



Talking About Genocide

'Genocide is the deliberate extermination of a racial, religious or ethnic group'
(Chambers Dictionary)

The word 'genocide' was coined in 1944 to name a particularly shocking and horrific crime of violence which it was then believed could never happen again. That it has been put into practice so many times in one century is even more shocking.

The human race is the only species that can and does think itself into anger and violence. ('The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.') We ought to be able to think our way out of it too. ('Later I realised that violence didn't achieve anything.')

One much-practiced way of thinking one's way to violence is developing beliefs to back it up; some of them may head towards the absurd. 'Violence is the only way to get respect.' 'Violence is the only language they understand.' 'I'm good, you're evil.' 'We're peaceful, they're brutal.' 'I wasn't going to let them beat me.' 'They're ALL cheats/ liars/ scroungers/ dirty.' 'If I took it lying down, I couldn't hold my head up again.' And so on. There may have been a time in the early history of the human race (a time when the natural world was the chief threat to survival) when this kind of primitive thinking served a purpose. But it's nothing but a handicap now.

Genocide is not a wild beast or a natural disaster. It is mass murder deliberately planned and carried out by individuals, all of whom are responsible whether they made the plan, gave the order or carried out the killings. Whatever its scale, genocide is made up of individual acts, and individual choices to perform them. So human individuals need to make the commitment, as early in life as possible, that they will have no truck with it. To do that, the way genocide becomes possible has to be understood.

There follow outline histories of eight 20th century genocides. You may want to research some of them further. There are also pointers towards some of the issues they raise, particularly in respect of their causes. Prejudice, racism, grievance, intolerance, aggression, injustice, oppression - they all start small, and we need to spot and stop them in our own local orbits before they grow and get out of control. This means looking at the often long prehistory of genocide, as well as its symptoms in the present. Understanding these will help to avert future horrors.

Genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law.

From the United Nations Convention on Genocide, 1948:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such: killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the

group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, forcible transferring children of the group to another group.

The following acts shall be punishable: genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to genocide, attempt to commit genocide, complicity in genocide.

Many countries signed the Convention, some of whom have since been party to genocide. Only a few people have been charged with genocide or complicity in it.

SEEDS OF GENOCIDE

EVERY HUMAN BEING

A German Jewish emigrant:

'It dawned on me that if I looked into my own heart I could find seeds of hatred there, too. I realised that they are there in every human being. Arrogant thoughts, feelings of irritation, coldness, anger, envy, even indifference - these are the roots of what happened in Nazi Germany.'

Are there any other emotions that can lead to hatred? What are they? What does 'hatred' mean? What is it like to feel it? What is it like to be on the receiving end? Does hatred ever feel right and good? If so, when? Does that mean it is right and good?

PREJUDICE

A Russian writer:

'What mattered about Vitya was that he was my trusted friend, not that he was Jewish. My friend Khristik was Armenian, and Balbek was a Nagay, and Lida was Ukrainian, and Magda was German.

'From what age do we develop this Neanderthal dislike, irritation and hostility towards people of a different tribe or faith or origin? From childhood? From birth? I really want to know how it comes to be there in a person at all.

'I can say that for us in the children's home someone's nationality was of no importance whatever. I can't remember a single instance of anti-Semitism or racism among the children, unless it came down from the young thugs, older than us, who wintered in the orphanages and taught us the criminal's ideology - which isn't human nature but comes from a different hideous world of brutal oppression that was to swallow many of us.

'Neither Nazism nor racism are present as original sin in children who are just beginning life; they are born internationalists. It's only later, within the family, at school, in the street, from peer groups, that prejudice begins to break through, with its ability to subvert any primal truth. And here nothing helps, neither education, nor a profession, nor even belonging to an intellectual élite.'

How do we become prejudiced against people? Is the writer correct in saying it can't be overcome once it's taken hold? Can it be held in check by choosing not to let it dictate how one behaves?

NATIONALITY/IDENTITY

A Croatian writer:

'I met a Turk who was working in Germany. He complained, "When I'm in Germany, they see me as a Turk, but when I visit Turkey, they don't think of me as one of them, they think of me as a foreigner, a German. I always feel I have to choose between the two, and I don't like it." "Well, how do you feel/ Who do you think you are?" I asked. "I am both," he replied. It was only others who had a problem with his identity. But in a culture of nationalism, identity is made up of borders, territory and blood, and one is forced to choose.'

What do you think of as your nationality? Does it matter to you? Does other people's nationality matter to you? Do you think someone can have 'identity' without bringing nationality into it?

NAME-CALLING

A Roma journalist:

'After the Second World War, the Roma in Kosovo were given surnames of Turkish, Serbian and Albanian origin, many of them derogatory: Delibalta ('Crazy Axe' in Turkish), Vragovic ('Devil's Children' in Serbian), Choulanje (a rude word for peasant Roma) or Karach (a racially abusive word).'

A Roma from the Czech Republic:

'Four of us went to a park to get some exercise. About twenty skinheads started shouting, "Black pigs! We'll kill you!" '

A newspaper in 1998, on asylum seekers from Kosovo:

'Human sewage'.

Is it easy to call people names? How powerful is it? What's it like on the receiving end?

VIOLENCE

Two sides of a story:

'The villagers came in the middle of the night. While we were still in the house, the thugs threw rags soaked in petrol through the windows. They were shouting that they didn't want any Romany here, and that they were Hitler's followers, and that Hitler killed Romany and that they were going to do the same.'

'We went to have a bit of excitement. To shout a bit at those gypsies. It was quite exciting. We threw stones at them, and they threw stones at us. I wanted to get into the house they were in. My friend and I kicked the door in, and they smashed my head. We went home - well, we went to the local. The next day the police came after me. The house had burned down. At first I laughed. I didn't care at all. But I stopped laughing when the police came for me. But you know how it goes, I didn't feel sorry.'

'A bit of excitement.' What is the real nature of this excitement? What is the pleasure gained from shouting abuse? How close can this kind of violence come to something much worse? How close can threats come to being carried out? What sort of attitude makes it possible to abuse people without remorse?

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

War reporter:

'In the 20th century, civilians have been the major victims of war. Nameless millions, but they had their own names, their own place on earth, until war swept over them, killing them, uprooting them - real people with feelings common to everyone. Grief and pain and fear and the loss of home are emotions that have no nationality. Maybe hate has no nationality either; but I believe hate comes from killing. The first deaths strengthen and feed it. Until the killing starts, hate is an ugly idea, ugly words. War gives hate power and deforms the killers: kill or be killed, kill your own people, kill strangers - hate and killing become a habit. Leaders make wars. People must first be inflamed with fear and hate, then organised and directed. There are always aggressor leaders, and they are recognisable - but their followers are an enigma. Why is it always so easy to rouse men to kill each other?'

Is it easy? If so, why?

'Collateral damage' (the title of this module) is the term used by the world's military to refer to civilian deaths. What is the effect of using words like this to refer to events like that?

LAW AND ORDER

A Muslim political leader:

'Sharia laws can only be applied in a settled, well-fed, successful country. When many people have nothing, you can't cut off the hand of a hungry little thief. When war mutilates souls, sweep aside moral norms, and devalues life, you can't punish with execution.'

This man is speaking with approval of law and order, and disapproval of war. It's true that Sharia law traditionally includes punishments such as execution and cutting off a hand. How 'settled' can a country be in which these are the punishments? Is there a risk that violent punishment sows the seeds of violent action? Is this the right way to keep people from committing crimes?

OBEYING ORDERS

A Tanzanian writer:

'Armed policemen were ordered to open fire on the people outside the mosque. From the videotape it's quite obvious that the aim was to kill the Muslims. The police commanders are seen and heard ordering their marksmen to take careful aim. In two cases the bullets only wounded the intended victims, and the police ordered the marksmen to shoot again. And they did, with unmistakable zest and ruthlessness.'

There is one brief scene in the tape that always moves me to tears. The commander orders a young policeman to shoot. He shoots in the air. The commander orders him to aim his gun at the crowd. The young policeman is clearly torn between obeying his commander and obeying his conscience. The commander repeats the order. The policeman makes an attempt to obey his commander. He raises his gun, he looks at the crowd, but his hands become weaker and weaker, and the gun slowly falls to the ground.'

'I was only obeying orders,' say many of the people responsible for atrocities in war and genocide. What should we do when orders and conscience are in conflict? What should we do about the arming of policemen? What should we do about the commanders of armed men who order the shooting of civilians?

NO CHOICE FOR SOLDIERS

Soldiers fighting Turkish Kurds:

'Whether you actually take part in a conflict or not, you are a part of it. You have to protect yourself. If you don't want to harm them, people think you're on the other side. The toughest war is the one you fight against being there at all: your civil war against yourself.'

'I've seen all I want to know. If the state met the Kurds' needs for their culture and language, and improved the conditions of their lives, there'd be no need to have war at all. Who is the enemy? Not the Kurds. The enemy is the ruling classes - who else?'

What does being a soldier let you in for? The soldier speaking was not a career soldier, he was doing his (enforced) National Military Service: might that make a difference to his attitude? These interviews were published and their editor was arrested for 'insulting the military'.

RESPONSIBILITY

An African American writer about prisoners:

'It's easy for folks who have enough to eat, homes, land, work, to preach about forgiveness. But is it fair to preach it to people living in hellholes, jobless, starving? Are they to forgive the fat well-fed millions who voted for their starvation? Who voted for war? Who voted for prisons? Who voted for a people's repression? Who wish, in their heart of hearts, that those people had never been born? Should the starving forgive the repression to come, the genocide to come?'

What is fair?

FRUITS OF GENOCIDE

DISAPPEARED

A war correspondent:

'Terror starts like this: in the city, at any hour day or night, anywhere, at home, waiting at a bus stop, a citizen can be seized by armed men (uniformed or not) tied up, blindfolded, bundled into a car and driven into police headquarters. The reason for arrest is suspicion of being "subversive"... After arrest, the victims fall into three categories: Disappeared, Captured, Assassinated. Disappeared? Witnesses - family, friends, passers-by - watch a person dragged off by armed security men. The frantic family searches. The security forces deny. He or she has disappeared, become a non-person, and is never found again.'

What are the ways of being made to feel a 'non-person'? Is it tempting to make other people feel like that? What examples are there in history of marginalising people like this, apart from genocides? How does war do it?

LOSING ONE'S SELF

Poem by Erich Fried, an Austrian Jew:

'I must learn to hide
from my persecutors
and am thereby
in double danger

Perhaps still not well enough
hidden from them
and perhaps by now
hidden too well from myself

Think about the meaning of this poem.

LOSING TRUST

Tutsi survivor, aged 17, of 1994 genocide:

'The genocide changed my personality and my way of thinking. It changed everything for me. I didn't trust people at all. In Rwanda before the genocide our neighbours were very friendly. But it's them who killed my family. It's them who made the genocide. As children we were confused. We knew that in school some teachers and kids were racist, but our parents wouldn't tell us why there was so much anger. When I asked, my father told me I would find out when I was older. War is mad, crazy. It makes you crazy as well, imagine someone comes and kills your sisters and kills your mother and father behind you. You're afraid. All you can think about is whether in a minute it will be your turn to die. Now I don't think there is a future for us. In our culture even when you are hungry you don't tell anyone. You light a fire and put on a saucepan of water so no-one knows. You try to be smart, wear nice clothes and show people you are happy when inside you are dead already. So that's what I'm doing now.'

Do you agree that parents and teachers should explain what's going on, even if it's bad news? What ways are there to rebuild trust, or somehow manage without it for a while, after war and genocide have killed it?

SLAVERY

A Palestinian doctor and psychiatrist:

'We simply became the slaves of our enemy. We build their houses in our villages, and we clean their streets. Do you know what it does to you when you have to be the slave of your enemy in order to survive? No: you will never know how painful it is unless your country is occupied by another force. Then you will learn to watch in silence, pretending not to see the torture of your friends and the humiliation of your father. Do you know what it means for a child to see his father spat at and beaten before his eyes by a soldier? Nobody knows what happens to our children. Except that we notice that they lose respect for their fathers and identify with the new symbol of power, a soldier with his gun. So our children began throwing stones and being killed.'

Gaining respect by using violence... what makes that possible? What sort of respect is it? Is it, or should it be, worth having?

HUMILITY

A Romanian Roma writer and human rights activist:

'I loved the humility of my people, with which we had survived for thousands of years. Even though we were slaves, we kept our language and our culture. A humility which meant life and liberty. It was not the humility of a people which falls on its knees to seek pity, but the intelligence of a people that does not want to die. A people which has grown and lived on

the land of others, being forced to humble itself in order to be accepted. Humility was its only chance of survival.'

It's true that the Roma have survived, with difficulty and hardship and many deaths. What's your view of this way, which is at least nonviolent?

HISTORY REPEATED

A journalist:

'In a Czech town, a wall is being built around housing for gypsies to construct a ghetto within which they must live. Despite this, Britain still thinks their claims for asylum must be rejected. The Czech government refuses to recognise the gypsies' legal right to travel in their search for work. This right is available to all Czech citizens, yet officials say "it wasn't meant to apply to gypsies". Presumably the British government agrees.'

Ghetto-building was one of the steps towards genocide taken by the Nazis. Do you know of any other examples of first steps being repeated like this?

TRAUMA

A Bosnian refugee whose husband was lost in the war in 1992:

'The children were asking for their father, getting up at night and crying. Everyone was crying. I was living in a school room with 45 people - women, children, the wounded. My younger daughter kept wanting to open the door, saying that her dad was coming. The older one made drawings of him, bending her head over the paper, hiding it from me. I just cried and cried. The advice given to me by women who'd been through this didn't help. They seemed to bear it more easily, or that's how it looked to me. They told me that I must fight, I must be strong, that I wasn't the only one who'd had this experience. But in vain. They did not calm me down.'

A widow from Srebrenica:

'To my children I can only offer bare survival. They can only sleep and eat, and that is no way to live.'

These women could be talking after an earthquake, but they aren't: they are the victims of war. Does that make a difference? What do you think is the 'way to live'?

SEEDS OF HOPE

GOOD INTENTIONS

The British Attorney General, speaking at the end of the 1945-6 Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals:

'The state and the law are made for man that through them he may achieve a fuller life, a higher purpose and a greater dignity'.

What went wrong? What is needed for the state and the law to work? Or do you think that it's not the state, or even the law, that leads people to fuller, more purposeful, dignified lives, but other things, or other things as well? (And if so, what could they be?)

ACCEPTING CHANGE

A journalist working in Belgium:

'I cling to my religion, culture and language, and I am determined that my children, half Asian and half European, should know as much about their faraway motherland as they do about their father's Europe. But Europe is my heart and soul. I speak at least two European languages better than my mother tongue. Look around: Europe is a vibrant mixture of cultures, ethnic groups and religions. It is diverse, multicultural and multicoloured. But many Europeans close their eyes to the epic changes taking place in their communities, refuse to come to terms with the new minorities living in their midst. It's clear that the EU needs all kinds of skilled immigrants to run its information technology industries, pay for pension schemes for a rapidly ageing population, and generally keep the European economy powering ahead. Perhaps one day I will be able to feel genuinely European, proud to belong to a new, tolerant and diverse Europe. For the moment I have to watch from the sidelines.'

What is the problem for the Europeans with closed eyes? What alarms people about 'diversity' (and does it make a difference here whether a man or a woman is speaking)?

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

A political prisoner in China, released in 1997:

'How do we bring about changes in political rights? From inside as well as outside the country. I spent long dark years in prison, but I never acknowledged that they had a right to curtail my freedom of speech. By standing firm for years, I won small victories: they allowed me to have some books and newspapers. Even as an insignificant political prisoner, in a small way I achieved something.'

How is freedom of speech suppressed? How can one resist that suppression? Are there in fact things that ought not to be said, or things we ought to choose, or agree, not to say? How important are the steps to freedom taken by each individual, insignificant or not?

HUMAN RIGHTS

A Polish journalist:

'Having read and signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is like having tasted the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Governments everywhere not only know that suppressing rights is wrong, they have to acknowledge the wrong and realise that others are aware of it too. The Declaration also dramatically draws attention to its NON-application, and the incapacity of the international community to enforce it.

'Indeed, human rights often seem to be involved in trade-offs: murderous dictators are able to strike deals with patron states by giving up slaughter and having a blind eye turned to their "ordinary" human rights record as a reward. Or human rights are off-set against commercial interests, or Security Council voting patterns. Yet without the Declaration all this would be considered the normal stuff of politics; now it is seen as shameful, and in need of justification. Thank God for small mercies.'

Do you know what the Declaration of Human Rights says? What is your own view of what human rights are or should be? What is needed to make them available to everyone? If that isn't possible, why isn't it?

FORGIVENESS

A writer on religion and morality:

'There's all the difference between forgiving and excusing.'

A Palestinian human rights lawyer:

'The act of forgiveness carries a lot of power. It is an assertion of one's dignity to have the means and ability to forgive. It may be difficult to understand, but I think if there is to be peace, there has to be forgiveness.'

A Black human rights leader:

'We get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.'

What is the difference between forgiving and excusing? Forgiveness leading to peace: is it difficult to understand? Getting rid of enmity: how?

REMEMBERING GENOCIDE

The British Chief Rabbi:

'Civilisation lives by memory. What we forget, we can repeat. What we remember, we can guard against. Only by handing on to our children what we have learned, often at great cost, have we a chance of turning history into a narrative of hope instead of an endless cycle of hatred and bloodshed... What the Holocaust must teach us is not what it means to be a Jew, but what it means to be human - and to acknowledge the humanity of others.'

There are some things that are good to remember. 'What it means to be human' can be creative and kind: what memories do you have of that?

CITIZENSHIP

An American war reporter:

'We free-worlders elect our governments freely, so we are responsible for what they do in our name. If governments were better, wider, more in touch with real life, citizens would not have to spend so much time educating and restraining them...

'Watching the peace movement grow in numbers and competence, I see it as a talented citizenship. Citizenship is a tough occupation which obliges the citizen to make his or her own informed opinion and stand by it. Progress in human affairs depends on accepting, generation after generation, the individual duty to oppose the evils of the time. The evils may change but they're never in short supply.'

Right. Where will you start?