The recent article by Blum et al.\(^1\) on ethnic cleansing and genocide is based in part on data that published studies have shown to be inaccurate, and contains at least one misleading statement. When these problems are corrected, their argument fails.

The inaccurate data are that 200,000 were killed in the 1992–1995 Bosnian war (Abstract, p. 2, p. 3, fig. 1, fig. 2). The source for this number (per note 26) is www.genocidewatch.org, a web site maintained by author Stanton. That site contains a chart on ‘Genocides, Politicides, and Other Mass Murder Since 1945, With Stages in 2006,’ which has the 200,000 figure, but does not provide a source for it.

The 200,000 figure originated in 1992 with Bosnian President Izetbegovic, leader of one of the parties to the conflict involved, who had an obvious interest in exaggerating the numbers killed,\(^2\) and was accepted, almost without question, by major western media and government figures. Former Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke has inflated the figure to 300,000 dead.\(^3\) However, demographers working in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have published a careful analysis of deaths in the Bosnian war, based on reliable demographic sources rather than on the statements of politicians, with a critique of earlier reports. They estimate the total number of war-related casualties in Bosnia–Herzegovina (1992–1995) as 102,622, including 47,360 military casualties and 55,261 civilians, a relatively high ratio of military to civilian casualties in a war in Europe in the late 20th century.\(^4\) In December 2005 an NGO in Sarajevo engaged in a similar project also said that final figures would be about 102,000.\(^5\) A similar methodology was used to arrive at the generally accepted figure of the number killed at Srebrenica.\(^6\) These data are contrary to the claim by Blum et al. that NATO intervention in Bosnia after 1994 came after ‘most of the 200,000 dead had already been killed’ there (p. 2). Not only is their total figure inflated by almost 100%, but the largest single massacre, at Srebrenica, happened at the very end of the war.

The misleading statement by Blum et al. is that the ICTY ‘concluded that what happened in Bosnia was genocide’ (p. 2). The ICTY has concluded only that the massacre at Srebrenica in July 1995 constituted genocide,\(^7\) and even that decision was criticized as ‘distort[ing] the definition [of genocide] unreasonably.’\(^8\) In another case, concerning events in the first year of the war, after a trial lasting more than 2 years, 27,000 pages of transcripts of testimony and more than 3800 prosecution exhibits, the trial court found the defendant, one of the most important leaders of the Bosnian Serbs, not guilty of genocide or complicity in genocide, though he was guilty of many other crimes against humanity.\(^9\)

Considering these more reliable data, the Blum et al. article fails in two ways. Their argument that the use of the term ethnic cleansing instead of genocide ‘bears no relationship to legal rigour’ (p. 5) is incorrect, at least in regard to Bosnia. After several trials on this issue, there has been no finding by any international legal body that ‘genocide’ occurred in Bosnia until the very last months of the war, so the term ‘genocide’ was indeed avoided when the facts on the ground were not conducive with its use, except by those who used the term despite a lack of reliable evidence that it was applicable. More importantly, Blum et al. themselves are not using the term ‘genocide’ in a rigorous, reliable, or verifiable, manner. They seem instead to equate ‘genocide’ with ‘massacres, forced starvation, expulsions and other atrocities’ (p. 4). These events are and have been reprehensible, but they do not necessarily, or always, constitute genocide. Such a non-specific use of a critical term is unacceptable in scientific analysis.

A strong case can be made that the reckless use of the term ‘genocide’ is dangerous. While Blum et al. refer to the deaths in Kosovo as ‘genocide,’ not even Slobodan Milosevic was charged with that crime for the conflict by the ICTY. Even the U.S. State Department admitted, while the war against Serbia over Kosovo was still in progress, that it was not until the NATO intervention that ‘Serbian forces dramatically increased the scope and pace of their efforts, moving away from selective targeting of towns and regions suspected of KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] sympathies towards a sustained and systematic effort to ethnically cleanse the entire province of Kosovo.’\(^10\) This conclusion is supported by the data in the AAAS study on refugee flows from Kosovo, which saw them begin on 26 March 1999, 2 days after the start of the NATO campaign.\(^11\) Thus the events there that Blum et al. call ‘genocide’ (p. 2) were the result of intervention, and that intervention was itself prompted at least in part by irresponsible and inaccurate invocations of the term ‘genocide.’\(^12\) The effects of falsely crying ‘genocide’ may be severe. The failure of Blum et al. to consider them raises further doubts about their analysis.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

References


2. Cong. Christopher Smith, hearing of the U.S. Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) on ‘War Crimes and the Humanitarian Crisis in the former Yugoslavia’ 25 January 1993. Transcripts of hearings of the CSCE may be accessed at http://www.cisce.gov, where they are organized by issue and by country, then listed chronologically within each category.


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