

# Genocide and war propaganda

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*A recording of this perspective by the author is available here.*

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden declared that Russia was engaged in genocide in Ukraine. The allegation tossed off by Biden is a lie, but it is more than this. It is a political provocation consciously aimed at whipping up a public hysteria to legitimize a massive escalation of the war, including the full-scale, open participation by the United States.

Genocide is a word stamped with profound historical content. There is no graver charge that can be leveled.

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew and lawyer, coined the word “genocide”—a coupling of the Greek *genos* (race or people) with the Latin *cide* (killing)—in 1944 in his book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. Both the word itself and its subsequent legal codification by the United Nations were inextricably bound up with the Holocaust. What the Allied forces uncovered at the end of World War II was evidence of the worst crime in human history: extermination camps, mass graves, gas chambers, the human ovens and the mounds of spectacles and human hair and extracted gold teeth. Lemkin’s neologism strained to contain this enormity: the carefully planned extermination by the Nazis of European Jewry, 6 million killed with industrial efficiency.

This experience called for a precision of formulation that would give legal force and ethical specificity to the injunction “never again.” The United Nations in 1948, in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, codified an international legal definition of genocide as specific crimes “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.”

The crimes of the Holocaust were seared in the consciousness of the world. Genocide was the premeditated and systematic extermination of a population because of its race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. The monstrous crimes of imperialism and war were weighed in popular consciousness by this measure, and those that began to approximate its barbarisms were

deemed genocidal. History was re-examined in this light, and it was found that Hitler’s crimes were anticipated in the crimes of empire.

The westward expansion of American capitalism was fueled by railroad coal and genocidal acts. The indigenous populations of America were impediments to this progress, and cavalry and settlers systematically exterminated them. The Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Trail of Tears, Sand Creek Massacre, the forcible removal of children—the Sioux and Cheyenne, Comanche and Yuki were slaughtered. This is how “the West was won.”

The emergence of American imperialism with the conquest of the Philippines at the turn of the century, seizing a formal colony in Asia, was conducted on a scale and with a rapacity that was genocidal. Over 200,000 Filipinos were killed. They were tortured, their villages incinerated, and populations were forced into concentration camps. General Jacob Smith embodied the brutality of the conquest when he told his soldiers, “I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me.” Mass murder was a means to colonial conquest.

Each of the major colonial powers held grip on their possessions by genocidal force when they deemed it necessary. The Belgians secured rubber from the Congo with forced labor, mutilations, torture and mass murder. The British retained India by dint of repeated massacres. The French subdued Algeria with genocidal violence.

The dropping of atomic bombs by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were genocidal acts. The bombings killed nearly a quarter million people, the overwhelming majority of them civilians. It is undeniable that race was a critical factor. American citizens of Japanese ancestry were imprisoned in internment camps in the United States. The “Japs” were different, it was frequently argued, and they would not surrender unless you killed every last one of them. Hundreds of thousands—doctors, high school students, grandmothers—were incinerated in the nuclear blasts; tens of thousands more died agonizing deaths from radiation

poisoning.

The American ruling class sustained its Cold War hegemony by aiding and overseeing bloodshed around the world, often of genocidal dimensions. The Indonesian dictator Suharto rose to power in 1965 through the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of members of the Indonesian Communist Party. The United States coordinated this mass murder, keeping track of its progress and providing radio communication to the military and paramilitary units carrying it out. Communists and alleged communists were hacked to death with machetes and their mutilated corpses clogged the rivers of Sumatra, Java, and Bali.

When the UN Convention on Genocide was completed in 1948, the United States would not sign and did not do so for another forty years. There was a nervous awareness that charges might be raised against the United States for its wars in Korea and Vietnam, for the carpet bombing of Laos and Cambodia, and the use of Agent Orange and napalm. In 1988, when Washington finally signed the convention against genocide, it was with the stipulation that the United States was granted immunity from prosecution for genocide unless the US national government authorized it.

The last thirty years have witnessed the uninterrupted crimes of US empire in the Middle East and Central Asia. Hospitals and villages were deliberately bombed. Cities were reduced to rubble. Economic sanctions starved hundreds of thousands of children to death, and drone strikes killed them at play. Once proud civilizations are haunted ruins, picked bare by the dogs of war.

The only plausible defense that Bush, Obama and Trump could mount if they were charged with genocide, is that while they did launch and conduct wars of aggression that killed over a million Iraqis and hundreds of thousands of Afghans, they saw the deaths of men, women and children as a useful means to an end, and not as the end in itself. Their actions are undeniably genocidal.

Biden stands at the head of this blood-soaked power and accuses Russia of genocide. The charges deliberately mangle and distort both the contemporary facts and the historically established legal definition.

Biden points to specific events—corpses in the streets of Mariupol, the bombing of a train station—which may be war crimes, but which require investigation. Neither the precise details nor the perpetrator have yet been established. No evidence whatsoever has been presented that Putin is intent upon eradicating the Ukrainian people.

Nothing that has happened in Ukraine can be measured on the genocidal scale established by the Nazis and the United States and other imperialist powers. Biden's accusation trivializes the Holocaust and does violence to history.

Biden's accusations of genocide are not the rhetorical overreach of moral indignation. They are the deliberate and reckless escalation of conflict in service to the interests of US imperialism and they target Washington's enemies.

Washington cries genocide when Russia bombs Kiev, but not when Saudi Arabia drops US weapons on Yemen, killing more than 377,000 people. Biden accuses China of genocide for the treatment of the Uyghurs, but he says not a word about Israel's systematic devastation of the Palestinians.

The atrocity stories told by Washington and the repeated, baseless accusations of genocide tell us far less of the events themselves and far more of the war fever that is convulsing the imperialist powers. Once genocide is invoked, there is no possible further rhetorical escalation.

The US is preparing for direct military conflict with Russia. Biden speaks of genocide—blurring painfully acquired legal, historical, and moral distinctions—for the purposes of war propaganda. Russians—who bear no responsibility for the actions of their government—are now stigmatized, barred from international competitions, threatened and hounded internationally.

In an unmistakable sense, Biden is cultivating a genocidal frame of mind, marked by irrational scapegoating and hatred on the basis of nationality. Biden's false use of this term is setting into motion a global war which could prove to be genocidal, one in which the subject of the genocide is the human race itself.



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