

Why Does Genocide Still Happen?

By Bennett Sherry

Genocide continues to happen worldwide, even after the Holocaust. The world vowed to never again permit the crime of genocide. Why does mass violence play out again, and again?

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Never Again

Historian Samuel Moyn has called human rights the “moral lingua franca” of the international community. That is, all countries speak the language of human rights. International understanding of human rights largely resulted from Nazi brutality during World War II led to the rise of human rights. As knowledge of the Holocaust spread, the world promised, “never again.”

Since the Holocaust, we have walked on the moon and created the internet, yet we’ve made no progress stopping genocide. Since World War II, people in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, and many other places have committed genocide against civilians. Why does genocide still happen?



[A memorial at Dachau Concentration Camp](#), with the words “Never Again” written in five languages. Forrest R. Whitesides, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Genocide is organized murder. Leaders take advantage of unstable conditions when they start killing civilians within the borders of their country. However, other countries allow genocide to continue by refusing to get involved. Protection of national sovereignty, or independence, has repeatedly been valued over the lives of innocent civilians.

There is a long global history of organized violence against groups of people. You’ve read about the Armenian genocide in the early twentieth century. But in the second half of the twentieth century, the international community reaffirmed “the dignity and worth of the human person” in the United Nations Charter. The UN passed a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment for the Crime of Genocide in 1948. But it was not enforced until 50 years later, when the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda tried those responsible for the Rwandan genocide. Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, Sudan, and Myanmar belonged to the convention. Meanwhile, genocides occurred within their borders.

Cambodia and Iraq: Genocide during the Cold War

In 1975, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge military government killed 1.7 million people. That was 21 percent of the country's population. The Cambodian genocide began with the Vietnam war. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. military bombed Cambodia to kill North Vietnamese enemies in hiding. In the process, Cambodian civilians died.

Many survivors joined the rebel group known as the Khmer Rouge. They fought against the U.S.-backed Cambodian government.

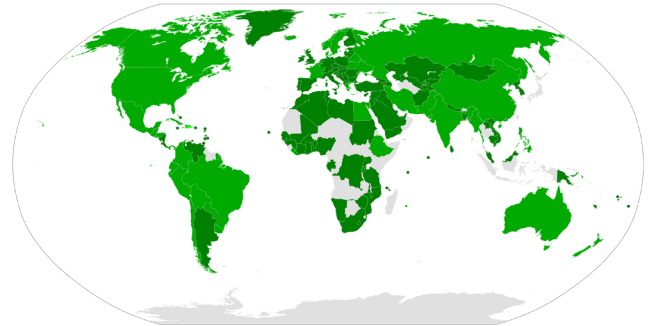
Led by a former school teacher who called himself Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge seized control of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, in 1975. They attacked anyone named an enemy of the revolution. Ethnic and religious minorities were targeted.

The UN knew of these horrible acts early on. Why did no international force act to stop the killing? There are five members of the UN Security Council: United States, Soviet Union, China, France, and Britain. These powers can intervene, or step in to solve problems in other countries. However, the Soviet Union and China refused to get involved in Cambodia. They feared UN intervention could later hurt their own abusive governments in Eastern Europe and Tibet.

The United States and China both supported the Khmer Rouge. The United States' former enemy Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979 to end the genocide. In response, the United States provided aid to the Khmer Rouge. President Jimmy Carter said that the United States was choosing the "lesser evil." (Yes, in 1975, the Khmer Rouge saw the U.S. as the enemy. Things change fast in war and politics.)

A few years later, Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq, launched a campaign to kill Iraq's Kurdish population. The Kurds are a large ethnic minority. They live in the land where Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq border each other. In the 1980s, almost one-fourth of Iraq's 18 million people were Kurds. The Iraqi government claimed its attacks were aimed at Kurdish terrorists. They said these Kurds were helping Iran attack Iraq. Hussein's military murdered and forced tens of thousands of Kurdish men, women, and children from their homes.

Both the Americans and Soviets provided financial and military aid to Iraq in its war against Iran. The Americans eventually worked with the UN to protect civilians. That was only after 100,000 Iraqi Kurdish refugees entered Turkey, an American ally.



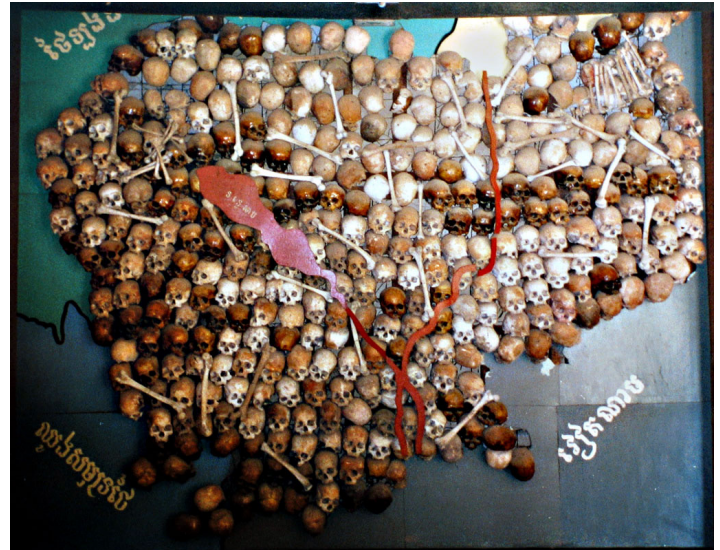
[States participating in the Genocide Convention.](#) By Allstar86, CC BY-SA 3.0.



[An American B-52 bomber drops bombs on Cambodia in 1969.](#) By the National Museum of the United States Air Force, public domain.



*Exhumed Shoes of Child Victim of Anfal Genocide, 3rd International Conference on Mass Graves in Iraq, Erbil, Iraq.
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A map of Cambodia made from the bones of victims of the Khmer Rouge, which hung in the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Cambodia from 1979 to 2002. BY Donovan Govan, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Bosnia and Rwanda: American indifference after the Cold War

The Soviet Union's empire fell apart in 1991. It thrust Eastern Europe into a period of rapid change. The country of Yugoslavia erupted into violence in 1992. Serbian nationalists exploited the country's religious and ethnic divisions.

Serbian generals shelled the Bosnian city of Srebrenica. Tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims died. The UN struggled to stop the violence. Western powers failed to support a UN peacekeeping force. During times of war, the UN will send trained peacekeepers into a country to restore security and peace. The new Russian government blocked UN action in Yugoslavia in the Security Council, placing the UN peacekeepers in danger. Serbian forces captured UN peacekeepers and used them as human shields.

Decolonization was a major shift in the global balance of power. This shift increased tensions in many African nations. A century of German and Belgian imperialism had divided people in Rwanda on ethnic lines.¹ When the country gained its independence in 1962, tensions broke out between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority. In 1994, Hutu leaders tried to eliminate the Tutsi people from Rwanda.



*Gravestones at the Potočari genocide memorial near Srebrenica.
By Michael Buker, CC BY-SA 3.0.*

¹ This was a tactic used by most European imperialist nations in their colonies. They would highlight racial and ethnic differences in colonial nations in order to divide the people. Therefore they could weaken the chances of an organized rebellion.

Hutu armed forces roamed the countryside. They killed Tutsi and other minorities. Radios broadcast racist propaganda, or messages, encouraging violence against minorities. The radio was one of the most effective tools of the genocide. And it is a glaring symbol of an international failure to act.

When presented with evidence of genocide, politicians often say, “we didn’t know.” This is a lie. In one violent example after another, world leaders had detailed knowledge of horrors like those in Rwanda. The UN had a peacekeeping force on the ground in 1994. A UN general pleaded for more troops. But, as in Bosnia, the UN failed to find the political will and funding for a larger peacekeeping force. The American government actually tried to remove peacekeepers from Rwanda. It refused even to shut down the radio broadcasts, arguing that it would be too expensive and ineffective. One Pentagon official went so far as to say, “Radios don’t kill people. *People* kill people.” In 1994, the Rwandan government and Hutu militias murdered 800,000 people in 100 days.



Display of Skulls of Victims - Courtyard of Genocide Memorial Church - Karongi-Kibuye - Western Rwanda. By Dr. Adam Jones, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Darfur and Rakhine: Genocide in the twenty-first century

The first genocide of the twenty-first century started in a western region of Sudan called Darfur in 2003. Like Rwanda, Sudan’s independence from Britain in 1956 worsened ethnic and religious divisions. Civil wars have resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths. Millions more children, women, and men have been sexually abused, forced into military service, or forced to leave their homes.

Many nations at least pressured Sudan to end the killing. The American government declared a genocide in Darfur in 2004, but Russia and China have prevented serious action within the Security Council. They refused to violate Sudan’s independence. And while American officials might speak out against the violence, they have not done much to stop the killing. A UN peacekeeping force was sent to Darfur in 2007. This force, however, is relatively small. It lacks proper funding and support.

In 2017, the military and Buddhist militias in Myanmar launched attacks against the country’s Muslim Rohingya minority. Like Rwanda and Sudan, years of European takeover fueled ethnic tensions. Since 2017, the military



Protesters against China’s support of Sudan in San Francisco, 2008. Note the sign calling for a free Tibet alongside signs urging China to intervene in Darfur. By BrokenSphere, CC BY-SA 4.0.

and Buddhist majority have carried out a campaign of extermination. Millions of people have been brutally abused, murdered, and forced from their homes. The largest refugee camp in the world is a Rohingya camp in Bangladesh.

In 2018, the United Nations declared these killings a genocide, but a declaration isn't enough to stop bullets. International indifference has condemned hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to death, assault, torture, and homelessness.



[*Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Bangladesh.*](#) Public domain.

Conclusion: Again, and again

Genocide happens because of the choices people make. Within a society, hatred makes some people decide to murder. Other people decide to allow it to happen, without acting to defend those being attacked. At the international level, as well, genocides continue to happen because the leaders of powerful states decide not to intervene to stop it. Or they don't let the United Nations intervene.

Samantha Power, former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, argues that early action is critical to stop genocides. Power believes that the United States was the country most capable of stopping genocide. Of all the countries in the world, it had the resources to take action outside the framework of the UN. In almost every case, it chose not to take action. Power argues that the American government's inaction was not a failure of the American system. The system, she says, with understandable cynicism, "is working" as it was intended. She makes the point that "no U.S. president has ever made genocide prevention a priority, and no U.S. president has ever suffered politically for his indifference."

Again, and again, the powerful nations of the world have turned a blind eye to mass violence. Why? In each of the six cases above, a member of the UN Security Council held back UN action. Sometimes, powerful nations actually support genocidal regimes.

The veto power of the Security Council ensures that the UN cannot stop genocide. All it takes is one of the five members to disagree. Countries often decide to value national sovereignty or their own interests above the mass murder of civilians. The international system is not failing. It is operating exactly as it was designed.

If genocide continues to happen, what does that say about the value of human rights in the international community? Or about the overall morality of our global community?

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