

The Hidden Holocaust--Our Civilizational Crisis Part 1: The Holocaust in History

by Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed
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"...for five hundred years, hundreds of millions of indigenous peoples were slaughtered, decimated, deported, enslaved, starved, exterminated, impoverished, and forcibly assimilated into an emerging world system dominated by Western Europe. This was how the global values and politico-economic structures of our civilization came into being. Globalization... the bloody legacy of a 500-year killing machine."



1. "Hidden Holocaust"

As we are all aware, the term "Holocaust" is traditionally used to refer to the "systematic, bureaucratic state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime", during the Second World War. The word "Holocaust" is a Greek word, which means "sacrifice by fire." It conveys an event, the scale and horror of which, transformed the course of world history. Moreover, it's often seen as a crime against humanity that is unparalleled and unique.

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This, we cannot dispute. The Nazi Holocaust was, indeed, a uniquely horrific genocide, whose enormity and systematic character is barely imaginable, designed to exterminate wholly the Jewish people, physically, socially, culturally, from the face of the Earth.

But what then, do we mean by a "hidden holocaust"? This term conveys the reality of a campaign of global homicide, murder, whose scale and enormity is such that one feels that the word "holocaust" does, certainly loosely speaking, apply. It is "hidden", in the sense that, although experienced by millions of people around the world both historically and today, it remains invisible, officially unacknowledged.

This "hidden holocaust" [1], is escalating, accelerating, intensifying; according to all expert projections from the social and physical sciences, it may culminate in the extinction of the human species, unless we take immediate drastic action, now.

2. "Civilizational Crisis"

We often hear the word “civilization”. It’s often been used to explain the dynamics of the “War on Terror”, as a clash between two civilizations, the advanced, developed and progressive civilization of the West, and the backward, reactionary civilization of Islam.

As is well known, the man who first formulated this idea as an academic theory of international relations was the Harvard professor and US government adviser, Samuel Huntington.

In early 2007, then Prime Minister Tony Blair described the War on Terror as “a clash not between civilizations”, but rather “about civilization.” The War on Terror is, he proclaimed, a continuation of “the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace the modern world and those who reject its existence.” [[“A Battle for Global Values”](#)], *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2007)

But the “hidden holocaust” is not an aberration from our advanced civilization that represents the peak of human development, requiring only some reforms. Rather, the “hidden holocaust” is integral to the very structure, values and activities of our civilization. It is part and parcel of the “global values” of the international political and economic order that underpins industrial civilization. And unless we attempt to transform the nature of our civilization, we will all perish in a holocaust of our own making.

3. The Genocidal Conception of Civilization

The hidden holocaust associated with our modern civilization, began at the beginning of modern civilization itself.

The origins of modern civilization can be found partly in the pivotal voyages for European colonial expansion and trade from the 15th century to the 19th centuries. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, English and other explorers ventured out from their home countries in search of new wealth and new land in all corners of the globe. They went to the continents of America, Africa and Asia and set up colonies and trading outposts. Colonists and settlers had all sorts of intentions. Some of them had capital, and were simply looking for new investment opportunities. Others were trying to escape lives of hardship at home to make new lives for themselves with a fresh start by settling in the colonies. Others wanted to deliver the message of Christianity to native populations. Almost all of them saw themselves as part of the inevitable historical momentum of progress, bringing the fruits of European civilization to backward peoples.

Whatever the intentions, European expansion involved massive, systematic violence. Violence of all kinds. Wholesale massacres, forced labour camps, disease, malnutrition due to the imposed conditions of economic deprivation, mass suicides due to depression and cultural alienation. As Irving Louis Horowitz argues, for example, “the conduct of classic colonialism was invariably linked with genocide.” [*Genocide: State Power and Mass Murder*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1976), p. 19-20.] Below we review some salient examples.

4. American Holocaust

Starting from 1492, when Christopher Columbus is said to have discovered the Americas, the deadly conquest commenced. The complex civilizations of native Americans, over the next few centuries, were devastated. British historian Mark Cocker has reviewed reliable estimates of the death toll:

“[E]ven million indigenous Americans lost their lives in the eighty years following the Spanish invasion of Mexico. In the Andean Empire of the Incas the figure was more than eight million. In Brazil, the Portuguese conquest saw Indian numbers dwindle from a pre-Columbian total of almost 2,500,000 to just 225,000. And to the north of Mexico... Native Americans declined from an original population of more than 800,000 by the end of the nineteenth century. For the whole of the Americas some historians have put the total losses as high as one

hundred million.” [Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe’s Conquest of Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), p. 5]

Although the majority of these deaths occurred due to the impact of European diseases, disease alone does not explain the variations of death toll rates in different parts of the Americas. The key factors in which diseases operated were ultimately the kinds of repressive colonial social formations imposed on natives by European invaders, consisting of different matrices of forced labour regimes in mines and plantations, mass enslavement for personal domestic use of colonists, religious and cultural dislocation, and so on.

As David Stannard concludes in his extensive study of the genocide, which he describes as an “American Holocaust”, these factors accelerated and intensified the mere impact of disease. He further describes the colonists’ strategic thinking:

“At the dawn of the fifteenth century, Spanish conquistadors and priests presented the Indians they encountered with a choice: either give up your religion and culture and land and independence, swearing allegiance ‘as vassals’ to the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown, or suffer ‘all the mischief and damage’ that the European invaders choose to inflict upon you.” [David Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 255]

This binary choice, put to the Native Americans five centuries ago, bears an unnerving resemblance to the rhetoric underpinning the “War on Terror” today, “you are either with us or against us.”

5. African Holocaust

In Africa, the slave trade contributed substantially to the protracted deaths of vast numbers of people. While slave structures had already existed locally, it certainly did not exist on the vast scale it adopted in the course of European interventions. English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Danes, and Portuguese slave-traders started out by raiding villages off the West African coast. The transatlantic slave trade, lasting from the 1450s to the 1860s, consisted of “a series of exchanges of captives reaching from the interior of sub-Saharan Africa to final purchasers in the Americas.” An observer at the time, British journalist Edward Morel wrote: “For a hundred years slaves in Barbados were mutilated, tortured, gibbeted alive and left to starve to death, burnt alive, flung into coppers of boiling sugar, whipped to death.” [*The Black Man’s Burden: The White Man in Africa from the Fifteenth Century to World War I* (New York: Modern Reader, 1969)]

From the 16th to 19th centuries, the total death toll among African slaves being in transshipment to America alone was as high as 2 million. Although the many millions who died “in capture and in transit to the Orient or Middle East” is unknown, among the slaves “kept in Africa some 4,000,000 may have died.” Overall, in five centuries between nearly 17,000,000 - and by some calculations perhaps over 65,000,000 - Africans were killed in the transatlantic slave trade. [R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994)].

University of Essex sociologist Robin Blackburn has demonstrated convincingly the centrality of capitalism to the growth of new world slavery, arguing that the profits of slavery accumulated in the “triangular trade” between Europe, Africa and America contributed fundamentally to Britain’s industrialization. For instance, the profits from triangular trade for 1770 would have provided from 20.9 to 55 per cent of Britain’s gross fixed capital formation. [Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso), p. 572.] The question of capital formation, however, is only part of the story. The trans-atlantic slave trade was an indispensable motor in an emerging capitalist world system under the mantle of the British empire. The mechanization of cotton textiles, originally produced in American plantations manned by African slaves, was

overwhelmingly the driving force in British industrialization. [CK Harley and NFR Crafts, "Cotton Textiles and Industrial Output Growth", *Warwick Economics Research Paper Series* (1994, no. 420)]

6. Indian Holocaust

In his landmark study, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), historian Mike Davis shows how British imperial policy systematically converted droughts in South Asia and South Africa into foreseeable but preventable deadly famines.

In India, between 5.5 and 12 million people died in an artificially-induced famine, although millions of tonnes of grains were in commercial circulation. Rice and wheat production had been above average for the previous three years, but most of the surplus had been exported to England. "Londoners were in effect eating India's bread." Under "free market" rules, between 1877 and 1878, grain merchants exported a record 6.4 million hundredweight of wheat to Europe while millions of Indian poor starved to death.

Crucially, Davis argues that these people died "not *outside* the modern world system, but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of liberal capitalism; many were murdered by the application of utilitarian free trade principles."

7. Division of the World

This violence was, therefore, not merely accidental to the European imperial project. It was integral, systematic, as a solution to the problem of native resistance.

Between about 1870 and 1914, European imperial policies received a new lease of life, resulting in the intense scramble for control over eastern Asian and African territories. Almost the entire world was divided up under the formal or informal political rule of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, the USA, and Japan. Between themselves, in Africa for instance they acquired 30 new colonies and 110 million subjects. African resistance was brutally crushed. Consider, for example, the 1904 uprising of the Hereros, a tribe in southwest Africa, against German occupation. The German response was to drive all 24,000 of them into the desert to starve to death; others who surrendered were worked to death in forced labour camps. [Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent, 1876-1914* (London: Random House, 1991).] During this period, we can already see drastic inequalities in the international system. By 1880, the *per capita* income in the developed countries was approximately double that of the 'Third World'. By 1913, it was three times higher, and by 1950, five times higher. Similarly, the *per capita* share of GNP in the industrialized countries of the developed core was in 1830 already twice that of the Third World, becoming seven times as high by 1913. [E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (London: Abacus, 1987), p. 15]

In summary, for five hundred years, hundreds of millions of indigenous peoples were slaughtered, decimated, deported, enslaved, starved, exterminated, impoverished, and forcibly assimilated into an emerging world system dominated by Western Europe. *This* was how the global values and politico-economic structures of our civilization came into being. Globalization... the bloody legacy of a 500-year killing machine.

Note:

[1]. *The Hidden Holocaust--Our Civilizational Crisis Part 2: Exporting Democracy*

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