

# ETHNIC CLEANSING

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## Ethnic Cleansing: A Psychological and Sociological Analysis

### Introduction and Core Definition

The term Ethnic Cleansing refers to a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove forcibly the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from a given geographic area. This process is undertaken using a variety of violent and coercive methods, intending to achieve ethnic homogeneity within that territory. It is fundamentally a strategy of intimidation and forced relocation, distinct from but often related to other crimes of mass atrocity. While the motivation is primarily territorial and political--to secure control over a specific region--the execution relies heavily on profound psychological manipulation and the systematic destruction of the victim group's social fabric and sense of security.

The core mechanism underlying ethnic cleansing is the creation of a pervasive atmosphere of terror. This terror is not random but is systematically applied to ensure compliance and rapid flight. Tactics often include targeted assassinations of community leaders, the shelling of civilian infrastructure, systematic economic disenfranchisement, and the widespread use of sexual violence and arbitrary detention. The goal is not necessarily immediate mass extermination, although that may occur, but rather the rapid and irreversible displacement of the target population. Perpetrators leverage the basic human instinct for survival, forcing victims to choose between immediate flight and certain violence or death, thereby achieving their demographic goals with maximum speed and minimal long-term resistance.

It is crucial to understand that ethnic cleansing is rarely a spontaneous eruption of violence; rather, it is a highly organized, state-sponsored, or state-tolerated operation. These operations require significant logistical planning, coordination between military or paramilitary forces, and often, extensive preparatory media campaigns designed to justify the violence. The planning stage involves identifying the target population, cataloging their property, and establishing the routes and destinations for their eventual expulsion. This methodical approach highlights the bureaucratic nature of the crime, transforming large-scale violence into a logistical problem of population management from the perspective of the perpetrators.

### Historical Development and Conceptual Origin

Although the practice of forcibly removing populations based on ethnic or religious identity has existed for millennia, the specific term "ethnic cleansing" gained international prominence during the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. This period saw widespread atrocities committed during the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia, where the phrase was used by the perpetrators themselves to describe their actions aimed at creating ethnically "pure" territories. Before this modern usage, historical precedents included the forced removal of indigenous populations,

various population transfers conducted after major wars, and early 20th-century movements aimed at national consolidation. The novelty of the 1990s context was the explicit use of the term in political and military discourse.

The United Nations Commission of Experts, established in 1992 to investigate the atrocities in the former Yugoslavia, provided an early and influential definition, characterizing ethnic cleansing as "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas." This formal acknowledgment forced the international community to confront a category of mass violence that seemed to fall between the established legal definitions of simple population transfer and the crime of genocide, which requires proof of intent to destroy a group physically or biologically.

The origin of the contemporary concept lies in the desire for territorial nationalism, where the state or controlling political faction seeks to align borders with ethnic identity. This hyper-nationalist ideology views diversity as an existential threat to national cohesion and stability. Historically, the process often accelerates during periods of state collapse or intense inter-group conflict, providing an opportunity for dominant groups to execute long-held demographic goals under the cover of chaos. The historical record shows that these actions are frequently preceded by decades of propaganda that frames the target minority as invaders, parasites, or traitors, preparing the psychological ground for the eventual violence.

## Mechanisms of Expulsion and Violence

The execution of ethnic cleansing relies on a staged sequence of coercive mechanisms designed to dismantle the target group's presence systematically. The initial stage often involves legislative and economic repression, where the targeted minority is stripped of property rights, employment, and civic protections. This legal exclusion makes the group vulnerable and dependent. This phase transitions into organized terror through paramilitary raids, mass arrests, and the establishment of detention centers or concentration camps. These camps serve not primarily for incarceration, but as centers for systematic abuse, torture, and selection for expulsion, sending a clear, terrifying message back to the broader community.

A particularly insidious mechanism is the destruction of cultural and religious heritage. Perpetrators systematically target churches, mosques, cemeteries, libraries, and historical monuments belonging to the victim group. This physical erasure aims to destroy the target group's historical claim to the territory and their collective memory, making return nearly impossible and robbing them of the psychological anchor points of their identity. The destruction is a symbolic act asserting absolute dominance and permanently altering the landscape to reflect the desired homogeneity.

Ultimately, the mechanism culminates in forced displacement, often conducted under perilous

conditions. Victims are frequently given short notice to leave, stripped of their valuables, and marched or transported to hostile borders. The lack of humanitarian corridors, coupled with attacks during transit, ensures high casualty rates and maximizes suffering. This final act of expulsion solidifies the perpetrator's control and creates a refugee crisis, which further burdens and destabilizes neighboring states, effectively externalizing the human cost of the cleansing operation.

## The Psychology of Perpetrators and Bystanders

The commission of ethnic cleansing requires substantial psychological transformation within the perpetrator group. Central to this process is dehumanization, a psychological mechanism wherein the target group is stripped of its human qualities and equated with vermin, disease, or existential threats. Propaganda plays a critical role in promoting this view, utilizing media and public education to create an "us versus them" dichotomy so rigid that violence against "them" becomes morally permissible, or even heroic, in the eyes of the perpetrators. This process reduces the moral dissonance associated with committing atrocities against fellow human beings.

Furthermore, the dynamics of group conformity and obedience to authority are paramount. Many atrocities are committed not by psychopaths, but by ordinary individuals operating within a highly structured military or paramilitary hierarchy. Social psychological studies, such as those related to the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment, suggest that situational factors--like clear orders, diffusion of responsibility, and the perceived legitimacy of the authority figure--can override personal moral constraints. In the context of ethnic cleansing, the group provides the moral framework, and individual actions are submerged within the collective, violent endeavor.

The psychology of the bystander community--both domestic and international--is also crucial. Domestically, bystanders often engage in selective inattention or normalization of violence, driven by fear of persecution or complicity with the dominant ideology. Internationally, the response is frequently characterized by delayed action, diplomatic maneuvering, and the difficulty of mobilizing political will in the face of complex military realities. This failure to intervene promptly often gives perpetrators the necessary window of opportunity to complete the cleansing operation before international pressure can effectively halt it.

## Legal Status and International Response

Legally, ethnic cleansing is a complex concept because it does not have a precise definition as an independent crime in an international treaty, unlike genocide or Crimes Against Humanity. However, the actions and policies that constitute ethnic cleansing--such as murder, persecution, deportation, destruction of property, and systematic rape--are unequivocally defined as War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). In practice, prosecuting individuals for ethnic cleansing involves charging them with these

specific underlying criminal acts.

The debate over the legal definition often revolves around intent. If the intent of the perpetrators is merely to expel the population (ethnic cleansing), it is typically prosecuted as deportation (a Crime Against Humanity). If the intent can be proven to be the destruction, in whole or in part, of the ethnic group's physical or biological existence, the crime becomes genocide. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) recognized ethnic cleansing as often achieving the same results as genocide, namely the permanent removal of a group, but stressed that the intent requirement for genocide remains higher and more difficult to prove.

International response mechanisms include sanctions, diplomatic pressure, humanitarian intervention, and the establishment of ad hoc tribunals. While the international community has shown a greater willingness to intervene and prosecute these crimes since the Balkans and Rwanda, intervention remains highly inconsistent, often dependent on geopolitical interests and the perceived risk to intervening forces. The establishment of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) theoretically mandates intervention when a state fails to protect its population from mass atrocities, including ethnic cleansing, but its application remains highly selective and politically charged.

### Case Study: Illustrating the Process

Consider a hypothetical but illustrative scenario in the fictional region of "Aethelgard," where a dominant majority group, the "Aethels," seeks to consolidate power by removing a long-standing minority, the "Rhytons," from a resource-rich border province. The process begins not with mass violence, but with a calculated propaganda campaign. State-controlled media broadcasts daily narratives portraying the Rhytons as economically parasitic and disloyal fifth columnists who threaten the Aethel national identity. This initial phase of psychological preparation lasts for several months, eroding public sympathy and normalizing discriminatory attitudes.

The process then escalates through specific, targeted steps:

**Legal Marginalization:** The government passes emergency decrees stripping Rhytons of their property deeds and restricting their movement and assembly. This creates economic desperation and prevents organized resistance.

**Systematic Terror Campaigns:** Paramilitary units, often disguised or operating under official tolerance, begin night raids. They target prominent Rhyton professionals (doctors, teachers, religious leaders) for disappearance or public execution. Simultaneously, they systematically destroy Rhyton cultural sites--churches, community centers, and historical markers--to erase the Rhytons' claim to the land.

**Mass Detention and Coercion:** Remaining Rhytons are rounded up and concentrated in temporary camps under brutal conditions. Interrogation and torture are used not only to extract information but primarily to terrorize the detainees and ensure that the survivors carry stories of horror back to their communities, accelerating the flight response.

**Forced Expulsion:** The military organizes convoys, giving the remaining population minimal time (often less than 24 hours) to gather only what they can carry. They are marched or bussed to the border, often facing abuse, extortion, and sexual violence along the way. The military ensures the journey is dangerous and that the refugees arrive at the border traumatized and depleted, solidifying the impossibility of return.

This step-by-step application of psychological and physical violence successfully achieves the goal: the province is emptied of the Rhyton population, its economic assets are seized by the Aethels, and the homogeneity of the region is structurally reinforced, demonstrating the chilling effectiveness of planned ethnic cleansing.

## Related Concepts and Broader Context

Ethnic cleansing exists within a cluster of related concepts concerning mass violence and population control. The most frequently compared term is genocide. While both involve the targeting of an ethnic group, genocide specifically requires the demonstration of intent to destroy the group physically or biologically. Ethnic cleansing, while horrific and often resulting in mass death, primarily focuses on forced removal and territorial control. It is often argued that ethnic cleansing is a means to an end, and if resistance is met with utter destruction, the action quickly crosses the threshold into genocide.

Another related concept is **Population Transfer**, which historically refers to large-scale, often state-sanctioned, movement of people across territories. While historical population transfers (such as the exchange between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s) were sometimes negotiated and partially consensual, ethnic cleansing is fundamentally non-consensual and reliant on terror and systematic human rights abuses. Furthermore, ethnic cleansing is distinct from **Mass Deportation** in that its underlying goal is permanent demographic change aimed at homogeneity, not simply the removal of undesirable foreign elements.

The broader academic category encompassing ethnic cleansing is **Conflict Studies** and **Political Sociology**, specifically within the study of inter-group conflict, nationalism, and state formation. The phenomenon is analyzed through the lens of resource competition, security dilemmas, and the social construction of identity. Psychologically, it falls under the purview of **Social Psychology**, particularly studies related to group dynamics, obedience, propaganda, and the psychological prerequisites for collective violence, demonstrating how deep-seated prejudices can be rapidly weaponized by political elites to achieve territorial objectives.