

The Ten Patterns of Genocide



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Genocide is a process, not a single event. A key feature of the genocidal process is that it is not only a systematic but also a patterned form of attack on a group. This means that in the short-term we can often identify the emergence of intent at its early stages when genocidal patterns are played out in localized ways. The list of patterns below is meant to help guide the identification of “microcosms” of genocide at stages when a wider array of prevention tools may still have some utility. *NOTE: All patterns overlap, and a single genocide can take different forms at different times in its history.*

1 Gender-Neutral Mass Murder (Characterized by Gendered Atrocity)

Both men and women within a group are murdered outright, often in large-scale massacres or killing programs. In the process of killing, men and women may be treated differently; for example, men may be murdered first and women may be raped before murder. Children can either be killed alongside the adults or absorbed by the perpetrator community. Sometimes gender-neutral mass murder is achieved through the use of industrial technologies that enable quick and indiscriminate murder at some distance from perpetrators.

2 Mass Murder of “Battle-Aged Men” + Atrocities Against Women and Children

Men and boys are killed outright in massacres, as a means of “decapitating” the (perceived or real) patriarchal social structure, and women and children are murdered, raped, sometimes kidnapped and enslaved as resources for the perpetrating group, and/or expelled from the territory. The age of the men and boys killed will vary by the culture of the perpetrator, but is usually between 10 and 70. Sometimes only prominent men are killed initially. Although women, girls, and young boys are not the direct targets of mass murder, they are frequently killed on a more individual basis and used to commit physical and symbolic harm, as, for example, when pregnant women are eviscerated or infant boys bayoneted; they can also be placed in conditions resulting in death, whether from starvation, exposure, torture, illness, or self-harm and suicide. This is the most common form of genocide.

3 Sex-Selective Mass Murder (“Gendercide”)

The murder of one sex/gender in numbers large enough to constitute a direct threat to the ability of a specific group to reproduce itself in the future both biologically and culturally. Such murder will frequently be accompanied by life force atrocities that indicate an attempt to destroy a group in whole, despite the fact that only one sex or gender identity is being targeted for killing.

4 Mass Rape

Women and men, boys and girls, within a group are raped in numbers and in ways significant enough to demonstrate an attempt to undermine a group’s ability to sustain itself and its culture. These rapes will usually be public, will involve pronounced life force atrocities and tortures, will demonstrate high rates of attack against the very young and the very old, and target key cultural symbols of the health of a community: for example, community political and religious leaders, important family relationships, and infants.

5 Gross Human Rights Violations + Mass Cultural Destruction

Members of specific communities are humiliated and harmed based on their identities while important institutions and symbols of the group are desecrated and destroyed, including religious, cultural and educational institutions, religious, cultural and intellectual leaders, sacred texts, national museums and libraries, and so forth. Individual members may be killed sporadically as a part of the genocidal process, but massacres, if they exist, are small and infrequent. This pattern is often tied to a long-term genocidal process and does not always have a mass killing dimension, at least early on. It can include such acts as high rates of child removal, the ‘reeducation’ of children so they forget their native languages and traditions, killing children or pregnant women to demoralize the group, the denial of identity and citizenship, the erasure of history, the banning of languages, the renaming of the physical world, and the desecration of graves.

6 Man-Made Famine (“Genocide by Attrition”)

The imposition of artificial famine, or the exploitation of war and environmental and weather conditions, to weaken or destroy a specific group. People are frequently given no means of escape from the affected region, offers of food aid from the outside world are turned down, and the farming, procuring or eating of food is prohibited. Medical care is sub-standard or non-existent, and medical facilities, as well as schools and other institutions important to collective health, are closed or intentionally destroyed.

7 Environmental Despoliation (“Ecocide”) & Land Alienation

The land on which a people relies for its sustenance and identity is alienated, expropriated, or destroyed through intentional despoliation, as a consequence of settler colonialism, industry, war, or the use of pollutants and toxins, for whatever motives, resulting in reasonably predictable decline in the health, mental and physical strength, longevity, and reproductive capacity of a group. Often, groups are unable to sustain collective life abroad after expulsion or on the land as a consequence of despoliation. In the latter case they often must move, individually or en masse, to neighboring regions or countries, becoming IDPs and refugees. Land alienation and environmental despoliation are often accompanied by purposeful cultural despoliation.

8 Appropriation of Biological Resources

Group members, especially women and children, are kidnapped and appropriated to serve and replenish the perpetrator group, either as instruments of war (child soldiers, sex slaves, human shields, etc.) or to enrich the perpetrator group’s biological and economic capacity as future birth-givers and workers. Alongside this, the civilian world from which the captives came is intentionally and systematically undermined and sometimes destroyed. The appropriation of people is usually committed alongside the appropriation of natural and other resources, such as foodstuffs, medicines, and especially land, precious metals, diamonds, minerals, and oil, and results in widespread atrocity and terror.

9 Denial and/or Prevention of Identity

The existence of an identity is actively and systematically denied or obstructed from manifesting itself from within the social world through laws, decrees, speech acts, and practices of groups in power or groups seeking power. This denial and obstruction can take the form of revocation of citizenship, denaturalization, withholding of official recognition, and creating conditions preventing communal identity development.

10 Direct Killing of Women + Killing of Men Through Work

An older pattern in which women and girls, who are believed to be useless, are killed first and men and young boys are used as slave laborers (often in specialized industries) until they die.