

“They said they would keep us there up to 50 years, until the whole nation, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, and other Muslim nationalities, would disappear.”¹

A response to “‘Genocide’ is the wrong word for the horrors of Xinjiang”

<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/02/13/genocide-is-the-wrong-word-for-the-horrors-of-xinjiang>

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Reading the opinion piece in *The Economist*, one cannot help being struck by two things. First, the author seems to contradict themselves by wanting to use the right words to name things, while choosing to ignore the very definition of the word they want to specify the usage of. Secondly, they seem to be wildly unfamiliar with the details of the situation in the Uyghur Region (Xinjiang).

The author is right to point out that we should be careful when using such terms as genocide, and that the actions taken by states in response to the unfolding tragedy in the Uyghur Region are insufficient. However, that does not mean that confronting the reality of the situation, first and foremost by using the right words to describe it, is the wrong move.

I will not go into the definition of genocide here, or why it so readily applies to the situation of the Uyghur Region, as Ewelina U. Ochab, a specialist of genocide, has already written a very pertinent reply to the article published in *The Economist* from that angle.² However, I will allow myself to go over the elements of the Uyghur situation the author brings into play in their argument, and, more importantly, the many aspects they have passed under silence.

I understand that the author cannot have a knowledge of the situation, of the history of the region, of the historiography and of the current assimilation campaign which is as deep and comprehensive as I would like. I accept that for them, this is just one piece, on one topic, amongst the many others they will write and publish this year. But in exchange for this acceptance, I expect humility on their behalf. I expect them to turn towards specialists, who have dedicated their careers to this region, to its history, to its peoples, to the long lasting conflict with the Chinese party-state and most importantly to the current efforts to crush the Uyghur people, and to respect their carefully weighed-up positions on these topics. Many leading specialists, who are expected to choose their words carefully, have entered into serious discussions about the applicability of the term genocide since 2017, and agree that the situation in the Uyghur Region meets significant points in the UN criteria.³ Furthermore, the slap-dash attitude towards grave situations like that unfolding in China’s North-West displayed in the article is no match for the central and outstanding work

¹ Interview with Nurlan Kokteubai, a camp survivor, in Darren Byler, “‘Only When You, Your Children, and Your Grandchildren Become Chinese’: Life after Xinjiang Detainment”, *SupChina*, 6 January 2021, <https://supchina.com/2021/01/06/life-after-xinjiang-detainment/>.

² Ewelina U. Ochab, ‘Genocide Is The Right Word For The Atrocities In Xinjiang’, *Forbes*, accessed 20 February 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2021/02/19/genocide-is-the-right-word-for-the-atrocities-in-xinjiang/>.

³ Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP’s Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang* (Jamestown Foundation Washington, 2020); Joanne Smith Finley, ‘Why Scholars and Activists Increasingly Fear a Uyghur Genocide in Xinjiang’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2020, 1–23.

of many serious journalists who have taken the time to research and write about the region in question, and without whom we would not know as much as we do about the current situation. Therefore, I assume that the author has neither read the academic literature, nor taken the time to peruse the work of their hard-working colleagues.

Following on from this, I don't expect to encounter turns of phrase such as "it [the Chinese regime] has locked up *perhaps* 1m of them in prison camps" and "which it *naturally* mislabels 'vocational training centres'" (emphasis added). From this we are, I suppose, to understand that the figure of one million is mere supposition and speculation (when there is proof that the number of people interned is at least that⁴), and that the way the Chinese party-state names these prison camps is a self-evident lie, thus dismissing the Chinese state produced discourse as non-pertinent in the discussion. As for the admission that the state "has forcibly sterilised *some* Uyghur women" (emphasis added), a campaign aiming to sterilize the equivalent of at least 20 percent of women of childbearing age in Southern Xinjiang is not what I would call sterilizing "some" Uyghur women.⁵

For the journalist, the evidence potentially supporting genocide stops there. They forget or willfully leave out the question of forced inter-ethnic marriages,⁶ the growing number of children with so-called "double-detained" parents being raised in state orphanages separated from their families and their community,⁷ and the shift to near exclusive residential schools for students above eighth grade with, from 2017 onwards, increasing residential elementary schools and nurseries, "where students are held behind walls except on weekend home visits."⁸ They also seem to think it pertinent to exclude witness accounts of the camps, any discussion of the conditions inside them, as well as mention of the reported words or actions of the Chinese camp guards. I would think it fitting to include phrases of intent such as "[t]hey [the prison camp staff] said that the current system would not change until all Muslim nationalities would be extinct",⁹ even though they are not written black on white but reported by victims of the assimilation campaign. There is also the question of the conditions inside the camps, the long list of reasons one can be detained,¹⁰ and the new reports of systematic rape,¹¹ which one can only assume have for primary intent the destruction of the people interned within the camp walls.

⁴ Adrian Zenz, "Thoroughly Reforming Them towards a Healthy Heart Attitude": China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang', *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 102–28; Adrian Zenz, "Wash Brains, Cleanse Hearts": Evidence from Chinese Government Documents about the Nature and Extent of Xinjiang's Extrajudicial Internment Campaign', *Journal of Political Risk* 7, no. 11 (2019): 11.

⁵ Adrian Zenz, *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP's Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang* (Jamestown Foundation Washington, 2020).

⁶ Darren Byler, 'Uyghur Love in a Time of Interethnic Marriage', SupChina, 7 August 2019, <https://supchina.com/2019/08/07/uyghur-love-in-a-time-of-interethnic-marriage/>.

⁷ Adrian Zenz, 'Break Their Roots: Evidence for China's Parent-Child Separation Campaign in Xinjiang', *Journal of Political Risk* 7, no. 7 (2019).

⁸ Darren Byler, 'Xinjiang Education Reform and the Eradication of Uyghur-Language Books', SupChina, 2 October 2019, <https://supchina.com/2019/10/02/xinjiang-education-reform-and-the-eradication-of-uyghur-language-books/>.

⁹ Darren Byler, "Only When You, Your Children, and Your Grandchildren Become Chinese": Life after Xinjiang Detainment', SupChina, 6 January 2021, <https://supchina.com/2021/01/06/life-after-xinjiang-detainment/>.

¹⁰ Adrian Zenz, 'The Karakax List: Dissecting the Anatomy of Beijing's Internment Drive in Xinjiang', *Journal of Political Risk* 8, no. 2 (2020).

¹¹ Matthew Hill, David Campanale, and Joel Gunter, "Their Goal Is to Destroy Everyone": Uighur Camp Detainees Allege Systematic Rape', *BBC News*, 2 February 2021, sec. China, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071>.

It is ironic, I think, that in a piece arguing for nuance, and a correct understanding of the weight of words, the author deems it appropriate to open their article with Ronald Reagan, the East German situation, and the context of the Cold War with the simplistic and essentialist dictatorship/democracy dichotomy. I would think that the use of the term ‘genocide’, however controversial one might consider it, is certainly less problematic than an “us vs them” dynamic, which paints the Chinese regime as evil and by its very nature unreasonable. Furthermore, dismissing the discourse surrounding this situation in China, which is central to understanding the intentionality behind this atrocity and key to finding solutions to the problem, runs contrary to the argument the author clumsily tries to make.

“Democracies can tell it like it is”, but the question is, do they? Where is the author’s sense of responsibility, as a citizen of such a democracy, to speak truth beyond narrow political and economic interests, or beyond the fear of wounding conservative sensitivities? The question I would like to ask them is: how large a part of the Uyghur population has to be destroyed before they accept the term genocide, because very soon there will be no Uyghurs left in China. There will be no Uyghurs left not because of mass extermination, but because they will have been fully assimilated into the Han population. When a people cannot speak their language, practice their religion, produce their literature and music, interact with each other in the way they were brought up to, when their elites have all been locked away on fake charges, when they carry and pass down the psychological trauma of having been forcibly assimilated, when they do not know who their biological parents were or are, when they do not understand why their mother has strained interactions with their father, in these cases, is it not accurate to speak of the destruction of a people? Give it a generation, and then maybe the author will rethink this rushed and badly documented piece.

In considering how rarely and hesitantly the US State Department has applied the “genocide” label previously, the author seemingly concludes that applying this label to the Uyghur situation is underserved or rushed. On the contrary, what I see is the extent to which the US has failed other peoples in desperate situations. Instead of endorsing such hypocrisy, should we not encourage state actors to use the right words and subsequently take the right actions, instead of simply paying lip service to human rights, or softening our criticism to make it acceptable to... who exactly? The author then goes on to add a comically absurd touch when giving the following example of previous US State Department actions: “It did not call Rwanda’s genocide a genocide until it was practically over.” Considering this, I suppose they think we should do the same with the Uyghurs, that is to say that we should wait it out and see if there really are any of them left afterwards before making any hasty terminological decisions. It is unclear in whose interest the author is writing in but it is most certainly not in the interest of the Uyghurs, either in China or in the diaspora.

The last point I would like to touch upon is one that is particularly close to my heart and to my daily work with the European Uyghur Institute. This article has been written with complete disregard to the people who have friends and family in the region, who have had to flee and yet have still felt the impact of Chinese state persecution from abroad, who live in constant fear and insecurity, or who have themselves experienced the horror of the camps and who expend all their energy in fighting against the current Chinese policies in the region. They have felt the repeated blows to their language, culture, and lives. They may not be dead, or (currently) in a prison camp, but they will never be the same again simply

because they are Uyghur. As they struggle against the weight of the Chinese Communist Party, in a context of general indifference in the countries where they have found asylum, individuals who supposedly have the opportunity to “tell it like it is” simply don’t. Instead they prefer to pick apart the few successes that the Uyghur cause has earned over the past three years, and seek to deny them the right to refer to what is happening to them and their people with the appropriate word, that is to say “genocide”.

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