

The labeling of a genocide
Who “wins”?

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The definition of genocide — “the systematic and planned extermination of an entire national, racial, political, or ethnic group,” according to The American Heritage Dictionary — little informs us how to distinguish between a violent conflict and one that crosses into genocide.

Recognizing genocide is as much a political contest as it is a moral imperative. And in the court of international opinion, victims — and perpetrators — fiercely contest the labeling of a conflict as genocidal.

What was the first genocide of the 20th century?

If you said the Nazi Holocaust, you would be only semantically correct. The word “genocide” was not coined until 1943 when Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish legal scholar, combined the Greek prefix for family, tribe or race (genos) and the Latin suffix for massacre (cideo) to describe what was happening in Germany at the time. If you answered the 1915 Armenian genocide at the hands of the waning Ottoman Empire, from which Lemkin first developed his ideas on genocide, you would be closer, but still not correct.

The first genocide of the 20th century took place in Africa. But unlike the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, where the victims and perpetrators are Africans, it was a German colonial occupying force that exterminated the Herero people in South West Africa (present day Namibia) between 1904 and 1907. The Germans laid siege to the Herero community, massacring close to 80 percent of the population and forcibly moving the rest to concentration camps.

Germans came late to the scramble for Africa and intended on making huge strides to transform their territories by relying on their significant industrial prowess to subdue both man and nature. Initially, Germany tried to legitimate their presence in the Herero homeland through legal means, but when a group of Herero rose up against what they perceived as an unfair German occupation, the response was swift and dramatic. After a crushing defeat in the Battle of Waterberg, the Herero were forced to leave their land and tens of thousands were slaughtered by the German army. “I believe that the nation as such should be annihilated, or, if this was not possible by tactical measures, have to be expelled from the country,” said General Lars Von Trotha, Kaiser Wilhelm II’s choice to lead the campaign.

It was in Africa that the Germans first began their use of concentration camps, a harbinger of what was to come within Germany 40 years later against undesirables like Jews, Gypsies (Roma) and homosexuals. Herero inmates were used as slave labor and experimented upon by German imperial scientists. In fact, Eugene Fischer, a young German geneticist who began his work on race-mixing in the Herero concentration camps, was a seminal influence on Adolf Hitler. Hitler

eventually elevated Fischer to the top position at the University of Berlin where his star pupil was Josef Mengele, a leading architect of the German Holocaust.

In terms of the percentage of the population killed, the Herero genocide was more successful than the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide and the killings in Darfur. Less than 20 percent of the Herero population — or fewer than 20,000 — survived. There are a little more than 100,000 Herero living primarily in Namibia today and in smaller communities in Angola and Botswana. That a vibrant and diverse Herero community exists at all represents a tremendous recovery.

Given the historical significance, why don't people know about the Herero? The answer is related to several factors that tell us much about the politicized nature of labeling a conflict as genocidal. Lacking a significant diaspora in the West, the Herero have never been able to demand recognition from the international community in the way Armenians and Jews have attempted to ensure their history is never forgotten. In 2001, a private foundation representing the Hereros did sue the German government and corporations in American courts. However, the German government successfully argued that the 1948 Genocide Convention could not be applied retroactively. A century after the genocide took place, Herero groups did receive an apology from the German government in 2004, but no direct compensation was ever provided to the community.

Somewhat perversely, the term genocide has become so politically loaded that it has little meaning as a descriptor of contemporary ethnic and racial conflicts. Instead, it more accurately reflects the political standing of the targeted group in the West. As such, the application of the term has become more akin to a linguistic sweepstakes whereby persecuted minorities are awarded with recognition if and only if they can "win" the term's application to their situation. The downside of all this is the term inhibits us from recognizing the relative frequency with which minority groups are persecuted. We have become primed to care only when a conflict emerges in the international consciousness as genocidal — rendering others just forgettable.