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Author(s): Andrew Bell-Fialkoff

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A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing

Andrew Bell-Fialkoff

REVISITING THE SINS OF ANTIQUITY

THE SERBIAN CAMPAIGN to “cleanse” a territory of another ethnic group, while gruesome and tragic, is historically speaking neither new nor remarkable. Population removal and transfer have occurred in history more often than is generally acknowledged. The central aim of the Serbian campaign—to eliminate a population from the “homeland” in order to create a more secure, ethnically homogeneous state—is in some ways as old as antiquity. Moreover, despite greater international attention and condemnation, such campaigns have only intensified in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Despite its recurrence, ethnic cleansing nonetheless defies easy definition. At one end it is virtually indistinguishable from forced emigration and population exchange while at the other it merges with deportation and genocide. At the most general level, however, ethnic cleansing can be understood as the expulsion of an “undesirable” population from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic or ideological considerations, or a combination of these.

Under this definition, then, the slow dispersal and annihilation of North America’s indigenous population was indeed ethnic cleansing. In their efforts to gain and secure the frontier, American settlers

ANDREW BELL-FIALKOFF, formerly a Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Small States, is a doctoral candidate specializing in ethnic conflict at Boston University.

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“cleansed” most Indians from their lands, even though the process was slow and, until the nineteenth century, carried out mainly under private initiative. On the other hand, the removal of thousands of Africans from their home continent, however harsh and despite the fact that it denuded many regions of their original inhabitants, would not be considered ethnic cleansing. The aim was to import a desired slave population, not to expel any particular group.

Ethnic cleansing has taken many forms. The forced resettlement of a “politically unreliable” population—one conquered and incorporated into an empire yet still likely to rebel—dates from the eighth century BC. That practice was revived, however, as late as the 1940s in the Soviet Union. As part of a general process toward greater homogeneity within states that began in the Middle Ages, “ethnic” cleansing took on medieval notions of religious purity, targeting minorities of “nonbelievers,” whether Catholic or Protestant, Muslim or Jew. With the profound secularization of the modern world, cleansing later manifested itself in political ideology, namely as part of communism and fascism.

Nationalism, too, as a kind of modern religion, contains quasi-spiritual aspects that lend to its most extreme manifestation a desire to “purify” the nation of “alien” groups. The important difference between modern ethnic cleansing and the patterns established in the Middle Ages is that in religious cleansing a population often had the choice of conversion. In purely ethnic cleansing that option does not exist; a population must move or die.

FROM ASSYRIA TO SERBIA

HISTORICAL CONTEXT should help illustrate ethnic cleansing’s long evolution, motivations and various expressions, as well as its return to Europe on the cusp of the 21st century. Many of today’s liberal democratic states have, at some point in their histories, conducted campaigns to displace religious or ethnic minorities, events from which virtually no European nation has been exempt.

The earliest example was cleansing carried out by Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BC), the first Assyrian ruler to make forced resettlement

a state policy. Under his reign about half the population of a conquered land would be carried off, and its place taken by settlers from another region. Tiglath's heirs continued this policy and, over the centuries, so too did the Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, although not always on the same scale and often for the prevailing economic reason of slavery.

Once these ancient empires had rent the organic links among ethnicity, belief and political citizenship, religion became the primary basis of collective identity. In the Middle Ages cleansing was thus applied primarily to religious, as opposed to ethnic, minorities, as medieval Christianity attempted to impose orthodoxy on nonbelievers. Despite prior episodes of religious suppression, such as early Christians in Rome or the persecution of non-Zoroastrians in Persia in the fourth century, it was only during the Middle Ages that persecution of religious minorities became fully institutionalized for substantial periods.

Massacre and expulsion were the most common methods of religious cleansing, which tended to target Jews, the only sizable minority in most countries. Jews were thus expelled from England (1290), France (1306), Hungary (1349-1360), Provence (1394 and 1490), Austria (1421), Lithuania (1445), Cracow (1494), Portugal (1497) and numerous German principalities at various times. Spain was unique among European countries because of its sizable Muslim population. Having "tried" massacre in 1391, Spain expelled its Jews in 1492, then its Muslims in 1502, forcibly Christianizing the remaining Muslims in 1526 and finally expelling all Moriscos (converted Muslims) in 1609-14.

In 1530 the Confession of Augsburg had explicitly laid down the principle of religious homogeneity as the basis of political order. *Cuius regio, eius religio* meant in effect that medieval states had begun to shape an orthodox citizenry. Thus by revoking the Edict of Nantes in 1685, France indeed initiated a process of "self-cleansing," as thousands of Protestant Huguenots fled once denied freedom of worship. In this way, the Confession can be considered the ideological cornerstone of modern cleansing, a process only possible in centralized, absolutist states capable of enforcing "purity."

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Although still couched in religious terms, the first cleansings based primarily on ethnic discrimination were carried out by England. In the 1640s and 1650s, when war and plague swept away half the Irish population, England seized the opportunity to expel most of the remaining Irish Catholics from Ulster until, by 1688, 80 percent of their land was owned by English and Scottish Protestants. London's motivation was primarily strategic: to prevent Catholic Ireland from offering Catholic Spain or France a base of operations. Displacement of the Irish population thus completed a kind of historical cycle, as cleansing returned to patterns formerly established by the Assyrians and Romans.

In North America, meanwhile, those survivors of the sweeping removals of native Americans conducted in the 1830s were settled in the Indian Territory. Then the 1862 Homestead Act opened up much of the remaining Indian lands to white settlers. In the two decades after 1866 the federal government proceeded to assign Indian tribes to reservations. Those previously unconquered—the Sioux, Comanche, Arapaho and others—resisted and were subsequently crushed.

It was only in the nineteenth century that the complete destruction of an ethnic group manifested itself as the goal of a state, when Turkey began directing cleansing efforts against Greeks and Armenians. Having come to view those minorities as enemies within, the Turkish sultan Abdul Hamid II encouraged Kurdish depredations on Armenian villages until hostilities grew into a veritable war. By 1894 Turkish regular troops had joined with the Kurds, and about 200,000 Armenians were killed. In the 1915 holocaust, Armenians lost an estimated 1.5 million people—more than half their population—as well as about 90 percent of their ethnic territory. Despite the strains brought about by the First World War, that genocide was clearly the continuation, on a larger scale, of ongoing Turkish attempts to eliminate the entire Armenian population.

By the middle of the twentieth century cleansing was indeed car-

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ried out on purely ethnic grounds, an outgrowth of paranoid fascist nationalism that viewed "alien" groups as a threat to ethnic "purity." It is with the Nazi campaigns against Jews that ethnic cleansing reached its height: annihilation. Although Jews had for centuries been the victims of various forms of religious persecution, twentieth-century nationalism lent Central and East European anti-Semitism a largely ethnic character.

The Nazi campaigns were an ethnic cleansing in the sense that they were intended to remove Jews from territories of the Reich. The German term *Judenrein*, "clean of Jews," which was used to designate areas from which all Jews had been deported, testifies to this fact. But the Holocaust was much more. It combined elements of deportation, expulsion, population transfer, massacre and genocide. In that way it was "complete," truly a final solution. Altogether about six million European Jews were murdered between 1933 and 1945. About 250,000 Gypsies and an equal number of gays were also killed by the Nazis.

The Germans also practiced cleansing through deportation alone, without (immediate) extermination; for instance the Germanization of Polish territories incorporated into the Reich. Starting in October 1939 at Gdynia, expulsion orders were often issued without warning and implemented at night. Deportees were given between 20 minutes and two hours to collect what was usually limited to one suitcase containing personal effects. German authorities made no provisions for these deportees either on their way to or in those Polish areas not incorporated into the Reich, where they were dumped. In the first two years of German occupation 1.2 million Poles and 300,000 Jews were transferred from these incorporated territories in the largest, but by no means only, cleansing implemented by the Germans.

Hitler also carried out a kind of reverse cleansing in his effort to consolidate the Reich. Ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) were in effect cleansed from Eastern Europe as they were recalled and resettled in Hitler's occupied territories, especially western Poland. By spring 1942 more than 700,000 Germans (and non-Germans claiming German origin) had been transferred from the Baltic states, Bukovina, South Tyrol and elsewhere, and resettled in territories Hitler sought to Germanize.

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After Hitler's megalomaniacal efforts began to collapse, advancing Russian armies in turn forced most Germans back in their path. What ensued was the largest and most sweeping ethnic cleansing in history: the removal of over ten million Germans from Eastern Europe. The final decision to remove German populations from Eastern Europe was taken by the United States, the U.S.S.R. and Britain on August 2, 1945, in Potsdam. It is impossible to give exact figures, but it is estimated that nearly 12 million Germans were cleansed from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia after World War II. About 2.1 million of these died from a combination of war, hunger, cold and disease.

Germans were not the only group slated for cleansing. The Czech government, with Stalin's consent, expelled 25,000 to 30,000 Hungarians by the end of 1945. For various reasons, the Czech government later preferred to settle "the Hungarian problem" through population exchange. A 1946 agreement between Hungary and Czechoslovakia allowed for the eventual exchange of 31,000 Magyars for 33,000 Slovaks. After both countries were communized the exchange ceased.

Within its own borders, the Soviet Union also cleansed about 600,000 people from regions that had proved themselves "unreliable" in the war, such as the autonomous Kalmyk, the Checheno-Ingush republic and the Karachaev region in northern Caucasus. During the war Crimean Tartars formally requested permission from Romania, the occupying power, to exterminate all Russians remaining in the peninsula. When that request was denied, the Tartar Council organized a mass slaughter on its own, killing between 70,000 and 120,000 Russians. Consequently, Tartars too were transferred en masse by the Soviets after the war.

Twentieth-century communist ideology introduced yet another type of cleansing, that of economic class. The destruction of propertied classes in Stalinist Russia or Maoist China bore all the markings, including vocabulary, of an "ethnic" cleansing. Marx applied Christian rejection of the Jew, once based on religion but during his time transformed into racialism, to class analysis and the elimination of certain "parasitic" groups. In this way, the patterns of "self-cleans-

ing” established in the Middle Ages had returned yet again, this time manifested in the modern totalitarian state’s own mechanism for ensuring “purity,” the purge.

THE BALKAN TRAGEDY: ACT II

EVENTS IN YUGOSLAVIA cannot be fully understood without their historical antecedents. Especially in the Balkans, ongoing cycles of tragedy and atrocity remain historically fresh and provide not only the context but the basis for today’s brutal cleansing campaigns. The gruesome events being played out in former Yugoslavia are merely the second act of a tragedy that opened in April 1941.

Only about fifty years ago—that is within the lifetime of an individual—Croatian nationalists carried out massacres of Serb civilians in a Nazi puppet state comprising most of today’s Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Ustashi, as these nationalists were known, regarded Croatia’s more than two million Serbs as a threat to national integrity. The Croatian minister of education, for example, speaking at a banquet in June 1941, remarked that “one-third of the Serbs we shall kill, another we shall deport and the last we shall force to embrace the Roman Catholic religion and thus meld them into Croats.” This policy was officially enunciated later the same month by the governor of western Bosnia, Viktor Gutich. In a speech at Banya Luka, Gutich urged that the city, and all of Croatia, be “thoroughly cleansed of Serbian dirt.”

What followed was less a cleansing than a wholesale massacre. The list of atrocities is staggering and seemingly endless. In one instance, in August 1941 in the small Bosnian town of Sanski Most, two thousand local Serbs were killed in three days of executions. In other villages Serbs were rounded up and burned in their churches. Those trying to escape were gunned down. Others were killed along ditches and then buried, or dumped into rivers. So many corpses were thrown into the Danube in the summer of 1941 that German authorities were forced to close the river to swimming. Some atrocities defy belief. The Croatian führer, Ante Pavelich, is supposed to have shown the Italian author Curzio Malaparte a 40-pound basket of human

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eyes gouged from his Serbian victims. Between May and October 1941 it is estimated that the Ustashi killed between 300,000 and 340,000 Serbs.

The extermination of Serbs was part of a wider campaign by Germany and its allies. Hungarians who occupied parts of Yugoslavia massacred the Serbian population of two large villages on the Serbian Orthodox Christmas in January 1942, and killed another 15,000 Serbs and Jews in Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina. About 2,000 of these were thrown alive into holes in the frozen Danube. Bulgarians too obliterated several villages in southern Serbia. Altogether about 750,000 Serbs, 60,000 Jews and 25,000 Gypsies were annihilated. Others were expelled. In a clear example of cleansing, Bulgaria uprooted 120,000 Serbs, and Hungary 70,000, from their portions of occupied Yugoslavia. The deportees were given 24 hours' notice and allowed one suitcase and about six dollars.

When the Croatian army finally surrendered in May 1945, the British promptly turned over their prisoners to Marshal Josip Tito's Partisans. The Croats were immediately marched south into Yugoslavia. Some 5,000 were shot just within the borders of Slovenia, and over the next few days an additional 40,000 were killed. Serbs marched several "death columns" across the country on foot, denying their prisoners either food or water. Villagers along the route were forbidden to offer the Croats food or drink, and all those who could not complete the journey were shot. The exact number of Croats who died is uncertain, but it is estimated at about 100,000. Such was the Serbian revenge.

To some the horrors of a half-century ago may seem remote or unreal, but to many in the Balkans these atrocities remain vivid to this day. One Serb in ten died in that war, virtually every family lost someone, and many of the survivors are still living. Thus even before the country collapsed, population transfers were discussed extensively in the Yugoslav media. In 1991 the popular Serbian magazine *Nin* featured an article about (voluntary) population exchange between Serbia and Croatia. Bosnia and Krajina (a Serb enclave in Croatia), it said, would remain in Yugoslavia. Serbs living in areas with a Croatian majority would resettle in Vojvodina and other areas where

the Serb component had to be strengthened. Croats from Bosnia and Krajina would settle in Croatia in houses abandoned by the Serbs. The *Nin* article appeared along with the first violent clashes in Croatia, which started in Pakrac on March 1, 1991. Already at that

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early stage—before Croatia had even declared independence, before full-scale war had even begun—about 20,000 Serbs fled Croatia, most for Vojvodina.

Massive population transfers swelled as fighting intensified among Yugoslavia's various factions. By the beginning of 1992 there were 158,000 refugees in Serbia alone, the vast majority ethnic Serbs. Within one month of Bosnia's declaration of independence on March 3, 1992, some 420,000 people had fled Bosnia or were forced from their homes. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, by the end of that July the number of displaced persons had reached 2.5 million. By August one-third of all Serbs who had resided in Croatia had left; the number of ethnic Croat refugees was estimated at about 10 percent of that republic's Croat population. There were also 50,000 ethnic Magyars who fled to Hungary.

While there are indeed extraordinary numbers of people who have been displaced, not all of them have been technically "cleansed." From the very start, fear itself created large numbers of refugees. There are thus those who fled "voluntarily," like the initial 20,000 Serbs who "moved" to Vojvodina. There are others who, once their towns were taken by enemy forces, were simply too afraid to stay. Such was the evacuation of Jajce, which fell in October 1992, whose 25,000 survivors went to Travnik. These people are technically "voluntary" refugees, but the line separating them from the cleansed has worn increasingly thin.

The thousands who have been forced to leave their towns by partisans in the war, especially those made to leave even after an area has been militarily secured, belong unequivocally to the category of ethnic cleansing. These people are removed for ethnic and strategic considerations and are clearly victims of cleansing campaigns. In the

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Sanjak, for instance, some 70,000 Muslims out of a prewar population of 200,000 were terrorized into fleeing their homes. In another case, Serb guerrillas encircled the village of Turalici, cut off all communications and went door to door, throwing out everyone they could find before setting the village afire. This was a "gentle" cleansing; no one was known to have been killed or raped. Often those carrying out a cleansing loot all they can find—TV sets, washing machines, bicycles. Cleansing thus has economic motivations as well.

These campaigns to create ethnically homogenous regions are, in the history of ethnic cleansing, unique in only a few regards. First, much ethnic cleansing has been carried out not by regular government troops but rather by irregular civilian forces. This is perhaps inevitable in what may be considered a "civil" war. But the fact also attests to the very personal nature of the animosities in many areas of the Balkans, with some families resuming feuds that were frozen since the end of World War II. Civilian fighters have carried out what they understand to be their "duty as patriots," sometimes committing atrocities on their own initiative, even if aware of higher-level, official and semiofficial encouragement and expectations.

Another "innovation" has been the creative use of prisoner of war camps. While the men are held in camps, the women are presented with an ultimatum: the prisoners will be released only if families agree to leave the territory. Some 5,000 Muslim families from Bihac "expressed" such a desire, according to Bosnian Serb authorities, and signed kinds of affidavits to that effect. In August 1992, Croats and Muslims estimated at 70,000 the number of prisoners held by Serbs in some 45 camps; Serbs claimed that 42,000 compatriots were detained in 21 camps, where 6,000 prisoners had died. Since the Serbs control most of Bosnia, they are in a position to conduct much of their cleansing in this manner.

There is also overwhelming evidence of mass rape perpetrated against mostly Muslim, but also Croat, women. The number of women raped is estimated to range from 30,000 to 50,000. Although rape has long been a concomitant of war, organized rape is fairly rare. In the Second World War, for instance, Japanese authorities kidnapped thousands of Korean and Filipino women to serve in army-

run brothels. In Yugoslavia thousands of women, many of them minors, have also been interned in rape camps. Female refugees have testified to this and other mistreatment, and large numbers of these reports have been documented. The pattern of rape is too consistent and widespread to be dismissed as propaganda or mere lapses in the discipline of individual soldiers. Some Serbian fighters claim they were ordered to rape, just as they were also ordered to kill (mostly male prisoners) in order to "toughen" themselves up.

It is possible that, at least initially, rape was not intended as an instrument of ethnic cleansing. As in many wars, rape may have been viewed with a blind eye, permitted in order to "boost morale" or "reward" the soldier or to inflict lasting humiliation and demoralize the enemy. Cleansing per se may have been an unintended effect. But as the stigma of rape was seen to be effective in driving away women and their families from the lands that Serbs sought to conquer, rape indeed became a new and gruesome weapon in the ancient quiver of ethnic cleansing.

SOURCES AND CONSEQUENCES OF CLEANSING

THE FORCES THAT DRIVE such atrocities are of course larger and far less scientific than "simple" strategic motivations. The attitudes and emotions that define the relations between different peoples are extraordinarily complex. Discrimination and prejudice provide the thread that ties together the long history of religious and ethnic cleansing.

In the Balkans, too, bigotry has fueled the fighting on all sides. While grudgingly acknowledging that Croats have a higher standard of living—that they are in effect more "European"—Serbs may dismiss them as effete or submissive, a people that has willingly served stronger Austrian or German masters. Likewise, Serbs may regard Bosnian Muslims as the descendants of Slavic "turncoats" who converted to Islam under Turkish rule, a time when it was most opportune. In contrast, the perception is passed among Serbs themselves that they are a heroic, independent and virile race, a tenacious fighting people who were among the first to throw off 400 years of

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Ottoman domination. These historic feats, as well as Serbia's well-established claims to statehood, entitle it to lead the other (often ungrateful) South Slavs, who in turn regard the Serbs as domineering brutes seeking continually to impose their will and to infuse nastiness into their relations with other peoples.

The hollowness and exaggeration of these claims are revealed as each side will alternately emphasize their common roots when it indeed suits its purposes. Before the war, for example, when the Serbs still hoped to keep Bosnia in Yugoslavia, the media frequently highlighted similarities with the Muslims, while Croats often stressed that Bosnia had been part of historical Croatia and that most Bosnian Muslims were originally of Croatian descent.

The difficulty of bridging prejudice will only be compounded by the wellspring of fresh atrocities that this latest Balkan war provides.

Particularly troubling, if the abuse is indeed as widespread as reported, is how a generation of "half-breed" children, spawned of rape and "corrupted" with the blood of another ethnic group, will be received and cared for among populations that will have concluded a brutal war in which the purity, and indeed the very survival, of nationalities has been held so consciously in the fore.

Ultimately, whether compelled by deliberate attempts at cleansing or by the "voluntary" flight of refugees, the processes that have shifted thousands of lives in the Balkans will accomplish the same end. War, prejudice and a desire, finally, to be left in peace will have transformed the peninsula into a land more closely resembling other parts of Europe that have already undergone their own tragic upheavals. The Balkans too may become a patchwork of ethnically distinct territories. With no sizable minorities left within any state and with the warring factions securely walled off behind "national" boundaries, the best that can be hoped for is that the motors of conflict will be disabled and the fatal cycles of violence that have marred Balkan history will finally have reached their end. 🌀

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