War and Genocide: Distinguishing Conflict and Extermination

Simone Geggie

Columbia University

14th Annual Consortium of African and Asian Studies' Symposium

September 15, 2024

*Abstract**:***
This paper examines the nuanced distinctions between war and genocide, focusing on the contentious language that shapes public perception, legal accountability, and international responses to mass violence. By analyzing the evolving understandings of war, from Clausewitzian concepts to Mary Kaldor's "new wars," this study reveals how identity-based violence and civilian targeting have blurred lines between conflict and genocide. Exploring cases like Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and recent debates surrounding Gaza, this paper demonstrates that the invocation of "genocide", while mobilizes necessary international outrage, also constrains discourse, humanitarian intervention, and results in oversimplified interpretations that limits policymakers and historians alike. Through historical, legal, and theoretical lenses, the paper underscores the implications of terminology in defining violence, ultimately advocating for critical awareness in using language with powerful legal shapes global humanitarian and academic discourse.

Student protestors across American college campuses calling for an end to the genocide in Gaza has ignited a debate on the nature and boundaries of *genocide.* The memory of the Holocaust – and its centrality to the imagination and origination of "genocide" – complicates the conversation, as Jewish identity is deeply intertwined with both the historical suffering that defines genocide and the current political stakes of the Israel-Hamas conflict. This paper interrogates the concept of genocide against modern warfare that obscures the line between conflict and humanitarian crises. Some scholars argue that the concept has lost its analytical strength due to its overly broad application.[1] Others, advocate for a more expansive use of the term to widen the scope and cases of genocide.[2] While genocide and mass casualty war share many of the same qualities and are difficult to distinguish, they are distinct in their individual rhetoric and affective resonances. The lack of scholarly consensus, paired with distinct emotional or social response to these terms, raises critical questions about the implications of labeling violence as 'genocide' versus 'war.' The language used to describe conflicts not only shapes understanding of such events, but also affects international responses, legal accountability, and the broader historical memory of violence. More locally, it affects the mobilization of [student] activism and the associated knowledge production that comes with social movement.

1.1 Changing Understandings of War

The idea and understanding of war has shifted and changed form since the initial Clausewitzian understanding of absolute war. For Clausewitz, war is shaped by the interaction of violence, chance, and rational strategy, with the ultimate goal of compelling the enemy to submit

[1] Ronald Suny, "Debating Famine and Genocide," *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 3 (2008): 476–81.
[2] Norman M. Naimark, *Genocide : A World History*, The New Oxford World History (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017)

to one's [political] will.[3] His work remains foundational for understanding the strategic and political dimensions of warfare, influencing both military theory and historical interpretations of war. Clausewitz's focus is primarily on the nature of war as a continuation of political aims through violence. His analysis of war involves the people, the government, and the military – he does not single out ethnicity as a key factor in warfare, setting the first distinction between war and genocide.

Mary Kaldor understands these wars as "old wars" in her book, *New and Old Wars.* Kaldor explores a paradigm where modern conflicts are characterized not merely by traditional military engagements but by a complex interplay of political, economic, and identity-based factors. Kaldor's "new wars" often involve a breakdown of legitimacy and create widespread destabilization - which can include or resemble genocide. What is crucial in these modern conflicts, is that they are less about territorial conquest and more about identity politics. In this way, "new wars" are conditioned to have a persecuted 'other'. Violence is not just about defeating an enemy but about undermining the social and political fabric of affected regions. Deliberate campaigns against ethnic groups can fracture communities, and erode bonds that hold societies together, leading to long-term destabilization by fostering mistrust, fear and division among once-interconnected populations – as seen in classic divide and rule cases in colonial wars.[4]

Similarly, scholars Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye Jr. have examined how globalization and interdependence, particularly after World War II, have reshaped conflict. Their analysis of economic and military globalism during the Cold War highlights the balance of terror and the

---

[3] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War (*1832), trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2008). 75 – 83

[4] Richard Morrock, "Heritage of Strife: The Effects of Colonialist 'Divide and Rule' Strategy upon the Colonized Peoples," *Science & Society* 37, no. 2 (1973).

technological advances that changed the stakes of war.[5] Globalization blurs the lines between local conflicts and global interests, making it harder to distinguish internal power struggles from broader international dynamics. This too, makes it increasingly difficult to decipher dynamics of large-scale warfare from humanitarian crises or genocidal violence.

Keohane and Nye highlight Bosnia and Kosovo as examples where heightened global awareness from the information revolution and media coverage, contributed to pressure for humanitarian intervention.[6] In the case of Bosnia and Kosovo, global audiences became exposed to the disturbing images of ethnic cleansing and civil massacres, prompting a moral outcry that pressured governments and institutions to act. With these examples the importance of the 'audience' of war is discerned. The increased visibility of atrocities through global media raises the question of whether heightened awareness can lead to a broader application of the term 'genocide.' As the public becomes more aware of mass suffering in conflicts, there may be a tendency to conflate mass casualties with genocide, driven by the emotional impact of witnessing violence in real time rather than by precise legal definitions.

These shifting understandings of war are crucial for distinguishing between war and genocide in the contemporary era. As warfare moves beyond traditional state-driven conflicts to include identity-based violence and civilian targeting, it becomes important to critically assess where war ends and genocide begins, and how the two can be addressed in both theory and practice.

1.2 Instability of "Genocide"

Understanding the etymology and development of the term is essential for recognizing how it emerged as a distinct concept, separate from the broader category of war. When Raphaël

[5] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, "Globalization: What's New? What's Not? (And So What?)," *Foreign Policy*, no. 118 (2000): 106.
[6] Keohane and Nye. 116

Lemkin coined "genocide" in the early 1940s, he understood it as mass violence perpetrated against a group (racial, social, religious) in a short period of time.[7] Andrea Graziosi and Frank Synsyn explore genocide – its' scholarly and political development since Lemkin's World War II classification. Graziosi and Synsyn emphasize the importance of Lemkin formalizing and defining genocide as a distinct concept, recognizing and naming a practice of systematic extermination that had long existed but lacked precise terminology.[8] Composed of the Greek word *genos* –used to describe a people of the same descent, and *-cide* from the Latin word for killing, creates a specific distinction from war: the victimization or intended extermination of a specific group. The objective of conflict is not merely imperial conquest, or to defeat an enemy, but to eradicate a perceived inferior group. Graziosi and Synsyn further argue that this distinction has shaped both historical analysis and policy-making, but they caution against the creation of an oversimplified "genocide or not" binary, which risks narrowing our understanding of mass violence and its complexities.[9]

The legalization of genocide through the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide played a pivotal role in codifying genocide as a distinct international and punishable crime, separate from war. Lemkin's efforts to define and criminalize genocide laid the groundwork for this convention, which created a legal framework for identifying and prosecuting genocidal acts. The convention's definition, which focused on the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, not only provided legal clarity but also elevated genocide as an exceptional crime in the realm of international law and crimes against humanity.[10]

---

[7] Andrea Graziosi and Frank E. Synsyn, *Genocide: The Power and Problems of a Concept* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022) 5
[8] Graziosi and Synsyn. 9
[9] Graziosi and Synsyn.
[10] Graziosi and Synsyn. 23

However, the legal codification reinforces the binary framework of 'genocide or not', shaping how mass violence is perceived and addressed on the global stage. It encourages scholars and policymakers alike to view genocide as a separate, exceptional occurrence that is distinct from broader warfare. The international community can limit recognition of atrocities that do not meet these precise conditions, yet still involve mass suffering or ethnic cleansing. This can have significant implications for international intervention and justice, as conflicts that fall short of the legal definition of genocide may be overlooked or miscategorise as "mere" war crimes or civil conflict.

The current conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a case where genocidal elements may be present but have not been legally classified as genocide by the International Criminal Courts (ICC) or UN. Since the First (1996-7) and Second (1998-2003) Congo Wars, political crises have continued, exacerbated by the fragmentation of power-sharing arrangements within the government. Ongoing violence, particularly in the eastern provinces like North Kivu and Ituri, stems from the armed conflicts between militias, ethnic groups, and state forces.[11] These conflicts are deeply rooted in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, where ethnic tensions between Hutu and Tutsi populations spilled into Congo, fueling cycles of mass violence.[12] Despite approximately 6 million conflict-related deaths since the outbreak, the international community has classified the mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and human rights violations in the DRC as crimes against humanity [13] Without the label of "genocide," the mass suffering and death in the DRC does not receive the same moral outcry and backlash from the

[11]United Nations, "Escalating Violence in Democratic Republic of Congo Exacerbating Humanitarian Crisis, Special Representative Warns Security Council, Urging Durable Political Solution" Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, February 20, 2024, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15596.doc.htm. and Jean Migabo Kalere, *Génocide au Congo? : analyse des massacres de populations civiles.* (Broederlijk Delen: Bruxelles, 2002)

[12] Gérard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe | Alexander Street, Part of Clarivate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[13] "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo," Global Conflict Tracker, accessed September 5, 2024, https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo.

international community. What is even more essential than moral outcry are the norms that such outrage establishes at the institutional level. While activism, protests, and grassroots anger arise from the bottom, institutions at the top have the capacity to absorb these sentiments and implement effective humanitarian responses.

On the other hand, the broad application of *genocide* can lead to the mislabeling of conflicts that, while involving significant violence and atrocities, do not meet the strict legal definition. In such cases, the emotional and political power of the term may be invoked to garner international attention or intervention, even when the intent to destroy a specific group is not present. Overuse of the term can also complicate international responses by conflating distinct forms of conflict, leading to misguided policies or interventions that fail to address the true nature of the violence. Pushing this binary framework is critical for understanding contemporary conflicts where mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and civilian targeting are entangled with military strategy. In such cases, applying a rigid label of either war or genocide may limit our ability to grasp the full scope of violence and, more importantly, the motivations behind it.

The 118th Congressional Resolution that recognizes genocide in Darfur against non-Arab ethnic minorities introduced in June of this year, serves as a reminder of the long and tumultuous history of genocidal violence in Sudan.[14] The peak of the conflict in Darfur (2003-2010), is widely recognized as a genocide due to the scale of atrocities, including systematic killings, sexual violence, and the mass displacement of targeted ethnic groups. However, the genocide label has not gone without controversy and contestation in academic and legal circles. The Save Darfur movement garnered mass media attention and public participation in the United States,

[14] John [R-MI-10 Rep. James, "H.Res.1328 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): Recognizing the Actions of the Rapid Support Forces and Allied Militias in the Darfur Region of Sudan against Non-Arab Ethnic Communities as Acts of Genocide.," legislation, November 7, 2024, 2024-06-27, https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/1328.

being described as the most successful social movement since Vietnam.[15] In 2004, the U.S. government passed a resolution in Congress recognizing and labeling the situation in Darfur as genocide.[16] The resolution reflects a political judgment designed to pressure international actors and justify potential intervention. However, just one year later in 2005, the UN ruled the Darfur conflict was *not* a genocide in the Security Council Resolution 1564, opting instead to describe the atrocities as war crimes and crimes against humanity.[17] The divergence between U.S. Congress and the UN reveals how the term "genocide" is not only a legal category but a political tool subject to strategic deployment. Following Resolution 1564 the UNSC referred the situation to the ICC, which ruled it *was* a in fact, a genocide.[18] In 2009, the ICC issued a warrant to arrest former president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir with the first genocide case in their court. Yet even this legal codification proved slow to materialize in political action, as al-Bashir remained in government until 2019, raising questions about the real-world impact of labeling an atrocity as "genocide". In this case, the ICC's use of the term carried legal weight, but lacked immediate enforcement, demonstrating the legal declarations alone do not guarantee swift international responses. While the Save Darfur movement did not succeed in mobilizing the international community effectively, it proved remarkably successful in energizing activism and raising awareness. The case of Darfur illustrates how the label of genocide is often contested, revealing the fluidity and complexity of its application depending on evolving political, legal, and academic contexts. The contestation itself shapes international responses, as it can either galvanize or impede efforts to intervene, depending on how the term is invoked.

---

[15] Iavor Rangelov, "The Role of Transnational Society," in *Responding to Genocide, The Politics of International Action*, ed. Adam Lupel and Ernesto Verdeja (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013).
[16] Scott Straus, "Darfur and the Genocide Debate," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005): 123.
[17] "Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General" (Geneva, January 25, 2005).
[18] "Darfur, Sudan | International Criminal Court," accessed September 5, 2024, https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur.

2.0 The Politics of Language: Framing Genocide in Academia

As discussed in the previous section, the term *'genocide'* is not only fraught with instability but is also a subject of intense debate, holding substantial significance in both legal and moral realms. Its meaning has been shaped by evolving political, social, and academic debates, making it a powerful yet slippery concept. This instability arises from its origins as a legal definition yet its application has often expanded beyond these boundaries, becoming both an analytical tool and a moral charge. The term's fluidity means that it is frequently invoked in ways that can diverge from the original legal intent, especially in academic institutions where critical inquiry into conflicts and atrocities is paramount.

Universities, as hubs of intellectual discourse, grapple with this conceptual instability in their examination of global conflicts. When scholars debate whether the atrocities in Darfur, for example, or Israel's military actions in Gaza constitute genocide, they are engaging with a term whose meaning shifts depending on the context, the evidence presented, and the political stakes involved. Academia often serves as a site for these debates, where the framing of an event as genocide—or not—can influence policy recommendations, historical memory, and international legal responses.

In this way, the language of genocide in academia is not just a reflection of scholarly rigor but also a reflection of power dynamics. The decision to label—or withhold the label of—genocide is not merely an academic exercise; it shapes how history is written, how nations are held accountable, and how future interventions are justified. Thus, the contested and evolving nature of the term *genocide* is central to the academic enterprise, influencing everything from research agendas to the political stances of universities themselves.

2.1 Student Activism and the Power of *Genocide* Rhetoric

In on-campus activism, language plays a critical role in mobilizing movements and shaping socio-political responses. While the term "genocide" can carry significant emotional weight, galvanizing students and serving as a powerful rhetorical device, its use also highlights a deeper issue: we need to think beyond just labeling conflicts - especially in the context of "new wars" blurriness and legal contestation. Campaigns like Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) have increasingly invoked the term "genocide" to describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but this focus can inadvertently stifle nuanced discussions and limit our understanding of complex realities.[19]

The power of *genocide* rhetoric in student activism, lies not only in its ability to mobilize but also in its capacity to shape how conflicts are understood and responded to. Activism and social movements – especially those on college campuses – result in powerful knowledge production. With widespread mobilization and participation, this knowledge can become mainstream, accepted as empirical. Thus leading to a stifling of nuanced discussion, where accusations of genocide become rhetorical weapons with high morality – rather than opportunities for meaningful dialogue. But more important than labeling conflicts is the need for innovation. Genocide determination has its limits; while it can catalyse immediate outrage and social mobilization, conflicts are persistent and often mutate rather than resolve, needing complex solutions and rapid responses.

As a student at Columbia during the Spring 2024 protests surrounding Israel's actions in Gaza, I witnessed firsthand how this dynamic unfolded. Dialogue often felt constrained, as the university was put in a difficult position where it could not openly disagree with protestors

[19] Lydia Polgreen and Mark Peterson, "Opinion | The Student-Led Protests Aren't Perfect. That Doesn't Mean They're Not Right.," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2024, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/26/opinion/columbia-student-protests-israel.html.

without being condemned. Yet in its silence, the institution struggled to maintain a semblance of neutrality. This created a climate in which complex, critical discussions about the conflict were sidelined, while the invocation of genocide left little room for deeper intellectual engagement. Instead of campus debates foregrounding innovative solutions and historical arguments, the need for harmony between administration, student activists and the different student groups consumed the air.

This pursuit of a false parity—where disagreement is viewed as divisive—fails to recognize that genuine discourse thrives on diverse perspectives. Rather than seeking agreement, robust debate and engagement with differing viewpoints should be encouraged. This approach can foster a more fertile ground for innovative humanitarian solutions, ultimately leading to a richer understanding of the complexities involved and more effective responses to pressing global issues.

3. Conclusion

Distinguishing between war and genocide remains an essential yet complex endeavor, deeply influenced by evolving scholarly, legal, contextual, and political interpretations. The term "genocide" carries a heavy moral and legal weight, impacting everything from historical memory to legal accountability and humanitarian intervention. However, its application can also be contentious, shaped by political agendas, media portrayals, and academic debates. This fluidity underscores the necessity for precise language and careful analysis when addressing mass violence. Educational institutions, as centers of critical inquiry, play a crucial role in navigating these distinctions. The tension between the emotional and moral weight of "genocide" and the academic rigor required for its accurate application illustrates the broader challenges faced in both scholarly and public discourse.

The deeper issue lies in how language itself constructs our understanding of these concepts. The words we use—whether labeling a conflict as "war" or "genocide" or “genocide or not”—carry immense power, shaping not only academic discourse but also the political, social, and legal responses to violence. Language does not merely describe reality; it creates it. By framing events in specific ways, we influence the reactions of governments, international organizations, and civil society. This is evident in how the term "genocide" is employed in different contexts. Its invocation can rally international intervention or silence nuanced debate, as seen in both historical case studies and contemporary activism. The decision to call something genocide—or not—is never a neutral act. It is a process of meaning-making that can elevate certain atrocities in the global consciousness while diminishing others. It is imperative to remain critically aware of the power of language, recognizing its capacity to not only inform but also constrain the ways we address suffering and injustice.

Bibliography

"Darfur, Sudan | International Criminal Court." Accessed September 15, 2024. https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur.

"Escalating Violence in Democratic Republic of Congo Exacerbating Humanitarian Crisis, Special Representative Warns Security Council, Urging Durable Political Solution | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," February 20, 2024. https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15596.doc.htm.

Global Conflict Tracker. "Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo." Accessed September 13, 2024. https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-democratic-republic-congo.

Graziosi, Andrea, and Frank E. Synsyn. *Genocide : The Power and Problems of a Concept*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022.

Kaldor, Mary. *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Keohane, Robert O., and Joseph S. Nye. "Globalization: What's New? What's Not? (And So What?)." *Foreign Policy*, no. 118 (2000): 104–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/1149673.

Kounkou, Dominique. *Le Génocide Des Laris Au Congo*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018.

Migabo Kalere, Jean. *Génocide Au Congo? : Analyse Des Massacres de Populations Civiles*. Bruxelles: Broederlijk Delen, 2002.

Morrock, Richard. "Heritage of Strife: The Effects of Colonialist 'Divide and Rule' Strategy upon the Colonized Peoples." *Science & Society* 37, no. 2 (1973): 129–51.

Norman M. Naimark. *Genocide : A World History*. The New Oxford World History. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Prunier, Gérard. *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe | Alexander Street, Part of Clarivate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Polgreen, Lydia, and Mark Peterson. "Opinion | The Student-Led Protests Aren't Perfect. That Doesn't Mean They're Not Right." *The New York Times*, April 26, 2024, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/26/opinion/columbia-student-protests-israel.html.

Rangelov, Iavor. "The Role of Transnational Society." In *Responding to Genocide, The Politics of International Action*, edited by Adam Lupel and Ernesto Verdeja. Boulder, London:

Lynne Rienner Publishers, n.d.

Rep. James, John [R-MI-10. “H.Res.1328 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): Recognizing the Actions of the Rapid Support Forces and Allied Militias in the Darfur Region of Sudan against Non-Arab Ethnic Communities as Acts of Genocide.” Legislation, November 7, 2024. 2024-06-27. https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-resolution/1328.

“Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General.” Geneva, January 25, 2005.

Straus, Scott. “Darfur and the Genocide Debate.” *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005): 123.

Suny, Ronald. “Debating Famine and Genocide.” *Contemporary European History* 27, no. 3 (2008): 476–81.

Von Clausewitz, Carl. *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2008.