

FIRES OF HATRED

**ETHNIC CLEANSING
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE**

NORMAN M. NAIMARK



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To Anna and Sarah

**See how efficient it still is
how it keeps itself in shape—
our century's hatred.**

From "Hatred" by Wislawa Szymborska



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Introduction

The history of Europe in the twentieth century ended badly. In the southeastern quadrant of the continent, former Yugoslavia has been overwhelmed by war, ethnic cleansing, and civil strife. The worst fighting in Europe since World War II has displaced millions of people and produced hundreds of thousands of casualties. Where Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Kosovar Albanians lived in relative peace and prosperity, there is now hatred, devastation, and fearsome poverty. The tenuous multinational culture of Yugoslavia has been obliterated. Anger and resentment divide ethnic communities and imperil attempts by NATO and the European Union to rebuild multinational institutions and societies. Civil and ethnic strife threaten Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania. As a result, the stability of the European continent remains a source of great concern to the world community.

In Eastern Europe as a whole, the great hopes of 1989 have not materialized, in part because the optimism was unwarranted in the first place and in part because the transition from communism to democracy and from centrally run economies to market-style capitalism has been fraught with structural impediments, some anticipated, some not. For forty-five years, Germans longed for an end to the division of their country, but unification proved much more problematic than expected. A few success stories can be found in former communist Europe—Poland most notably—but the much longer line of failures, not the least of which is Russia itself, causes serious uneasiness about the new century. Yet nowhere has the descent into a dark cloud of pessimism been as steep as in former Yugoslavia. No country in formerly communist

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Eastern Europe has fallen apart with such violence and wanton destruction.

How could it happen that the hopes and dreams associated with the fall of communism in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were shattered by nearly a decade of war, brutality, and ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia? Once again, war on the European continent had disgorged tens of thousands of haggard refugees, telling horrific stories of rape, torture, and death. Once again, innocent civilians were executed by firing squads and buried in mass graves. Once again, villages were set aflame, animals killed, and houses of worship blown up. Once again, whole ethnic populations were crowded into railway cars and deported from their homelands. And once again, the “world community” looked on in horror, seemingly incapable of preventing or ending these acts of forced deportation and mass murder. Was the twentieth century’s sordid history of genocide simply repeating itself in this last decade? Or was there something new in these wars of “ethnic cleansing” about which the media spoke and wrote so often?

To try to answer these and related questions, I have chosen cases from twentieth-century European history that help illuminate the process of ethnic cleansing, its causes and effects. Comparative history is Clio’s own modest form of social science, allowing the observer to ask what is structurally the same and what is different in these cases and to think about what has changed and what has remained consistent over time. Most importantly, comparison provides the potential for better understanding the causes of ethnic cleansing in our era. Bound up in the comparative method of historical analysis are a number of conceptual problems, however—problems that are compounded by the geographical and chronological limitations I have placed on this work. To explore these limitations, the following discussion focuses on the three components of the book’s title itself: ethnic cleansing, twentieth century, and Europe.

Ethnic Cleansing

This term exploded into our consciousness in May 1992 during the first stage of the war in Bosnia.¹ At that time it referred to Serb attacks on Bosnian Muslims aimed at driving the Muslims from their home territories. But the term had been initially devised by Serbs themselves to describe what was happening to their own people in neighboring Kosovo,

at the hands of Kosovar Albanians in the early 1980s.² “Ethnic cleansing” quickly became part of the international lexicon of crimes associated with Serb aggression in former Yugoslavia, though it was later used to describe similar attacks by Croats on Muslims, Serbs on Croats, and, most recently, Serbs on Kosovar Albanians. What all of these cases had in common was the intent of driving victims from territory claimed by the perpetrators. Journalists, NATO spokesmen, European jurists, and American politicians invoked the concept with amazing consistency.³ Yet almost from the beginning, some commentators criticized the term as being at best imprecise and at worst a euphemism for genocide. More academic voices objected to use of a term that derived from contemporary journalism rather than from scholarly or juridical sources.⁴

In this book I will argue that “ethnic cleansing” is a useful and viable term for understanding not just the war in former Yugoslavia but other similar cataclysmic events in the course of the twentieth century. New concepts are consistently being invented to describe, classify, and arrange events of the past in order to understand them in the present. In this sense, “ethnic cleansing,” which was used with increasing frequency after May 1992, is little different from the term “genocide,” which derived its meaning from Raphael Lemkin’s writings during World War II to describe what was happening to the victims of Nazism. Moreover, ethnic cleansing is presently taking on a juridical meaning through the war crimes courts in the Hague, just as genocide was defined by Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of December 9, 1948.⁵

A new term was needed because ethnic cleansing and genocide are two different activities, and the differences between them are important. As in the case of determining first-degree murder, intentionality is the critical distinction. Genocide is the intentional killing off of part or all of an ethnic, religious, or national group; the murder of a people or peoples (in German, *Völkermord*) is the objective. The intention of ethnic cleansing is to remove a people and often all traces of them from a concrete territory. The goal, in other words, is to get rid of the “alien” nationality, ethnic, or religious group and to seize control of the territory they had formerly inhabited. At one extreme of its spectrum, ethnic cleansing is closer to forced deportation or what has been called “population transfer”; the idea is to get people to move, and the means are meant to be legal and semi-legal. At the other extreme, however, ethnic cleansing and genocide are distinguishable only by the ultimate intent. Here, both literally and figuratively, ethnic cleansing bleeds into

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genocide, as mass murder is committed in order to rid the land of a people.

Further complicating the distinctions between ethnic cleansing and genocide is the fact that forced deportation seldom takes place without violence, often murderous violence. People do not leave their homes on their own. They hold on to their land and their culture, which are interconnected. They resist deportation orders; they cling to their domiciles and their possessions; they find every possible way to avoid abandoning the place where their families have roots and their ancestors are buried. The result is that forced deportation often becomes genocidal, as people are violently ripped from their native towns and villages and killed when they try to stay.

Even when forced deportation is not genocidal in its intent, it is often genocidal in its effects. Millions of people in this century have been marched in hungry columns across huge expanses of land and crowded into freight cars, buses, or holds of ships for journeys in which thousands, even tens of thousands, become sick, starve, and die. Even those refugees who survive forced deportation and transportation out of their homelands must deal with hunger, disease, and the sheer sorrow of living in refugee camps, begging for food, and seeking shelter in new lands out of reach of their persecutors. Many give up on life and commit suicide.

In addition to making a useful distinction from genocide, the term “ethnic cleansing” is also valuable because of its associated meanings. In its Slavic forms *chishchenie* in Russian and *ciscenja* in Serbo-Croatian, cleansing often refers to political elimination or the purging of enemies. The purges in the Soviet Union, for example, were called *chistki*. The German word for cleansing, *Säuberung*, has the same kind of meaning, especially in the history of communism, but is also tied to the development of racial “science” in Germany at the turn of the century.⁶ As it came to maturity at the beginning of the twentieth century, eugenics itself was about racial cleansing, *Säuberung*, though its implications were not necessarily genocidal.⁷ Although the phrase ethnic cleansing itself was not used in the German or Slavic context, as far as I know, at the beginning of the century,⁸ German racial thinking did create the term *völkische Flurbereinigung*, which uses a metaphor from agriculture to indicate the cleansing, in this case of alien ethnic elements from the soil. Himmler, for example, favored this concept in describing the Aryanization of German territory.⁹ In both Slavic and German usages, “cleansing” has a dual meaning; one purges the native community of

foreign bodies, and one purges one's own people of alien elements. This latter association, which emphasizes self-purging, accounts in some measure for the fearsome up-close killing and barbarous mutilation of neighbors and acquaintances that characterizes a number of cases of ethnic cleansing.

"Ethnic" refers to what we call today an ethnic group, deriving from the Greek "ethnos" or nation. Some uses of the term tend to be pejorative, meaning that the group involved is something less than a nation or nationality. No such meaning is intended here. At the same time, "ethnic group" and "ethnicity" are extremely hard to define, and often their contours are delineated by dominant groups that wish to create and characterize the "other." The borders of ethnicity are constantly shifting; who is included and excluded has little to do with "objective" categories, since any categories we might use—race, religion, skin color, and so on—are themselves socially constructed and reified by their repeated application.

The definition of ethnicity I find most compelling is that of Geoff Eley and Ronald Suny, who note: "Ethnicity arises in the interaction of groups. It exists in the boundaries constructed between them." Equally important, these constructions change over time and are mutable, depending on circumstances even within the same societies. Ethnicity, in other words, is specific to time, place, and culture, and even to the individuals shaping its meaning. "It is *in* history, the flow of past events, that the emergence and variation appear, and only *through* history can we understand them."¹⁰ This book makes a similar argument about ethnic cleansing: its definition can be understood only through the ebb and flow of its history in this century.

The Twentieth Century

From the beginning of recorded history, dominant nations have attacked and chased off their lands less powerful nations and groups they deemed subordinate and alien. Homer's *Iliad* is full of brutal and shocking examples of what one might call ethnic cleansing, as is the Bible. The first and still most important scholarly book on ethnic cleansing by the Boston sociologist Andrew Bell-Fialkoff begins its historical overview with the Assyrians and Babylonians.¹¹ From this point of view, events as widely dispersed in time and place as the destruction of Carthage (146 BC), the murder of the Albigenians (1209 and following), the expulsion of Jews from Spain (1492), the Spanish conquest of

the Incas and Aztecs (sixteenth century), the German massacres of the Herreros in southwest Africa (1904–1905), and the driving out of Indians from their North American homelands (nineteenth century) all belong to the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing. One problem with such a broad understanding of the concept, however, is that it encompasses too much chronological territory and too many variations on a similar theme. The realm of explanation is reduced to finding essential characteristics of humankind or tracing modern behavior to mythological origins and biblical tropes.¹² My understanding of ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century is that its occurrences are highly dependent on the particular characteristics of the state, society, and ideology during the period itself. Bell-Fialkoff calls the twentieth century the third “contemporary” phase of ethnic cleansing.¹³ I think of it as so distinct in critical ways from earlier events that it belongs to a separate historical category.

Ethnic cleansing as experienced in former Yugoslavia, from this perspective, is a profoundly modern experience, related to previous instances in the twentieth century but not a product of “ancient hatreds,” as so often suggested by politicians and journalists, who repeatedly cite Ivo Andric’s *The Bridge on the Drina* to prove that the Balkans are endlessly violent. That Andric’s Nobel-prize-winning work belongs very much to the struggles of World War II rather than to Ottoman Bosnia seldom seems to influence its use. From this perspective as well, the episodic pogroms of late nineteenth-century Russia, which cost remarkably few Jewish lives given their bad press in the West, constituted a very different kind of attack than Stalin’s reputed plans in 1952–53 to deport Russian Jews to Siberia. These plans, which still remain mostly unresearched because of inaccessible Russian archives, might well have resulted in a second Shoah. The Turkish attacks on Armenians in 1894–95 under Abdul Hamid II (the “Red”), though terrible in their scale and brutality, belong to a different social and historical phenomenon than the Armenian genocide of 1915, which constituted a concerted attack on the Armenian nation as a whole. The Nazi mass murder of the Jews was not simply an advanced stage in the development of German anti-Semitism from medieval times to the present, Daniel Goldhagen’s analysis notwithstanding.¹⁴ There were essential differences that tied the Holocaust to the century in which it actually occurred.

One of those differences was the increasing popularity of modern, racist nationalism as it developed throughout Europe and the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Post-positivist and

post-Darwinian, this new extreme form of nationalism represented an essentialist view of nations, a view which excluded the “other” and forswore assimilation. Not only were races exclusive to themselves, but the mixing of others into the national corpus would compromise the people’s native strength. German anti-Semitism took on a much more virulent character than it had assumed in previous times; even those Jews who had fully assimilated were threatened by anti-Semitic laws. Johann Gottfried von Herder’s nationalism of the early nineteenth-century romantic era encouraged all nations to develop their languages and culture on a more or less equal basis.¹⁵ The late nineteenth-century nationalism of Roman Dmowski in Poland or Francis Galton in England or Ernst Haeckel in Germany was fundamentally different. Ostensibly “scientific” in character, it measured the size of skulls, the shape of torsos, and the width of crania to understand race and diagnose its supposed defects. In the form of social Darwinism, the new race thinking postulated a world of nations engaged in a life-and-death struggle with one another for survival. The strong and determined—the fittest—would succeed, while lesser nations, like lesser species, would fall by the wayside. When such notions of integral nationalism became mixed with imperialism’s harsh suppression of native populations and their aspirations around the turn of the century, the genocidal potential among dominant nations increased exponentially. Mass murder on the basis of race was already part of European colonial history at the dawn of the new century; nationalism became the fuse that would ignite an explosion of genocide.¹⁶

Modern racist nationalism was necessary for ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century but not sufficient. The modern state was a critical part of the story as it organized itself by ethnic criteria, especially after the Balkan Wars and World War I. According to Zygmunt Baumann, this marriage of modern nationalism and the post-World War I state was fatal in particular for the Jews: “Racism is unthinkable without the advancement of modern science, modern technology and modern forms of state power. As such, racism is strictly a modern product. Modernity made racism possible. It also created a demand for racism; an era that declared achievement to be the only measure of human worth needed a theory of ascription to redeem boundary-drawing and boundary-guarding concerns under new conditions which made boundary-crossing easier than ever before. Racism, in short, is a thoroughly modern weapon used in the conduct of pre-modern, or at least not exclusively modern struggles.”¹⁷ Religious difference in this schema is not the salient issue

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in ethnic cleansing, as it often was for mass murder in centuries past. Even in Bosnia and Kosovo, religion serves as a marker of ethnic identity, not primarily as an indicator of faith.¹⁸

Ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century is a product of the most “advanced” stage in the development of the modern state. This is the era of what James Scott calls “high modernism,” a state ideology which seeks to transform society into the regularized and “healthy” organism that reflects the state leaderships’ own needs for order, transparency, and responsiveness.¹⁹ The modern state takes the census, organizes cadastral surveys, counts, measures, weighs, categorizes, and homogenizes. It reifies geographical boundaries and enforces zoning regulations. It also subjects its population to surveillance and manipulation.²⁰ It interferes in family life and establishes natalist policies. The media inculcate the values of the state’s governing elite. High modernism has little use for minority rights, language differences, asymmetrical development, and primitive agriculture or artisanry. But, as Baumann points out, it insists on identifying ethnic groups and concretizing difference and otherness with the goal of banishing it. Of course, the state and its bureaucracies engaged in these activities long before the twentieth century. The origins of the modern state go back certainly into the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and even beyond, to the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Discovery.²¹ But the twentieth-century state, prompted in good measure by its mobilization of society around World War I, has engaged in the control and ordering of its population to a level previously unimaginable.

The modern sovereign state’s inability to tolerate large minorities within its borders leads sometimes to programs of assimilation and sometimes to ethnic cleansing, depending on the political circumstances and the historical context. But the impetus to homogenize is inherent to the twentieth-century state. Of course, the twentieth-century state has also provided an unheard-of level of welfare, medical care, and educational benefits to the populations it manages. In some cases, it has also brought to fruition many of the Enlightenment principles of human dignity and the rights of citizens. In the most fortunate societies, these rights allow individuals and groups to use the power of the state and the political system to check some of their own worst instincts. In the least fortunate societies, tyrants use the state to enforce their own nightmarish racist fantasies.²²

The achievements of modern science and technology are unimaginable without the direct support of the state and its institutions. Yet these

achievements are a double-edged sword when nations turn to ethnic cleansing. The messages to deport are sent by telegraph, teletype, telephone, and now by computers and email. Members of a particular minority can be tracked down by passport lists, village censuses, and tax rolls, where their ethnicity and religion are dutifully recorded by state employees. The justification for deportation is published and broadcast by modern mass media: newspapers, radios, and newsreels originally, then by television, video, and internet. Propaganda—used both to bolster the image of the state and to demean that of the internal enemy—coevolved with the modern media. The infrastructure of the modern state supports not only mass communication but also the mass transportation that ethnic cleansing requires; people are forcibly moved by railways in particular, but also buses and trucks, often built by the state. Technology has also given us the Uzis and AK-47s that are the preferred weapon of today's ethnic cleansers; in both cases these are weapons initially mass-produced by state arms manufacturers. Even the machetes used by Hutus against Tutsis in Rwanda were imported from China, where they had been mass-produced in modern factories. The drive toward ethnic cleansing comes in part from the modern state's compulsion to complete policies and finish with problems but also in part from its technological abilities to do so.

As many scholars have pointed out (Omer Bartov and Elisabeth Domansky among them), World War I was a crucible for the development of the modern nation-state and its willingness and ability to engage in mass population policies.²³ Both in the Balkan Wars and in World War I, forced deportation and population exchange became a regular part of peacemaking as well as warmaking. In mobilizing their populations for total war, the European state bureaucracies inserted themselves increasingly into the individual lives of their citizens, whether in reproductive policy, housing issues, or work norms. But particularly in post-World War I Germany and the Soviet Union, state intervention in and regularization of citizens' lives reached a new height. Even in relatively backward countries, like the newly constituted Turkish Republic of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), the state assumed a modernizing posture, intervening in the lives of its citizens in areas that had earlier been left to the Ottoman religious communities, the *millets*. The Great War also introduced "industrial killing" into the consciousness and reality of the European state system. Killing was routinized and perfected; the use of gas and airplanes brought more and more scientists and "scientific principles" into the prosecution of war.

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Although the modern state and integral nationalism have been critical to ethnic cleansing in this century, political elites nevertheless bear the major responsibility for its manifestations. In competing for political power, they have exploited the appeal of nationalism to large groups of resentful citizens in the dominant ethnic population. Using the power of the state, the media, and their political parties, national leaders have manipulated distrust of the “other” and purposefully revived and distorted ethnic tensions, sometimes long-buried, sometimes closer to the surface. They have initiated campaigns of ethnic cleansing by their orders and intimations; they have held the power to stop them if they wished, and they did not. Ethnic cleansing could not have taken place in the twentieth century without the direct involvement and connivance of political leaders. It is not an unpremeditated outburst of hatred, though it feeds on the potential for interethnic violence in society. As a witness to atrocities carried out by both Turks and Greeks during the Greco-Turkish War of 1921–22, Arnold Toynbee noted that political leaders have ignited the fires of ethnic hatred and resentment. “This is an ugly possibility in all of us; but happily, even when the stimuli are present, atrocities are seldom committed spontaneously by large bodies of human beings . . . More commonly the rabies seizes a few individuals, and is communicated by them to the mass, while in other cases the blood-lust of the pack is excited by cold-blooded hunters who desire the death of the quarry without being carried away themselves by the excitement of the chase.”²⁴

Political elites do not act alone in pursuing the goals of ethnic cleansing, however. They are backed up by state and party apparatuses, police forces, militaries, and paramilitaries. They also are supported by professionals—lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers—who more often than not are both the architects and the beneficiaries of the modern state. The Young Turk revolution and its eventual assault on the Armenians owed a great deal to the active involvement of military doctors.²⁵ Robert J. Lifton, among others, has demonstrated the important role played by Nazi doctors in the development of German racial ideology and Nazi practices of elimination, some of which they supervised and even carried out themselves.²⁶ Well-educated and well-trained technocrats oversaw the ghettoization and eventual murder of the Jews, the transport of Chechens-Ingush from their home territories in the Soviet Union, and the deportation of the Armenians from Anatolia. Radovan Karadzic, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs and an indicted war criminal, is a trained psychiatrist. Slobodan Milosevic, another indicted war criminal, earned

his law degree and worked in banking in Serbia. Both men studied abroad and enjoyed a cosmopolitan lifestyle. One can only conclude from these and other twentieth-century examples that modern professional codes of ethics do not deter some people from participation in ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

Europe

The cases examined in this book are taken from European history, including the history of the Soviet Union and the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, I do not feel competent to investigate and write about ethnic cleansing in regions whose cultures, history, and historiography I have not engaged in any depth. I am not able to explore the histories of Africa, Latin America, Asia, South Asia, and North America in the same way I can in the case of Europe. Although I am not familiar with the languages of some of the areas in Europe I discuss, I have studied their past, been involved in their present, and traveled extensively in their lands. The comparative method is hard on historians, who generally insist on knowing the languages and cultures of the lands they write about. My choice for the topic of ethnic cleansing was to stretch far enough to encompass some European groups whose histories I had studied through secondary works but had not been able to research in original-language sources. I did not think I could stretch so far as to make up for my ignorance of the histories and cultures of, for example, Cambodia, Rwanda, or India and Pakistan.

I have an intellectual as well as a practical reason for both confining my work to Europe and then attempting to cover its major episodes of ethnic cleansing. The cases I examine are nested in the history of twentieth-century Europe as a whole—not just in local circumstance. Officers from the Imperial German Army, for example, were deeply involved in the Armenian genocide in Anatolia. But Russian and French actions also influenced the course of events there. British politics and politicians were essential to the outcome of the Greco-Turkish war and the Treaty of Lausanne which concluded it. Young Turks fled to Germany to escape prosecution for their crimes; one of the most prominent, Talat Pasha, was assassinated on the streets of Berlin by an Armenian nationalist. Hitler and the Nazis were intimately aware of the Armenian catastrophe and referred to it in their discussions of mass murder. There is a clear and apparent relationship between, on the one hand, the rise to power of Nazism and its domination of the continent