



A Rhetorical Crime: Genocide in the Geopolitical Discourse of the Cold War

by Anton Weiss-Wendt.

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In *Rhetorical Crime*, Prof. Anton Weiss-Wendt (Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies, Oslo) combines his knowledge of Soviet legal and political history with a novel use of explored and unexplored primary sources from the United States and the Soviet Union in a fine account of the role of the UN Genocide Convention (1948) in the dynamics of the Cold War. He argues that the Convention reflected geopolitical considerations more than ethical impulses. Of course, memories of the horrors of World War II and a resolve to prevent their recurrence were powerful incentives, but the national delegations in the UN General Assembly did not renounce efforts to make the law apply to their adversaries and not themselves.

In the context of emerging Cold War politics, the Americans and the Soviets agreed that the UN should have the power to prevent (or try to prevent) atrocities that might destabilize the international order from which their authority derived. At the same time, they thought the UN should never have the power to question their sovereignty or endanger their national interests.

In the event, according to Weiss-Wendt, far from becoming a means to prevent genocides and punish their perpetrators, the UN Genocide Convention and the rhetorical application of the very word *genocide* intensified the geopolitical hostility of the two superpowers. The Cold War disregarded the legal foundations of the Convention and turned it into a tool to punish one's adversary and pursue broader aims. In short, "the Cold War inserted a self-destructive mechanism into the Genocide Convention ... [which] added more fuel to the Cold War flame, without extinguishing any others" (170).

Weiss-Wendt also maintains that the USSR was as effective as the United States in shaping the Genocide Convention and equally bent on using it to achieve its own ends. Soviet lawyers, he writes, at first played a major role in this process, seeing "law publications as weapons and legal scholars as foot soldiers in [the] global struggle" (14). Their importance peaked in the mid-1950s, when the Soviets had less to fear of and more to gain from making allegations of genocide. The resurgence of interest in the crime of genocide in the Soviet Union reflected an awareness that the election of Eisenhower in 1952 meant that ratifying the UN Genocide Convention would vanish from the US Congressional agenda. This lack of commitment prevented the US delegation in the UN from formally indicting the Soviet Union for genocide. Meanwhile, Stalin's death in 1953 meant the Gulag system would be dismantled and the its inmates gradually released. Thus, the most brutal aspect of Soviet rule could no longer be used against the USSR in the international arena.

Finally, decolonization tipped the balance of power in the UN, strengthening the position of the Soviet Union. In this context, a string of publications on genocide began to appear in the Soviet Union on into the mid-1980s. Their authors dismissed the accusations of genocide against the Soviet Union as unfounded and politically motivated. They also turned the charges of genocide

against the United States and sometimes its allies. Genocide was invariably depicted as the crux of imperialism: analogy with Nazi crimes was a constant in this narrative.

Similarly, in the late 1940s and 50s, many American scholars claimed that genocide was an inherent aspect of the Soviet Union and the Communist system at large. Significantly, émigrés of Eastern European descent produced much of the US literature on ethnic deportations, persecutions, massacres, and the Soviet forced labor camp system. With the change of Soviet politics in the mid-1950s, however, these interpretations gradually lost credibility and “by the 1960s calls for ... indictment of the Soviet Union for genocide became much less frequent and the tenor milder” (48).

In the 1960s, the focus of the bipolar confrontation shifted from Europe to postcolonial Africa and Asia. Accusations of genocide, accordingly, began to center on newly independent countries in “proxy wars of words” reflecting the international system of alliances. The Soviet Union attacked the West for the French repression of the Algerian insurgency, the Anglo-French intervention in Egypt, the Portuguese colonial wars in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, and the US-Belgian intervention in the Congo crisis. It also tried to embarrass the Americans by spotlighting the apartheid regimes in South Africa, Rhodesia, and Namibia. At the same time, Western countries spoke of genocide in relation to Nigeria’s war with the secessionist state of Biafra. The case of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, meanwhile, clearly showed the importance of geopolitics in genocidal discourse: in the end, the Soviets prioritized relations with the Ba’ath Party over support of the Kurdish people, abandoning previous accusations of genocide against Iraq and even assisting it in suppressing the Kurds.

The prominence of geopolitics in Soviet genocidal discourse was all too visible in Southeast Asia. With the gradual collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance and the emergence of the Washington-Beijing rapprochement, the Soviet Union started condemning China for its genocides in Tibet and against ethnic Mongols and the Uighur minority. While the United States mostly kept mum on the genocide in Bangladesh in 1971 and Cambodia in 1975–79, the Soviet Union used “genocide” in both cases, though only after the fact.

Meanwhile, unsurprisingly, Moscow quickly admonished the United States for its genocidal policy in Vietnam, though it failed to influence or make contacts with the American antiwar movement. Despite its persistent attacks on the United States for its racist domestic policies, Moscow failed to forge ties with the African American and the American Indian movements. The Soviet authorities were more effective in exploiting the US debate on the ratification of the UN Genocide Convention, which in the 1960s and 70s saw a harsh conflict between the anti-ratification far right and the pro-ratification liberal left. The failure of the Americans to ratify the UN Genocide Convention was used by the Soviets to counter accusations of infringing on the human rights basket of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.

Political and geopolitical factors, Weiss-Wendt contends, also shaped Soviet attitudes toward the treatment of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. Facing growing nationalist sentiment among Soviet Armenians and enjoying improved ties with Ankara, Moscow was increasingly cautious in invoking the notion of genocide. The strategic alliance with Turkey, meanwhile, led the United States to adopt a similarly cautious position on the mass murder of ethnic Armenians during World War I. Hesitant to evoke the Armenian genocide, Soviet authorities had no such inhibitions regarding Palestinians. They saw the Israeli treatment of Palestinians as epitomizing the notion of genocide in the post-World War II period; they also applied the word genocide to the 1982 Lebanon War more frequently than to any other conflict. Paradoxically, Weiss-Wendt observes,

this “reflected a bad conscience rather than firm convictions on the part of the Soviets, who never fully committed to the Palestinian cause” (133). Equally paradoxically, “the Soviets proved tight-lipped when it came to the Nazi mass murder of the Jews” (146), while trumpeting the Israelis’ persecution of Palestinians.

The first half of the 1980s, finally, was marked by reciprocal claims of genocide. While Western politicians excoriated the Soviets for the genocide in Afghanistan, the Soviets responded by accusing the United States of committing genocides against anti-mujahideen peoples in Afghanistan and leftist militants in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Brazil, and Venezuela. By the mid-80s, however, the time came for the Americans to ratify the UN Genocide Convention. Domestic changes combined with the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as the new secretary of the Communist Party in 1985. Since the Soviets no longer intended to use the Genocide Convention against the United States, Washington could safely and fully embrace it in 1986–88.

Among its shortcomings, *A Rhetorical Crime* fails to discuss allies of the United States and the Soviet Union and the Non-Aligned Movement and its members. And, too, the parts devoted to the Soviet Union seem more accurate than those dedicated to the United States. These weaknesses aside, Anton Weiss-Wendt has presented clear and innovative arguments on a crucial topic and scrupulously supported them with relevant documents and other evidence. In so doing, he has written a salutary alternative narrative of human rights in the Cold War, one that has the potential to improve our understanding of Cold War dynamics as a whole.