

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.21.2.139>

THE EMERGENCE OF MASS ATROCITY CONCEPTS: REFLECTIONS ON GENOCIDE, CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY, WAR CRIMES AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

Alan Whitehorn**Royal Military College of Canada*Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2595-4579>

The article commences with a brief listing of some of the key words and phrases used in journalistic accounts in the 1915 *New York Times* about the mass deportations and killings of ethnic Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Exploring the emergence of academic and legal terms associated with such mass atrocities in general, a number of key concepts have been formulated, most notably *war crimes*, *crimes against humanity*, *genocide* and *ethnic cleansing*. Other suggested terms include *democide*, *politicide*, *ethnocide*, *urbicide*, *gendercide* and *omnicide*, which are also briefly discussed by way of background and overview. Amidst an analytical comparison of the meanings of the two terms *ethnic cleansing* and *genocide*, problematic aspects of using the term *ethnic cleansing* are raised and discussed. There has been a continuing global challenge of mass atrocity crimes, and today we witness increased usage of the problematic concept of *ethnic cleansing* in important, yet diverse case studies such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Gaza. It is suggested that other terms, such as *war crimes*, *crimes against humanity* and *genocide*, are more suitable terms, both analytically and morally.

Keywords: *ethnic cleansing*, *genocide*, *crimes against humanity*, *war crimes*, *Armenian Genocide*, *Nagorno-Karabakh*.

Introduction

The history of human civilization is not only of enhanced learning and understanding, but also a history of episodes of inhumanity. There has been a multitude of examples of harsh discrimination, violent hostility, population deportations, mass killings, and destruction of an ethnic people's homes, community and culture. How do we describe such significant malevolent mass atrocity events? How do we "describe the indescribable?" (Whitehorn, 2015a)? For example, one can observe efforts by then contemporary diplomats and journalists

* alan.whitehorn@gmail.com

Received: 06.09.2025

Revised: 16.09.2025

Accepted: 21.09.2025



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

© The Author(s) 2025

to find the words to describe the mass deportations and killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Among some of the many journalistic terms and phrases offered in the *New York Times* newspaper articles in the year of 1915 were the following: *great deportation, completely depopulated, wholesale deportations, systematically uprooted, wholesale uprooting of the native population, million Armenians killed or in exile, 1,500,000 Armenians starve, wholesale massacres, slaughtered wholesale, extirpating the million and a half Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, policy of extermination, deliberately exterminated, annihilation of a whole people, organized system of pillage, deportations, wholesale executions, and massacres, deliberate murder of a nation, war of extermination, race extermination, Armenia without Armenians, extinction menaces Armenia, deportation order and the resulting war of extinction, aim at the complete elimination of all non-Moslem races from Asiatic Turkey, and crimes against civilization and morality.*¹

During World War I, the Ottoman persecution and targeting of the Armenian Christian ethnic minority continued as hundreds of thousands were deported, starved, tortured and killed. Accordingly, in May 1915, the governments of Britain, France and Tsarist Russia issued a formal joint declaration about the ongoing “massacring” of Armenians and suggested these constituted “new crimes of Turkey against humanity and civilization” (Whitehorn, 2015b). Even as the events unfolded, there were attempts to find the words to describe such mass atrocities.

Describing the indescribable: the evolution and challenges of key concepts in mass atrocity crimes

As both a genocide scholar and grandson of an orphan of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, it is academically and personally important for me to search for the conceptual words to “describe the indescribable”.

Key terms: While initially formulated at different times in history, four leading analytical terms have emerged: *war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide* and *ethnic cleansing*. They are interrelated and overlap (Geib & Ozelik, 2021).² Collectively, they constitute key foundational pillars in international law relating to mass atrocity crimes. War was the common feature in the emergence of all of these concepts. In recent decades other terms have also emerged and will be briefly mentioned later.

War crimes: The concept of war crimes emerged from the Hague conferences in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Ball, 1999; Crowe, 2014; Gutman et al, 2007). These international sessions sought to regulate the conduct of war in modern times, particularly given that weapons could be so much more destructive in the contemporary era. The 1907 Hague convention recognized the principle of

the “laws of humanity” and the “laws and customs of war” that had been “established among civilized peoples.” Efforts after World War I to prosecute German and Ottoman war criminals were largely unsuccessful. The post-World War II Nuremberg Trials witnessed significant strides forward in prosecutions of top German Nazi officials. Amongst the main categories of charges laid were: Crimes against Peace (waging War of Aggression), War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity (Ball, 1999, p 52). Decades later, with a number of international tribunals created in the 1990s, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), along with the passage of the Rome Statute of 1998 and the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the nature of war crimes has been further elaborated. Amongst the list of war crimes are: *wanton destruction, the deliberate harming of unarmed civilians, mistreatment of war prisoners, torture, compulsory slave labor, and willful killing of civilians.*

Crimes Against Humanity: These involve a widespread attack against a civilian population. Examples of crimes against humanity include: *murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, persecution, rape, and torture of civilian populations* (Bassiouni, 2014, pp 3, 362-363). The term first emerged in 1915 during World War I, when the Russian, French and British governments issued a formal joint international declaration that warned the Young Turk dictatorship about the mass deportations and massacres of Armenians and other Christians within the Ottoman Empire (Bassiouni, 2014; Jones, 2008).³ Earlier massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire had occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, despite repeated protests from European foreign governments. However, it was not until after World War II, when former German Nazi officials were charged at the post World War II Nuremberg Trials, that the term *crimes against humanity* received wide formal usage. Further conceptual elaborations followed with the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and with the passage of the Rome Statute and the creation of the (International Criminal Court (ICC) (Bassiouni, 2014). In 2019, the International Law Commission submitted to the UN General Assembly draft articles for a proposed convention on Crimes against Humanity. To date, no such ratification vote has taken place. The charge of Crimes Against Humanity addresses mass atrocity crimes that target any social group or large number of individuals.

Genocide: The concept of genocide emerged in the pioneering book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* by Raphael Lemkin in the 1940s during World War II, but the analytical roots go back earlier. In the aftermath of World War I, Lemkin had been

a university student in Poland and had wondered why there were domestic laws for the punishment of the murder of one person, but not international laws against mass murder by political leaders, such as the wartime Turkish military dictators.

A decade later in the 1930s in a paper at an international legal conference, Lemkin proposed the precursor twin concepts of *barbarism* and *vandalism* (Powell, 2011, p 71; Lemkin/Jacobs, 2014, ix). The former described acts of violence against people, while the latter the wanton damage and destruction of cultural property. Both were key to the survival of a nation/people. Amidst World War II, Lemkin formulated a synthesis of the two concepts with the creation of the new term *genocide*. This term first appeared in his influential volume on the Nazi deportations and mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust.

Main features of genocide: In 1948, the United Nations passed the “International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” which included the following features: 1) Killing members of a group; 2) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group; 3) Deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; 4) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within a group; 5) Forcibly transferring children of one group to another.⁴

A group focus was central to the definition and four groups were specifically listed for special protection: national, ethnic, religious and racial. We can note the following observations: Random killing of individuals is not genocide. Genocide requires targeting of at least one of the four types of groups.

Crimes against humanity vs genocide: Since not all possible social groups (e.g., class, gender, age) are listed in the enumeration of the groups to be protected by the Genocide Convention, the concept of Crimes against Humanity in this regard is a more inclusive and comprehensive law to address horrific crimes of targeting or mass killing directed at any group. The term can even also include acts of mass slaughter conducted without specific groups targeted. In recent prosecutions at international tribunals and the International Criminal Court, the three important terms -- *War Crimes*, *Crimes against Humanity*, and *Genocide* – have tended to cluster together, both in terms of deeds by the perpetrators and in subsequent legal proceedings by the prosecutors. They are important tools for punishing those guilty of past deeds and potentially deterring future mass atrocity crimes.

Emergence of alternate terms: Along with other academics, four highly influential scholars and authors of major leading textbooks on genocide, Martin Shaw in *What is Genocide?* (2007; 2015), Adam Jones in *Genocide: Comprehensive Introduction* (2017), and co-editors Samuel Totten and Paul

Bartrop, *The Genocide Studies Reader* (2009, pp. 57-91) have noted the emergence of a variety of competing terms that have been offered as alternates to the concept of genocide. For example, Jones (2017, pp. 34-37) briefly outlines aspects of 17 other terms or so-called “cides”. Shaw (2007, pp 63-78; 2015, pp 84-100) lists up to 8 comparable terms in different editions, including a useful chart-summary on page 100. More recently, Feierstein (2023) authored a thoughtful review article of various terms employed. Shaw (2007; chapter 5, pp. vi & 63) even cautioned that there has been a “conceptual proliferation”. Amongst the more notable terms that have been introduced are the following:

- *Democide* is primarily identified by the writings of Rudy Rummell’s *Democide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder* (1992) and *Death by Government* (1997). The term refers to mass civilian killing of any sort by an autocratic state (Rummell, 2014).

- *Politicide* was a term introduced by the wife and husband scholarly team of Barbara Harff (1992, 2009) and Ted Gurr (2004, 2014). The term refers to the mass killing of targeted political opponents by an authoritarian regime.

- *Ethnocide* has sometimes been used with reference to cultural genocide, particularly related to coerced language and religion conversions of the indigenous populations (Shaw, 2007; Kiernan, 2007). Mann (2005, p. 16), however, describes it as “unintended wiping out of a group or culture”.

- *Autogenocide* addresses where the mass killings include the majority ethnic population. The term emerged in attempts to explain the Kymer Rouge regime in Cambodia/Kampuchea in the 1970s (Hinton, 2005, p 15).

- *Urbicide* is also a term often linked to analysis of the Kymer Rouge mass killings in Cambodia where the cities were depopulated and largely emptied. Virtually the entire urban population was coerced into internal exile to the rural countryside where starvation and brutality prevailed (Jones, 2017 and Shaw, 2017).

- *Gendercide* is an increasingly used term and is usually cited with reference to the most violent and coercive forms of patriarchy against women (Warren, 2014). However, it has also been used by some authors to highlight the primary targeting and swift killing of young military age men amidst the earlier phases of genocide (Jones, 2007, chapter 13). Of important note, women are often heavily targeted in rape, mass deportations, starvation and slaughter. It is evident that gender-based killing can occur in different ways at different stages.⁵

- *Omnicide* emerged in the nuclear age amidst the enormous proliferation of atomic weapons in the Cold War. The intense bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two hostile superpowers, raised the spectre of a possible global nuclear holocaust where entire continents and the globe itself were

at grave risk. Amongst the authors using this term was Eric Markusen (Jones, 2017, p. 143). This is a significant and growing issue in a world witnessing more nuclear states, too many of which are autocratic, violent and territorially-aggressive regimes.

Most of these and even other newer terms have been less widely employed or cited than the earlier and interrelated concepts of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. A notable exception, however, is the increasing usage of the term *ethnic cleansing*, particularly since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s (Preece, 1998) and more recently following the South Caucasus/Karabakh wars of the 1990s and 2020s and the decades-long one-sided conflict in Gaza and the West Bank.

Ethnic cleansing: As the United Nations website notes: “Ethnic cleansing has not been recognized as an independent crime under international law [...]. [However,] The expression ‘ethnic cleansing’ has been used in resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly, and has been acknowledged in judgments and indictments of the ICTY, although it did not constitute one of the counts for prosecution.”⁶ Over the years, the term *ethnic cleansing* has been closely linked to *war crimes*, *crimes against humanity*, and *genocide* (Smith, 2010, p. 113; Pegorier, 2013) and this has led to discussions about similarities and differences between the terms. A number of authors have even suggested that the term *ethnic cleansing* is often used as a euphemism in place of the term *genocide*, as a way of avoiding graver and more complex implications (Shaw, 2003, p. 191; Shaw, 2013, pp. 125 & 148; Blum, 2007; Feirstein, 2023, pp. 28-29).⁷ Some authors have noted with considerable caution that the wording was originally a “perpetrator term” that later became a more widely used phrase by outside observers and commentators (Smith, 2007, p. 49). As such, it has a troubled historic legacy. These are themes which will be explored further later.

The term *ethnic cleansing* has been employed extensively in recent decades by journalists, academics, legal scholars, international courts and the United Nations itself. Quite significantly, the term has grown in official international governmental statements and legal court rulings. Accordingly, the term is worthy of further and more detailed commentary and analysis. The legal emergence is related to the last decade of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, when the term *ethnic cleansing* saw more formal international recognition. A number of UN Security Council resolutions were passed in the 1990s (Lieberman, 2013; Pegorier, 2013, p. 9; Gzoyan, 2024, p. 61)⁸ that led to the creation in 1993 of the *ad hoc* international court for the former Yugoslavia whose areas of jurisdiction included ethnic cleansing.

Their subsequent international tribunal court prosecutions and rulings added to the sequential case law on ethnic cleansing, along with genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes (Schabas, 2005, p. 114; Pegorier, 2013, p. 31; Gzoyan, 2024).

Echoing the post-World War II Nuremberg trials, the Rome Statute of 1998 which created the International Criminal Court to be enacted from 2002 onwards, outlined four major international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.⁹ Ethnic cleansing, however, was not listed as either one of the major categories or even mentioned (Pegorier, 2013, p. 25; Gzoyan, 2024, p. 66). Interestingly and quite significantly, under the category of crimes against humanity, the words *deportation, forcible transfer, displacement of the persons* and *expulsion* were mentioned.¹⁰

Most notably, the concept of ethnic cleansing received a major boost when a few years later in 2005 the United Nations World Summit unanimously passed the official Responsibility to Protect (R2P) declaration which included ethnic cleansing, along with genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in the list of four types of mass atrocity crimes (Geib & Ozelik, 2021; May, 2025, p. 147; Gzoyan, 2024, pp. 71-72).¹¹ Today, the UN headquarters and its website continue to list ethnic cleansing as one of the major international crimes with which it is greatly concerned and seeks to address.¹²

Historic usage: the 1990s and after: As mentioned previously, the dramatic increase in usage of the term *ethnic cleansing* occurred during and following the Balkan civil war during the break-up of the former federal republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Examples of earlier authors using the term include Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide* (1993); Alfred-Maurice De Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East Germans, 1944-1950* (1994), Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, *Ethnic Cleansing* (1996); Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century* (2001), Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (2001), Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (2005); Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (2007, chapter 4), Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (2007), and Adam Jones, *Crimes Against Humanity* (2008). Interestingly, several authors such as Bell-Fialkoff, Naimark, Kaufman and Mann each offered separate chapters on the Armenian case study as suggested examples of ethnic cleansing. It was even noted by Shaw (2007; p. 48) that the term historically emerged, in part, when Soviet analysts had described earlier Azerbaijani hostility and harsh policies/deeds towards Armenians in the South Caucasus in the 1980s.

In our current era of the 2020s, the term is once more being employed extensively to describe the recent tragic events in Nagorno-Karabakh where Armenian civilians have suffered the impact of renewed one-sided wars, a blockade of trade, food and medical supplies and forced mass expulsion. See for example, the Freedom House Report, *Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?* (2024); AGMI Director Edita Gzoyan and her colleagues Svetah Chkhmakhchyan and Edgar Meyroyan at the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute's *Ethnic Cleansing in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Issues of Definition and Criminal Responsibility* in *International Journal of Armenian Studies* (2023); former Armenian diplomat Sossi Tatikyan's numerous in-depth articles in *EVN Report* (2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, and most notably *Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide or Displacement? The De-Armenization of Nagorno-Karabakh and Why the ICJ Case Matters Now*, *EVN Report* (2024a) and her academic article *Legal and Political Aspects of the De-Armenization of Nagorno-Karabakh: Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide, Forced Displacement or Voluntary Exodus?* in *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* (2024b). It was even reported that Yegishe Kirakosyan, a distinguished YSU professor of law who represented Armenia at the International Court of Justice, used the term *ethnic cleansing* (Tatikyan, 2024a, 2024b, p. 63).¹³

Given the term's continued use and even increased profile, further analysis of the term *ethnic cleansing* and its problems is warranted. Shaw (2007, 4; 2015, 5) devotes an entire chapter on the term in his influential textbooks on genocide. While Petrovic (1994, p. 351) and May (2025, p. 9) each outline a page of different definitions of the term *ethnic cleansing*.

UN definition: In the decade of the 1990s which witnessed mass ethnic killings in the former Yugoslavia, a United Nations Commission of Experts in 1994 offered the following widely-used definition of ethnic cleansing: "[...] a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic area [...]" (Ball, 1999, pp. 132-133; Lieberman, 2013, p. 44; Geib & Ozcelik, 2021). It was, in effect, a means of rendering an area more ethnically homogeneous by force or intimidation (Petrovic, 1994, p. 349; Preece, 1998, p. 818; Jones, 2017, p. 455). A significant goal of ethnic cleansing was land acquisition by one group at the expense of another (Bartrop, 2015, p. 166). It did not necessarily imply mass murder or genocidal slaughter, although it could lead to such if conditions deteriorated, as they often did. Ethnic cleansing may also include the removal of cultural and religious buildings, but in so doing readily blends into cultural destruction/genocide. It is not uncommon following

ethnic/religious mass deportations for historic gravesites to be vandalized and destroyed.¹⁴

Ethnic displacement vs genocidal death: Forced ethnic displacement can be and often is seen as part of genocide. Two dimensions are tapped: 1) type of intent towards a targetted victim population and 2) the degree of magnitude of violent force. Mann (2005, p. 12) even offers a two-dimensional table outlining these aspects. An ethnic group is targeted in both cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide, but the level of violence is different (Bell-Fialkoff, 1996; Lieberman, 2013, p. 45; May, 2025, p. 91; Gzoyan, 2024, p. 67; Suny, 2025).¹⁵ Forced group removal is, in theory, far less extreme than mass murder, although both may have the long-term effect of the ultimate destruction of the community in question (Schabas, 2005, p. 122). Displacement can certainly lead to the eventual break-up of much of the collective culture and community, particularly if no new nearby surrogate homeland is found and the population is dispersed and fragmented into a global diaspora. Mass murder is, of course, far swifter and more violent. Mass population transfer can also transform in practice into mass murder (Naimark, 2001, p. 4), particularly if there is an over-abundance of hostility towards the victim group and ease of access to weapons of destruction by the perpetrators.

In summary: 1) To remove is not necessarily the same intent as to annihilate; 2) To forcibly transfer is not the same magnitude of violence as to kill; 3) In practice, forcible relocating can be brutally harsh and involve considerable physical and mental suffering and a significant number of deaths; 4) Ethnic cleansing is on the same general continuum as genocide, but not necessarily as far along; 5) Both are mass atrocity crimes. Perhaps the former is more effectively labelled Crimes Against Humanity, while the other is Genocide.

Perpetrator perspective about ethnic cleansing: Perpetrators believe that there exists something profoundly different and undesirable within their polity. That negative element is seen as being “impure” and needs to be immediately removed so that the polity can be “cleansed” (Bell-Fialkoff, 1996; Bryant, 2021, p. 287). Perceived as a grave and malignant force/disease, such an unwanted entity is portrayed as something to be eradicated from its current present location. It is identified, in effect, as a hostile alien enemy from within the borders of the country that must be urgently removed (Bell-Fialkoff, 1996, p. 281).¹⁶

Problems with ethnic cleansing: An issue, which has been raised by Jones (2008, p. 43), Blum (2007) and others, including Whitehorn (2025), is that the word *cleansing* is problematic. It unnecessarily repeats the genocidaire’s language and world view. As such, *ethnic cleansing* remains at root a profoundly problematic concept. To employ the concept unwisely incorporates a genocidaire’s

language about ridding a polity/society of allegedly “impure” or “diseased” elements. What or who is supposedly being cleansed? In what way is it cleansing? Who are the targets selected to be removed or even perhaps eradicated? The phrase *ethnic cleansing* is inherently a pejorative concept relating to the targeted victim group. It implies that the victim group is “unclean” or “unhealthy” (Blum, 2007). Most journalistic, academic and legal authors use the term in order to focus on the disruptive territorial nature of the perpetrators’ violent acts of “ethnic removing” of the allegedly objectionable element from the region or territory. In so doing, commenting authors try to note that forced mass ethnic dispersal is differed from and, in important degrees, contrasted with the annihilation and mass killing of an ethnic nation. However, a different choice of wording seems a far wiser strategy to employ.

Need to use alternate concepts: As Shaw (2007, p. 49) asked: “[...] why enshrine a perpetrator concept in official, legal, journalistic and social scientific analysis when there were terms such as *expulsion* and *forced migration* that indicated the precise harm caused -- and when *genocide* described the general social destruction involved?” Academically and morally, it seems more suitable and less problematic to employ terms other than *ethnic cleansing*. For example, *coerced ethnic population transfer* or *forced ethnic relocation* are more neutral terms and could be used instead. Forced ethnic *removal* or *displacement* seem far less skewed phrasing and do not unintentionally convey the genocidaire’s framework of implying or judging that the victim group is “unclean”.

In view of several earlier generations of officials, academics and journalists repeatedly using this problematic term, it is a significant challenge, but wiser if scholars and activists today would commence to employ concepts more worthy of scholarly humanist analysis and prescription. The term *ethnic cleansing* should be left to old history texts, not to current analysis of contemporary events. Almost two decades ago, this was the collective conclusion of Blum, Stanton, Sagi and Richter in their article in a public health journal where they called for the “expunging the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ from use [...]” (Blum et al, 2007, p. 208).

In general, it seems more appropriate to use the overarching terms *war crimes*, *crimes against humanity* and *genocide*, and not to employ the phrasing *ethnic cleansing* (Whitehorn, 2025).¹⁷ Shaw, in both editions of his influential book *What is Genocide?* (2007, p. 78; 2015, p. 99), suggests genocide is the preferred key concept to employ.¹⁸ That being said, other more specific phrases relating to forced transfer of ethnic and religious populations are possible. Accordingly, it seems useful to provide a preliminary list of such phrases that have frequently appeared in a variety of writings on mass atrocity crimes in history.

Beyond *ethnic cleansing*: toward more accurate and ethical terminology

A List of possible alternate terms to *ethnic cleansing* is the following:

Forced transfer of ethnic population
Forced ethnic removal
Forced ethnic displacement
Forced ethnic population removal
Forced ethnic depopulation
Forced mass ethnic population transfer
Forced ethnic population movement
Forced ethnic migration
Forced ethnic resettlement
Forced mass ethnic deportation
Forced ethnic territorial expulsion
Forced ethnic eviction
State-decreed/directed ethnic displacement
State-ordered ethnic exile/ban
State-coerced ethnic minority transfers
Military-imposed ethnic population removal

This list is not exhaustive, but only suggests some more suitable alternatives.¹⁹ Even authors who use the term *ethnic cleansing* have sometimes shown a willingness to use other terms. For example, in addition to using the term *ethnic cleansing* in the sub-title of his major book *The Young Turks' Crime Against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*, Taner Akcam (2012) employs the following variety of terms and phrases in the actual detailed text of the book: *population transfer*, *population emptying*, *forced migrations*, *forced emptying out*, *forcible resettlement*, *forcible removal*, *expulsions* and *forcible expulsion*. With the exception of the term *ethnic cleansing*, the wordings selected by Akcam are sound and effective.

At the very outset of framing of the title *Legal and Political Aspects of the De-Armenization of Nagorno-Karabakh: Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide, Forced Displacement or Voluntary Exodus?* in the International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies article, Tatikyan (2023, p. 62) thoughtfully poses the overarching question of which term is best to use and lists some of the options: *de-Armenization*, *ethnic cleansing*, *genocide*, *forced displacement* or *voluntary exodus*. In the main, she seems to opt for the term *ethnic cleansing*, both in the article and many of her other published writings.

Amongst other authors who use the term *ethnic cleansing*, but also employ alternate words, Pegorier (2013, p. 69) on one sample page of her book *Ethnic Cleansing* used the words: *displace, expulsion, deportation and forced departure*. Similarly, alternate phrases cited by Gzoyan and her colleagues (2024, p. 76) on one sample page of their article in the International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies include: *deportation, forcible transfer, displacement, involuntary and illegal uprooting and transfer of people*. Naimark (2001, p. 3) similarly suggests *forced deportation and population transfer*, as does Preece (1998, pp. 819, 834).

Mostly importantly, none of these suggested alternate terms or phrases incorporate the perpetrators' pejorative vision of *cleansing of an undesirable entity*. It is important in journalistic and scholarly commentary and analysis not to reiterate hurtful and painful language. Unintentional harm is still harm. Research and writing on genocide need to be rigorous, but also sensitive to the impact on victims, both first and later generations.

The United Nations' limited usage of the term *ethnic cleansing* in the 1990s has been accentuated and compounded by its continued contemporary usage and even formal reference to the term, particularly in the R2P documentation. A major institution such as the UN added substantial organizational weight and seeming legitimacy to the term. However, previous analytical/historical and ethical mistakes, even by leading international institutions, are not ones that scholars and journalists need to repeat now or in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

As a genocide scholar and grandson of a genocide orphan, I join other scholars who have suggested rejecting the continued use of the perpetrator-originated term *ethnic cleansing*. We can do better in our analysis and should. We can perhaps start in our contemporary commentating on the ongoing plight of the Armenians from Karabakh and the Palestinians in Gaza. Regrettably, a number of international organizations and scholars have already used the problematic term *ethnic cleansing* for these profoundly troubling, tragic cases. Examples of important and otherwise thoughtful publications using the term *ethnic cleansing* include distinguished authors such as Ilan Pappé (2006) *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* with regard to Gaza. On the forced exodus of the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh, notable examples of prominent authorship are Freedom House's Report (2024) *Why Are There No Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?*, Edita Gzoyan's and her AGMI colleagues' article in the International Journal of Armenian Studies (2023) and former diplomat Sossi Tatikyan's articles in EVN Report (2024a) and International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies (2024b).²⁰

While the historical facts and details are sound in these publications, other alternate terms than *ethnic cleansing* should be employed, at the very least. Ultimately, it may be that the historic international trilogy of the pre-eminent legal terms -- *war crimes*, *crimes against humanity* and *genocide* -- may prove the more widespread, effective and lasting analytical tools to employ in the quest for justice in this troubled and all too-imperfect world.²¹ Nevertheless, we continue to search for the words to “describe the indescribable”.

Notes

1. This is an abbreviated list drawn from my earlier more comprehensive content analysis of the 1915 issues of the *New York Times* newspaper. See Whitehorn (2018b) *Introduction* in Vahan Ohanian and Ara Ketibian (eds.), *The Armenian Genocide: Prelude and Aftermath as Reported in the US Press: The New York Times (1890-1922)*. Major excerpts can also be found in *Describing the Indescribable* in Whitehorn, *The Armenian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide* (2015b) and Whitehorn, *Remembering and Understanding Genocide Through the Arts: A Case Study of the Armenian Genocide* in *Armenian Folia Anglistika*, 20/2, 30, 2024.

2. Some of the introductory text draws upon my two previous articles Whitehorn (2008) *A Brief Global History of Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity and Human Rights* in *Armenian Weekly*, April 24, 2018 and Whitehorn (2025) *Revisiting Genocide: A Brief Review Article*, in *Keghart*, February 17, 2025.

3. Comparing the different editions of Jones' highly influential *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, we can see that a chapter in the first edition (2007) was only titled *The Armenian Genocide*, whereas the third edition (2017) had the more inclusive title of *The Ottoman Destruction of Christian Minorities*.

4. As Jones (2017) notes, a number of scholars have offered alternate definitions of *genocide*. The most widely cited and legally binding one is the UN definition which will be the focus of this article. Amongst the authors he lists are: Vahakn Dadrian, Irving Horowitz, Leo Kuper, Yehuda Bauer, Helen Fein, Barbara Harff/Tedd Gurr, Frank Chalk/Kurt Jonassohn, Israel Charny, Manus Midlarsky, Jacques Semelin, Martin Shaw, Daniel Feierstein, and Donald Bloxham (Jones, 2017, pp. 23-27). Powell (2011, pp. 312-319) also offers a list of different definitions by various authors.

5. Many accounts of the Armenian Genocide note that the military age men were the first victims to be killed, but subsequently during the deadly caravans into the desert, many women perished in the later stages (Holslag, 2015, p. 97).

6. United Nations, *Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes*. <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition>, Accessed June 27, 2025.

7. Tatikyan (2024a) makes an intriguing argument for the use of the term ethnic cleansing, so as not to overuse the word *genocide*.

8. United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780* (1992).

9. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/rome-statute-international-criminal-court>. Accessed August 20, 2025. Worthy of note, acts of deportation or forcible transfer of population were listed under Crimes Against Humanity.

10. See *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, July 17, 1998.

11. In fact, paragraphs 138 and 139 list *genocide*, *war crimes*, *ethnic cleansings* and *crimes against humanity* five times. Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, *ethnic cleansing* was listed ahead of crimes against humanity on each occasion. See United Nations, *Responsibility to Protect Populations from Genocide, War Crimes, Ethnic Cleansing, and Crimes Against Humanity* in Jens Meierhenrich (ed.), *Genocide: A Reader* (2014, pp. 485-6), also found at United Nations, *About the Responsibility to Protect*. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/responsibility-protect/about>, Accessed August 20, 2025.

12. United Nations, *Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes*. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition>, Accessed June 27, 2025.

13. Yegishe Kirakosyan Represents Armenia in Case Against Azerbaijan at ICJ in Armenian Mirror Spectator, April 18, 2024.

14. In this fashion, such malevolent deeds approximate one of Lemkin's original, interrelated terms from the 1930s: *vandalism*.

15. Lieberman (2013, p. 56) describes both as forms of “violent social engineering”.

16. The parallels to earlier centuries of forced “religious expulsions” can be noted. Of course, religion and ethnicity can and often do overlap.

17. Feierstein (2023, p 28) offers a similar conclusion in the following passage: “Used, de facto, as euphemism by the United Nations, the concept of ethnic cleansing would seem to have nothing to add to the much more precise ones like genocide, deportation, or forced migration”.

18. By contrast, Pegorier (2013, p. 146) advocates *ethnic cleansing* as a term for further continuation and development as an independent and international crimes.

19. Edita Gzoyan and here AGMI colleagues (2024), as well as Sossi Tatikyan (2024b), at times, use the term *de-Armenization* to denote ethnic

cleansing. This is a case-specific terminology which is not readily comparable to other case studies, but it at least avoids the problematic word *cleansing*.

20. Tatikyan observes that “Armenian officials, including the diplomatic corps, most of Armenian civil society, as well as many non-Armenians in international political, policy and academic circles, refer to the displacement of Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and the preceding events as *ethnic cleansing* (2024a). She even quotes Yeghishe Kirakosyan, prominent YSU professor and Armenia’s former representative for international legal cases as stating: “Azerbaijan has completed ethnic cleansing of the region and is now systematically erasing all traces of ethnic Armenian presence”.

21. On this point, I echo Shaw’s assertion that genocide is and should be employed as an overarching concept. His actual phrasing is “master-concept” (2007, p. 78; 2015, p. 99).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

References

- Akcam, T. (2012). *The Young Turks’ crime against humanity: The Armenian Genocide and ethnic cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*. Princeton University Press.
- Ball, H. (1999). *Prosecuting war crimes and Genocide: The twentieth century experience*. University Press of Kansas.
- Bartrop, P. (2015). *Genocide: The Basics*. Routledge.
- Bassiouni, M. C. (2014). *Crimes against humanity: Historical evolution and contemporary application*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bell-Fialkoff, A. (1996). *Ethnic cleansing*. St. Martin’s Griffin.
- Bell-Fialkoff, A. (2009). A typology of cleansing. In S. Totten & P. Bartrop (Eds.), *The Genocide studies reader*. Routledge.
- Bloxham, D. & Moses, D. (eds.) (2013). *The Oxford handbook of Genocide studies*. Oxford University Press.
- Blum, R., Stanton, G., Sagi, S. & Richter, E. (2007). ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ bleaches the atrocities of genocide. *European Journal of Public Health*, 18(2), 204-208.
- Bryant, M. (2021). *A world history of war crimes: From antiquity to the present*. Bloomsbury.
- Crowe, D. (2014). *War crimes, genocide, and justice: A global history*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- De Zayas, A. M. (1994). *A terrible revenge: The ethnic cleansing of the East Germans, 1944-1950*. St. Martin's Press.
- Feierstein, D. (2023). The meanings of concepts: Some reflections on the difficulties in analyzing state crimes. *HARM (Hostility, Anger, Repression and Malice)*, 1, 23-30.
- Fein, H. (Ed.). (1992). *Genocide watch*. Yale University Press.
- Freedom House (2004). *Why are there no Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh?* Freedom House.
- Geib, R., & Asli, O. (2021). *Ethnic cleansing*. Oxford Public International Law. URL: <http://www.oupilaw.com/>
- Gutman, R. (1993). *A witness to Genocide: The 1993 Pulitzer prize-winning dispatches on 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Bosnia*. Macmillan.
- Gutman, R., Rieff, D., & Dworkin, A. (2007). *Crimes of war: What the public should know*. New York, London: W. W. Norton.
- Gzoyan, E., Chkhmakhchyan, S., & Meyroyan, E. (2023.) Ethnic cleansing in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Issues of definition and criminal responsibility. *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies*, 8(2), 56-85.
- Harff, B. (1992). Recognizing genocides and politicides. In H. Fein (Ed.), *Genocide watch* (pp. 27-41). Yale University Press.
- Harff, B. (2009). Recognizing genocides and politicides. In S. Totten & P. Bartrop (Eds.), *The Genocide studies reader* (pp. 71-77) Routledge.
- Harff, B., & Gurr, T. (2004). *Ethnic conflict in world politics*. Westview.
- Harff, B., & Gurr, T. (2014). Politicide. In J. Meierhenrich. (Ed.), *Genocide studies reader*. (pp. 75-76) Routledge.
- Hinton, A. (2005). *Why did they kill? Cambodia in the shadow of genocide*. University of California Press.
- Holslag, A. (2015). Exposed bodies: A conceptual approach to sexual Vvence during the Armenian Genocide. In A. Randall (Ed.). *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century* (pp. 87-106). Bloomsbury.
- Jones, A. (2007). *Genocide: A comprehensive introduction*. Routledge.
- Jones, A. (2008). *Crimes against humanity: A beginner's guide*. Oneworld.
- Jones, A. (2017). *Genocide: A comprehensive introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Kaufman, S. (2001). *Modern hatreds: The symbolic Politics of ethnic war*. Cornell University Press.
- Kiernan, B. (2007). *Blood and soil: A world history of Genocide and extermination from Sparta to Darfur*. Yale University Press.
- Lemkin, R. (2008). *Axis rule in occupied Europe: Laws of occupation, analysis of government, proposals for redress*. Lawbook Exchange.
- Lemkin, R. (2012). *Lemkin on Genocide*. Lanham: Lexington.

- Lieberman, B. (2006). *Terrible fate: Ethnic cleansing in the making of modern Europe*. Ivan R. Dee.
- Lieberman, B. (2013). 'Ethnic Cleansing' versus Genocide. In D. Bloxham, & D. Moses (Eds.). *The Oxford handbook of Genocide studies* (pp. 42-60). Oxford University Press.
- Mann, M. (2005). *The dark side of democracy: Explaining ethnic cleansing*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, M. (2009). Explaining ethnic cleansing. In S. Totten, & P. Bartrop (Eds.). *The Genocide studies reader* (pp. 63-71) Routledge
- May, L. (2025). *Ethnic cleansing: A social and legal examination*. Routledge.
- Meierhenrich, J. (ed.) (2014). *Genocide: A reader*. Oxford University Press.
- Naimark, N. (2001). *Fires of hatred: Ethnic cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Harvard University Press.
- Pappe, I. (2006). *The Ethnic cleansing of Palestine*. Oneworld Publications.
- Pegorier, C. (2013). *Ethnic cleansing: A legal qualification*. Routledge.
- Petrovic, D. (1994). Ethnic cleansing – An attempt at methodology. *European Journal of International Law*, 5/3.
- Powell, C. (2011). *Barbaric civilization: A critical sociology of Genocide*. McGill Queens.
- Preece, J. J. (1998). Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of nation-state creation: Changing state practices and evolving legal norms. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 20, 817-842.
- Rummell, R. J. (1992). *Democide: Nazi Genocide and mass murder*. Transaction.
- Rummell, R. J. (1997). *Death by government*. Transaction.
- Rummell, R. J. (2014). Democide. In J. Meierhenrich. (Ed.) *Genocide studies reader*.
- Schabas, W. (2005). 'Ethnic cleansing' and Genocide: Similarities and distinctions. *European Yearbook of Minority Issues*, 3, 109-128.
- Shaw, M. (2003). *War & genocide: Organized mass killing in modern society*. Polity.
- Shaw, M. (2007). *What is Genocide?* Cambridge: Polity.
- Shaw, M. (2013). *Genocide and international relations: Changing patterns in the transitions of the late modern world*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shaw, M. (2015). *What is Genocide?* Polity.
- Smith, K. (2010). *Genocide and the Europeans*. Cambridge University Press.
- Suny, R. (2025). That troublesome word, Genocide: What does the Armenian case tell us. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1-21.

- Tatikyan, S. (2022a). International community must prevent Azerbaijan's creeping ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2022b). Weaponizing blockade with the intent to ethnically cleanse. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2023c). 'Integration' of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians: A tool for subjugation and ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan, Part I. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2023d). Deliberate starvation of Nagorno-Karabakh: A tool for subjugation and ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan, Part II. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2023e). Can the international community reverse the ethnic cleansing of Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh? Part I. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2023f). Can the international community reverse the Ethnic cleansing of Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh? Part II. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2024a). Ethnic cleansing, Genocide or displacement? The de-Armenization of Nagorno-Karabakh and why the ICJ case matters now. *EVN Report*.
- Tatikyan, S. (2024b). Legal and political aspects of the de-Armenization of Nagorno-Karabakh: Ethnic cleansing, Genocide, forced displacement or voluntary exodus? *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies*, 9(1), 62-95.
- Tatikyan, S. (2025). Armenia and Azerbaijan at odds over peace process. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 22/25, 1-5.
- Totten, S., & Bartrop. Pl. (Eds.) (2009). *The Genocide studies reader*. New York: Routledge.
- United Nations, Security Council. (1992). Final report of the commission of experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780.
- United Nations. (2014). Responsibility to protect populations from Genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. In J. Meierhenrich (Ed.). *Genocide: A reader* (pp. 485-486).
- [United Nations. \(2025\). Definitions of Genocide and related crimes.](#)
- [United Nations office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights \(2025\). Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.](#)
- Warren, M. A. (2014). Gendercide. In J. Meierhenrich (Ed.). *Genocide: A Reader*.
- Whitehorn, A. (Ed.). (2015a). Describing the indescribable. The Armenian Genocide: *The Essential Reference Guide*. ABC-CLIO.
- Whitehorn, A. (Ed.) (2015b). *The Armenian Genocide: The essential reference guide*. ABC-CLIO.
- Whitehorn, A. (2018a). A brief global history of Genocide, crimes against humanity and human rights. *Armenian Weekly*. Reprinted in *eVeritas*, June 11, 2018; *Toronto Hye*, July 2018.

Whitehorn, A. (2018b). Introduction. In V. Ohanian and A. Ketibian (Eds.), *The Armenian Genocide: Prelude and aftermath as reported in the US press: The New York Times (1890-1922)* (pp. V-VIII) Mekhitarist Publication.

Whitehorn, A. (2024). Remembering and understanding Genocide through the arts: A case study of the Armenian Genocide. *Armenian Folia Anglistika*, 20 (2 (30), 85-109.

[Whitehorn, A. \(2025, February 19\). Revisiting Genocide: A brief review article. Keghart.](#)

**ՋԱՆԳՎԱԾԱՅԻՆ ՎԱՅՐԱԳՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻՆ ՎԵՐԱԲԵՐՈՂ
ՀԱՍԿԱՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ԱՌԱՋԱՑՈՒՄԸ. ՑԵՂԱՍՊԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ,
ՄԱՐԴՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԴԵՄ ՀԱՆՑԱԳՈՐԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ, ՊԱՏԵՐԱԶՄԱԿԱՆ
ՀԱՆՑԱԳՈՐԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐ ԵՎ ԷԹՆԻԿ ԶՏՈՒՄ**

Ալան Ուայթհորն

Հոդվածում ներկայացվում են Օսմանյան կայսրությունում էթնիկ հայերի զանգվածային տեղահանությունների և սպանությունների մասին 1915 թ. *Նյու Յորք Թայմզ* պարբերականի լրագրողական նյութերում օգտագործված հիմնաբառեր և արտահայտություններ: Ուսումնասիրվում են զանգվածային վայրագություններին առնչվող ակադեմիական և իրավական մի շարք հիմնարար հասկացություններ, որոնցից առավել նշանակալի են *պատերազմական հանցագործություններ*, *մարդկության դեմ հանցագործություններ*, *ցեղասպանություն* և *էթնիկ զտում* միավորները: Առաջարկվել են նաև այլ տերմիններ՝ *դեմոցիդ*, *պոլիցիդ*, *էթնոցիդ*, *արբիցիդ*, *գենդերցիդ* և *օմնիցիդ*: *Էթնիկ զտում* և *ցեղասպանություն* տերմինների համեմատական իմաստային վերլուծությունից բացի, քննարկվում են *էթնիկ զտում* տերմինի կիրառության խնդրահարույց կողմերը: Զանգվածային հանցագործությունները շարունակում են մնալ համաշխարհային լուրջ մարտահրավեր, և *էթնիկ զտում* հասկացությունն արդեն կիրառվում է ներկայիս տարբեր համատեքստերում, ինչպիսիք են Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի և Գազայի իրադարձությունները: Առաջարկվում է թե՛ բարոյական և թե՛ վերլուծական առումով նշված իրադրություններում առավել նպատակահարմար համարել այլ տերմինների կիրառությունը, ինչպես օրինակ *պատերազմական հանցագործություններ*, *մարդկության դեմ հանցագործություններ* և *ցեղասպանություն*:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *էթնիկ զտում*, *ցեղասպանություն*, *մարդկության դեմ հանցագործություններ*, *պատերազմական հանցագործություններ*, *Հայոց ցեղասպանություն*, *Լեռնային Ղարաբաղ*: