Noah Lachs

René Cassin 'Human Writes' Essay Competition 2020 – winner

Competition judge Danny Finkelstein commented:

"All three of these essays were really good. They were each compelling in different ways and some of the writing was very fine.

But I have chosen as the winner Noah Lachs. The winning essay is highly persuasive. Indeed in its clarity of thought and ideas it wouldn't go too far to describe it as intellectually thrilling. That was its impact upon me, anyway.

The author is very much of the same mind as my grandfather, Alfred Wiener. Dr Wiener was one of the leaders of German Jewry in the 1920s and 30s and later the archivist of the anti-Nazi effort. His view was that central to combating fascism, was understanding it.

It is of course right that the best moment to tackle genocide is before it becomes genocide. And the essay is very convincing in its identification of the signs that ideas might turn genocidal. I thought the understanding of the role played by Kristallnacht was particularly brilliant.
I am pleased to recommend it to you as the prize winner."

Why is genocide still happening, and what can we do to stop it?

Genocides do not happen *ex nihilo*. The ideas that propel them creep in among benign political commonplaces: legitimate grievances, collective identity formation, and promises of a better future. Our communications systems do not pre-conditionally convey hateful ideas at scale, and to attentive listeners. They are co-opted, monopolised and curated so they amass audiences. Violence does not begin with massacres of entire peoples - it begins with flickers of unchecked aggression. Genocide prevention begins further up-stream than we have proven capable of recognising. Prevention should be less about destroying concentration camps and more about ensuring the first bricks in such places are never laid. This essay provides a framework for an early warning system. Focussing on ideology, mass communications and violent shifts, it identifies the historically evidenced and contemporarily relevant conditions that can produce genocide. It proposes how we might begin to mitigate

these with more targeted policymaking, accountable organisations and values-driven governance.

The same ideological templates have propelled multiple genocides. Perpetrators typically formulate groups in fatalistic zero-sum terms: the survival of one group, defined by race, religion, ethnicity or politics is framed as contingent on the death of another group. Genocide ideology also frequently involves utopian cultural mythologies. These reinforce the group's identity and outline the often-tantalising outcomes for its survival, or terrifying fallout of its failure. For the Nazis, degenerates were frustrating the potential of the Aryan race (USHMM, 'Nazi Racial Ideology': 2020). This potential was laid out in utopian cultural mythology, which fashioned a world of classical, folkloric and imperial aesthetics, reachable only if degenerates were exterminated (Kiernan, 2009: 22-3). The Khmer Rouge employed a similar ideological formula. They presented the evil designs of "enemies of the people" as anathema to the promise of a revolution, steeped in utopian cultural mythology. Described by Henri Locard as "a bizarre amalgam of royalty, revolution, and past glory", the Khmer Rouge future promised the natural justice of agrarian communism and might of ancient Cambodian civilisation, but for the obstructive, conspiring counter-revolutionaries (Locard, 2015: 201). Throughout history, genocide perpetrators have defined their group, destination and the bodies they need to climb over to get there.

Our world is rife with calcifying, rivalrous group identities and utopian cultural mythologies. Somewhere between complacency and alarmism we must call these out, and act against them. Identity politics — in both its nativist and purportedly progressive guises — is a highway to zero-sum group formation, when exploited. This is most obvious in the form of 'great replacement theory', peddled by the far right, which claims white people are unconditionally imperilled by multiculturalism.[1] Mitigating the excesses of identity politics requires a fine balancing act between policymaking, to meet reasonable demands where there are legitimate grievances, and firmly challenging irredeemably divisive elements. We must not underestimate the gravity of polarisation in our societies. Polarisation is a structural weakness, the severity of which is unknown until other toxic factors take hold, such as war, economic crises or demagogues. Dissolving borders between hostile social groupings is not bleeding heart liberalism. It is about resilience. It is the most fundamental form of early-stage genocide prevention.

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[1] The Counter Extremism Project provide this fuller definition: "The Great Replacement Theory is an ethno-nationalist theory warning that an indigenous European—e.g., white—population is being replaced by non-European immigrants. The Great Replacement concept was popularized by French writer Renaud Camus in his 2012 book, *Le Grand Remplacement* ("The Great Replacement"). Camus postulated that black and brown immigrants were reverse-colonizing native "white" Europeans": (Glossary, CEP web: 2020).

Utopian cultural mythologies are in plenty supply around the world too, from Narendra Modi's *Hindutva* to Xi Jinping's Belt Road Initiative to Tayyip Recep Erdogan's "Blue Homeland".[2] To varying degrees, these examples merge proud histories with great power ambitions. They have claimed victims already: the disenfranchisement of many Indian Muslims belongs to Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda (HRW: 2020). The collective punishment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang is inseparable from China's reimagined silk road (bordering eight countries, Xinjiang's stability is pivotal as China builds trade route west).[3] The unleashing of Turkish troops and proxies — from Africa to the Caucuses — belongs to Erdogan's irredentist ethos (IISS 'Strategic Comment' Sep 2020). A new US-administration has a golden opportunity to reset international norms. America must use its leverage, in NATO and as an economic superpower, to impress that sovereignty is not a cover for tyranny, and that trade cannot alchemise atrocities.

To propagate their ideologies, genocide perpetrators deftly exploit and monopolise communications systems. The Nazis fashioned a multimedia messaging enterprise to dehumanise Jews, and to fantasise about Aryan ascendency, in print as well as film (USHMM 'Nazi Propaganda': 2020). Operating in a more oral culture, the Khmer Rouge saturated Cambodians with slogans (Locard: 2005). Crucially, genocide perpetrators have relied on multiple vectors — top-down and bottom-up — to disseminate their hatred. RTLM — the Rwandan radio station that used 'Tutsi' and 'cockroach' interchangeably, broadcasted specific Tutsi targets, and called to "make [Tutsis] disappear once and for all" — had Ministerial backing (Des Forges 2007: 48). However it was a genocide communications beast unto itself: "individual broadcasters" and *not* "government officials" were "most likely to use the airwaves to disseminate hate" (Kimani, 2007: 110). There were even limited efforts, influenced by outside pressure, from Rwandan officials to constrain RTLM's rhetorical violence (Des Forges 2007: 47). RTLM offered a vulgate expression of hatred – "unlike the official Radio Rwanda which spoke in slow ponderous tones of state officials, RTLM was informal and lively" — so much so officials referred civilians to listen to the station in order to further the genocide (Des Forges 2007: 47). [4] When cross-sections within the

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2 *Hindutva* (lit. Hindu-ness) conceives of India as a holy land for Hindus, problematizing peaceful coexistence with Muslims. Some of Hindutva's proponents have endorsed militancy in pursuit of their religious nationalist objectives (Pirbhai, *GU*: 2020); The BRI is a giant infrastructure project that would give China mastery over a contiguous trade network spanning from East Asia to Europe. It is largely inspired by the fabled Silk Road (Chatzky & McBride, *CFR*: 2020); "Blue homeland" is an irredentist concept that claims vast sections of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, including Greek and Cypriot maritime borders and hydrocarbon deposits, for Turkey" (Erdemir & Kawalski, *War on the Rocks*: 2020).

3 "Xinjiang in the northeast borders Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The region is at the heart of the $1 trillion infrastructure development and investments scheme, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), […] According to Sean Roberts, a professor of international development at George Washington University, Uighur's attachment to their traditional lands and ways of life is seen by China's Communist Party (CCP) as a risk to the successful implementation of the BRI." (Kashgarian & Hussein *VOA*: 2020).

4 RTLM was not the only vector for popular hatred, the celebrity-singer-turned-genocide-criminal, Simon Bikindi, is another example among many. Bikindi's role as a singer was noted in the prosecution case against him: "the Prosecution alleges that

communications eco-system all hum the keynote of genocide in dissonant harmony, we are probably too late. But, understanding that there are different vectors for violent incitement, in addition to state propaganda, is key as we consider the predominance of social media today.

The internet has made communications harder to monopolise. However, it has catalysed the circulation of untruths, produced filter bubbles and facilitated anonymous mobs whose aggression is matched by impunity. This is not just about trolling, but a life and death matter: Facebook has been used to incite murder against Rohingyas in Myanmar, and WhatsApp has been exploited to mobilise anti-Muslim lynch mobs in India.[5] A Rwanda-style feedback loop, where violent incitement replays in *crescendo*, is not history but a present possibility. Our tech companies need to be accountable to independent bodies – these companies' licenses to operate should be contingent on their abilities to monitor their platforms for violent incitement. Policy makers have a critical role here too. Beyond combatting online hate and bringing tech companies to heel, they must champion information literacy and critical thinking skills in education (Machete & Turpin: 2020). These competencies are early-stage safeguards against hate media.

When fatalistic ideologies are mass communicated, violence often follows. However, it can be counter-intuitively difficult to know when genocide is a likely outcome from this violence. This is partly because perpetrators tend to obfuscate their atrocities, but also because genocides often take place where violence is already underway, for instance, during or between wars, and in authoritarian countries. There are, however, moments when violent norms shift in a way that should force the question – what is the next point of escalation? We have repeatedly failed to spot and adequately respond to these moments. *Kristallnacht* is probably the most famous example — a literal glass shattering moment — representing a "turning point" in Nazi Germany from discrimination of Jews to their mass murder (USHMM 'Kristallnacht': 2020). The Bosnian-Serb shelling of civilian targets at Srebrenica was also a shocking escalation, and prelude to the unthinkable brutality of which Ratko Mladic later showed himself capable (HRW: 1995). These violent shifts are not always so dramatic, involving glass and fire. Consider, for instance, the distribution of thousands of weapons to Rwandan civilians in December 1993, which would allow people to murder their neighbours four months later (Des Forges 2007: 46). These examples do not tell us that genocides turn on a single moment or decision. Genocides are far more complex. These examples

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Bikindi participated in this campaign through his musical compositions and by speeches which he made at public gatherings that incited and promoted hatred and violence against Tutsi": Case No. ICTR-01-72-T.

[5] An investigation by Reuters found more than 1,000 examples of posts attacking the Rohingya on Facebook (Stecklow: 2018); in the same year, at least 17 Muslims were killed in Indian connection due to Whatsapp rumours that they had abducted children (BBC: 2018).

demonstrate, however, that perpetrators often reveal their cards and test the boundaries. When we are blind to the hands shown and when our boundaries are soft, we invite further violent plays.

Multiple atrocity-wreakers have been calling the international community's bluff for years. Barack Obama did not enforce the "red-line" he had established when Bashar Al Assad dropped chemical weapons on Syrian civilians. If Obama's calculation was that intervention risked a more-harm-than-good escalation that is forgivable. If he recoiled, fearful of the backlash from an American people jaded by the Iraq War — a different time, context and conflict — that is inexcusably weak leadership. More recently, China has exploited its leverage to victimise an entire ethnic group, and leaders have allowed it to do so. None so unscrupulously as Donald Trump who reportedly stayed silent on Xinjiang in order to close a trade deal with China, or as the nominally Islamic countries who have actually endorsed China's anti-Muslim campaign against Uyghurs, similarly mindful of their economic ties to China.[6] We need to declare and enforce red lines instead of trading short term gain for long term risks.

If we are too late to undermine ideology, we can mitigate its communication. If we fail to resist the flow and reception of violent incitement, we can respond robustly when aggression is used. If we let the court of public opinion and fear of trade losses inhibit critical interventions, we are inviting the worst. The levers to prevent genocide — before it looks like anything of the sort — are manifold. They are within reach of our governments, companies and multi-lateral institutions. It is about time we pull them.

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[6] "Obama let the fear of crossing antiwar opinion dictate his path" (Greenberg, *FP*: 2016) also Cf. 'Trump held off China sanctions over Xinjiang to protect Trade Deal' *The Guardian* 22 June 2020 & 'Muslim Nations are Defending China as it Cracks Down on Muslims' *CNN* 17 July 2019.

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