discrimination (anti-Semitism in Europe and anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia); or the desire for a racially homogeneous state as in the cases of the Nazis, Khmers, and the Serbs.

Weitz’s study of twentieth-century genocides has moved the study of genocide in an interesting direction by focusing on the categories of race and nation in cross-case comparative analysis. Most importantly, Weitz’s engagement of race-critical theories will allow us to investigate genocide and the utility of the Convention’s classifications in light of new thinking about race. Clearly there is reason to move cautiously on comparative work on race until the apparent ambiguities of old and new definitions are further examined. However, students of genocide, new and established, will find this book a useful starting point for engaging the wealth of comparative factors that Weitz delineates and expertly presents.

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