

Review of Ward Churchill, A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present

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A. Clare BRANDABUR

Review of Ward Churchill's *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present*

Ward Churchill is a Keetoowah Cherokee and Professor of American Indian Studies with the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder and has been a leader of the Colorado Chapter of the American Indian Movement since 1972. *A Little Matter of Genocide* is an achievement of staggering scholarship. The book is dedicated to Polish-American jurist Raphael Lemkin, whose comprehensive definition of genocide, ultimately incorporated into the UN Resolution on Genocide, was rejected (in part at least because he was Jewish and spoke with a foreign accent, I believe) by Democrat and Republican members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in their deliberations in 1948. The title of the book is taken from a statement by Russell Means <<http://www.russellmeans.com/med.html>>, leader of the American Indian Movement, who spoke of "a little matter of genocide right here at home," by which he meant the ongoing genocide against all the Native peoples of the Western hemisphere including the American Indians which is still in progress.

The purpose of this book is to achieve an understanding of genocide which will enable the global human community to call past genocides by their right names, to stop genocides now in progress and to prevent future genocides. Starting from the staggering facts of the genocide, still in progress, against his own Native American people, Churchill relates the history of genocide and the struggle for a definition of the term sufficiently accurate and comprehensive, to prevent the watering down of the concept, and to cut through the misleading rhetoric which now obfuscates debate, thereby permitting this and other genocides to continue: "During the four centuries spanning the time between 1492, when Christopher Columbus first set foot on the 'New World' of a Caribbean beach and 1892, when the U.S. Census Bureau concluded that there were fewer than a quarter-million indigenous people surviving within the country's boundaries, a hemispheric population estimated to have been as great as 125 million was reduced by something over 90 percent. The people had died in their millions of being hacked apart with axes and swords, buried alive and trampled under horses, hunted as game and fed to dogs, shot, beaten, stabbed, scalped for bounty, hanged on meathooks and thrown over the sides of ships at sea, worked to death as slave labourers, intentionally starved and frozen to death during a multitude of forced marches and internments, and, in an unknown number of instances, deliberately infected with epidemic diseases" (1).

Later he concludes, "All told, it is probable that more than one hundred million native people were 'eliminated' in the course of Europe's ongoing 'civilization' of the western hemisphere" (86). Yet this ghastly history is denied, suppressed, minimized, or even celebrated by deniers of what Ward Churchill calls the American holocaust. The director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, in collaboration with the US Senate, during preparations for the 1992 celebration of Columbus Day, refused to fund any film production which proposed to use the word "genocide" to explain the liquidation of Native Americans. Charles Krauthamer used one of his *Time Magazine* columns (27 May 1991) to claim that the extermination of Native Americans was entirely justified because it wiped out "barbarisms" like the Inca community (notwithstanding that pre-Colombian Inca art has been compared favourably with the achievements of classical Greece), e.g., by Malcolm Billings in a recent BBC Heritage episode on Central America). Arthur Schlesinger, Churchill continues, is paraphrased by David Stannard as asserting that without the European conquests and slaughter, at least some New World societies today would be sufficiently unpleasant places to live so as to make acceptable the centuries of genocide that were carried out against the Native peoples of the entire Western Hemisphere (4).

From denials of the American holocaust, Churchill moves to a consideration of the Nazi program against Poles, Jews, Gypsies, Slovenes, and Serbs: "Between 1938 and 1945, Poland, the first Slavic nation to fall to the Germans, suffered 6,028,000 nonmilitary deaths, about 22 percent population reduction. (Three million of the Polish dead were Jews, and another 200,000 or so Gypsies, so the Slavic reduction would come to about 14 percent). ... Virtually every member of the Polish intelligentsia was murdered" (47-49). More horrendous statistics are cited by the author, for instance,

the USSR suffered terrible losses: "by May 10, 1943, the Germans had taken 5,405,616 Soviet military prisoners; of these, around 3.5 million were starved, frozen, shot, gassed, hanged, killed by unchecked epidemics, or simply worked to death [the pre-war population of the Ukraine, Churchill says, was reduced by the time the Germans were finally driven out in 1944, by about 14.5 million, of these at least 7 million were dead]. The Soviet Union lost a minimum of 11 million civilians to Nazi extermination measures, perhaps as many as 15 million, plus another 3.5 million exterminated as prisoners of war, in addition to perhaps a million troops executed by Wehrmacht and Waffen SS units rather than being taken prisoners" (48).

In spite of the exhaustive documentation for mass extermination in the American holocaust and the obvious inclusion of Slavs, Gypsies, Ukrainians and others besides Jews in the German extermination program, there are still those who deny that the term "genocide" applies to Native Americans, and they are the same in some instances as those who deny that the term "genocide" can be applied to any group other than the European Jews. Churchill explains this as follows: "But preposterous as some of the argumentation has become, all of it is outstripped by a substantial component of Zionism which contends not only that the American holocaust never happened, but that no "true" genocide has ever occurred, other than the Holocaust suffered by the Jews at the hands of the Nazis during the first half of the 1940s" (7). In a very closely reasoned discussion, Churchill shows that there is a close relationship between those who deny the historicity of genocide against the Jews under Hitler's Germany -- a fact of history which Churchill, like Edward Said for instance, regards as established -- and those who claim that atrocity was and remains the only holocaust to which the term applies: these two positions are two sides of the same coin in Churchill's view. Both positions falsify the whole subject and make objective discussion impossible. Reviewing the public statements of "deniers" and "exclusivists," Churchill asks what motive lies behind these patently false positions. The exclusivists, he says, have an agenda of establishing a "truth" which serves to compel permanent maintenance of the privileged political status of Israel, "the Jewish state established on Arab land in 1947 as an act of international atonement for the Holocaust ... and to construct a conceptual screen behind which to hide the realities of Israel's ongoing genocide against the Palestinian population whose right and property were usurped in its very creation" (74). But why, Churchill asks, do intellectuals and public figures in the rest of the world buy into such a "thoroughly dishonest enterprise?" He analyses the confluence of interest which he believes explains at least some of this collusion: by seeming to accept "exclusivism", i.e., by seeming to believe that only the Jewish people have ever been the victims of genocide, these other interests gain automatic exemption from coming to grips with various unpleasant skeletons in their own closets. Turkey and Israel, for example, have an unholy alliance: Turkey will piously agree that only the Jewish people have suffered true genocide, in return for Israel's looking the other way from genocide in the past -- against the Armenians -- and genocide in the present against the Kurds. The US can entertain itself with Hollywood dramatizations of the *Diary* of Anne Frank and repeated screenings of the Shoah -- their importance and horror notwithstanding -- yet and while carrying on with the nuclear pollution of Native American lands and the continuing impoverishment and deracination of the Indian people, meanwhile avoiding the genocidal character of its Korean and Viet Nam adventures. Germany can piously distance itself from its Hitlerian past, paying reparations to Jewish survivors, while continuing the active persecution and ghettoization of its Gypsy population without the unpleasant admission that they too are Holocaust survivors. Churchill throws light on the American Revolution and on the Cold War as he pursues the subject of genocide: the colonists opposed England in the years leading up to 1776, he points out, not just over the issue of taxation without representation as we have been taught, but because the Mother Country, engaged in conflicts in Europe, was trying to sign peace treaties with local Indian tribes and cut its losses, while the settlers still wished to expand into "free land" just like the Jewish/American settlers greedy for the "free land" in the West Bank and Gaza today. And US refusal to accept the "communistic" plan of a world-wide structure designed to settle international conflict in non-violent ways, sought instead to impose a "world order" through the attainment of the very kind of unassailable military ascendancy -- and consequent global politico-economic dominance -- for the US that Hitler had earlier desired for Germany. Contrary to what now passes as "responsible" analysis in US scholarship, Churchill concludes, this bellicosity was not an "outgrowth" of the Cold War. Rather, as Noam Chomsky has

argued, it was the cause of it. In his penultimate chapter, Churchill provides a review of the literature on genocide and traces the history of the UN Convention on Genocide, showing how Raphael Lemkin fought for a comprehensive definition which was repeatedly gutted by the great powers. Initially, Lemkin's formulation served as a basis for the Nuremberg Trials of 1946, but when it was submitted to the Council on the Progressive Development and Codification of International Law in June 1947, it immediately stalled, member states "backsliding" into older positions (408), much as Israel and the US recently resisted the attempt in Rome to form a World Court which would declare settlements on occupied land to be a war crime.

In his final chapter, Churchill offers an amended Genocide Convention which refines and elaborates that pioneered by Raphael Lemkin who had left Poland in 1939 and was working out of Yale and Duke University in the US and who developed an admirably comprehensive description of genocide in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944). Unlike many of the narrower definitions which restrict the idea of genocide to the physical annihilation of an entire group, Lemkin conceived of genocide as any "coordinated and planned annihilation of a national, religious, or racial group by a variety of actions aimed at undermining the foundations essential to the survival of the group as a group." This idea of genocide included attacks on political and social institutions, culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of the group. Even non-lethal acts that undermined the liberty, dignity, and personal security of members of a group constituted genocide, if they contributed to weakening the viability of the group, Churchill explains (407-08). Churchill presents this definition under the following title: "Proposed Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," fully elaborated in the format used for legal instruments in the United Nations, in the hope that it may serve as the basis for serious discussion of this crime which stands like a dark shadow at the heart of human history and without an understanding of which the human race may be unable to achieve a peaceful and stable future. The book contains an extensive bibliography and an index. The latter should be improved if a future edition is planned: several entries for individual authors are incomplete, e.g., only four citations are listed for Chomsky, whereas I have counted at least nine others in the text.

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