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The History of an Argument: Genocide in Australian History

O ver the last three decades, partly influenced by international discourse and research,[2] the term 'genocide' has increasingly been used to study the history of Australia. It has been vigorously embraced and fiercely rejected at the same time – by scholars, journalists, politicians, and ordinary Australians alike. This research investigates one aspect of the Australian genocide debate: the academic literature on the genocide that is said to have been committed against the Indigenous peoples of Australia. The objective of the present article is to retrace the emergence and development of the association of the term 'genocide' with Australian history. It identifies and analyses the key phases in research on Australian genocide, stretching from tentative considerations in the early 1980s to the comparative analyses of the 2000s. Moreover, it highlights the arguments advanced by those criticising the use of the concept of genocide. The study closes with a bibliography of scholarly literature, both critical and supportive of the argument for genocide in Australia.

There exists a legal definition of genocide which is often used as a reference point to Genocide Studies and legal decisions. This definition is part of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; Article II of this Convention specifies five categories of genocide:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

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[2] This article is based on a lecture given at the University of Edinburgh in September 2012. It is only concerned with Australian literature on Australian genocide. It does not discuss international literature.

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Quigley 10).

The following implications of this definition are important: firstly, for an atrocity to be referred to as genocide there must be an *intention* to destroy a human group as such (Lemkin 1947:147; Chalk 53-56; cf. Quigley 88-136); secondly, the group does not need to be completely destroyed; thirdly, genocide is not necessarily the same as mass murder. While genocide might be accomplished by means of mass murder – provided that there is an underlying intention to destroy the group – there are also other forms of deliberate destruction, such as transferring children or preventing births.

The concepts of genocide used in sociology and history usually differ from the legal understanding. They can either be broader, encompassing other forms of destruction, or narrower, reducing genocide to mass murder. For instance, the annihilation of cultural differences – through repressing languages, customs, and religious practices – is often subsumed under a similar though theoretically different concept of intentional destruction, usually termed 'ethnocide' or 'cultural genocide'.[3] Yet cultural difference is of central relevance to Indigeneity and has thus a bearing on the concept of genocide (Fein 79-91; Totten et al.; Chalk 56-60). The point here, however, is that no scholarly consensus exists about the exact differences between genocide and ethnocide, particularly when the result of the corresponding violence is the disappearance of a cultural group. Thus, any analysis of genocide actually depends on the definition of the term itself. In the humanities, the

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[3] Interestingly, Raphaël Lemkin, who coined the term 'genocide', equated 'genocide' with 'ethnocide' (1944:79).

concept of genocide is thus in itself potentially vague. It has no coherent definition upon which scholars can easily rely.

The context of the genocide argument in Australia

The use of the concept of genocide is fairly new within scholarship on Australian history. The application of the term 'genocide' to Australian history first occurred in the 1980s, and, as I will argue, the sudden emergence of this reinterpretation of Australian history should be contextualised within the broader frame of what Bain Attwood has called revisionist rewriting (Attwood 1996).[4] The revisionist rewriting, as Attwood argues, has tried to change a school of Australian national history called 'conventional history' which remained largely unchallenged up until the late 1960s. This challenge had several different reasons.

Firstly, many conventional historians described the making of modern Australia as a 'success story': the establishment of democracy, the achievement of economic prosperity, and the avoidance of revolutionary unrest were considered part of this success. Secondly, most historians of the time described Australian history as largely peaceful: "It is possibly harder to imagine a Hitler, a Stalin or even a Péron flourishing here than in any other country on earth, including England itself" (Ward 239). Interracial violence was thus not an issue historians researched systematically, and a discourse emerged that Indigenous people were hardly mentioned in mainstream history texts (Rolls). Australia was perceived as an essentially good place where no mass murder, wars or interracial violence had happened.

This perspective has changed considerably over the last four decades. To begin with, and to ground studies in Australian genocide, the so-called revisionist historians started to break with conventional history. Henry Reynolds, probably the best -known revisionist historian, writes in his autobiography: "The weight of

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[4] For contextualisation of the schools of Australian historiography, see Rob Pascoe.

evidence had totally convinced me that the history of exploration, of land settlement, of the squatting movement and the pastoral industry and much else had to be rewritten" (2000:102). The outcome of revisionist history was that it included Indigenous Australians in the history of Australia, and it also made interracial violence one of its central themes. This rewriting thus also meant that revisionist history would present a far less positive picture of Australia.

Two themes in revisionist history have become important for subsequent interpretations of genocide. Initially, the theme of Frontier violence dominated many studies, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. An eminent historian, Noel Butlin, reconstructed the massive decline in the Indigenous population figures in Australia, from approximately 1.5 million inhabitants at the time of settlement in 1788 to 31,000 in the year 1911 (133-134, 139). This reduction, the author argues, had been caused by the spread of diseases, particularly smallpox. Henry Reynolds, in turn, estimated the death toll in the Frontier conflict to consist of 20,000 Aborigines and 2,500 non-Aborigines (1995:121, 123).

The second theme that became a fundamental basis for writing on genocide was the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their parents; these children became known as the Stolen Generations. This practice was part of an assimilation policy that intended to suppress Indigenous customs, traditions and languages (Haebich). Peter Read eventually calculated that approximately 50,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and sent to missions, foster homes and white families (26).

As a result of all their methodological and thematic diversity, most revisionist historians thus presented a new view on Australia – many of them focussed on violence, destruction and racism. For example, the old terms employed in conventional history, including 'discovery', 'settlement' and 'peacefulness', have increasingly been replaced by new and often confrontational

terms, including 'invasion', 'war', 'dispossession' and 'extermination'. It is in this context in which the term 'genocide' has been applied to Australian history.

Revisionist history, however, has been increasingly attacked, particularly when, in 1993, Melbourne-based historian Geoffrey Blainey coined the term 'Black Armband History' to refer to the political ambitions of revisionist historians (11). This culminated in a backlash known as 'neo-conventional history', which rejected the negative facts and their interpretations within Australian history. This opposition ultimately triggered a debate that is still going on and has been dubbed the *History Wars* (Macinytre and Clark). One of the primary aims of neo-conventional historians has been to reject the reinterpretation of Australian history to include genocide.

The application of the term 'genocide' to Australian history thus needs to be contextualised within the broader frame of the rewriting of Australian history and of the changes in the major schools of this history. The application of the term 'genocide' to the violent moments in inter-racial Australian history has been a logical consequence of revisionist *re*writings.

The emergence of the genocidal interpretation of Australian history

Initially, most revisionist historians did not employ the term 'genocide'; instead, other words were used, including 'destruction' and 'extermination'. Interestingly, this was in stark contrast to the international literature on the same Australian events; this literature classifies especially the massive decline in the Indigenous populations of Tasmania as genocide. Raphaël Lemkin, a Polish jurist who coined the term 'genocide' in 1944, argues that it was primarily the settlers, and thus private persons rather than the state, who had committed genocide against the Aboriginal Tasmanians (2005). Many scholars outside of Australia have come to assent to this interpretation (e.g., Roberts, Kuper 40; Madley; Morris; Barkan 127-130). Australian scholars, however,

particularly historians specialising in Tasmanian history, such as Henry Reynolds in *Fate of a Free People* (1995), N.J.B. Plomley, and Lyndall Ryan (248, 255, 259), are more reluctant to apply the term 'genocide' and employ other terms instead, especially 'destruction'. There are many reasons for this, but most depend on which definition the individual historians adopt for genocide. Furthermore, these historians are also engaged in documenting the survival of Indigenous people instead of highlighting their destruction, which the term 'genocide' emphasises.

In Australia itself, the first text that focussed systematically on genocide appeared in 1984, approximately twenty years after revisionist history first emerged.[5] This article by Tony Barta has remained influential ever since its first publication; its main argument is that Australian genocide was committed primarily by settler people and not by the state, for the intention of the colonial government was 'to save [the Aborigines] from a genocidal society, a form of imported social order which could not be established here without dispossession of the original inhabitants' (1984:159). Barta further argues that in the context of Australian history, genocide is less a question of intention than one of effects (1987). Thus, in Barta's view, Australian genocide developed along the pattern of 'invasion-resistance-extermination': simply put, Europeans took the land and the traditional owners resisted, which resulted in clashes and massacres.

Thus, according to Barta, genocide was grounded in the processes of invasion and colonisation. Genocide was a consequence and not an intention of colonialism. This argument was certainly crucial, and yet it was also controversial because it broke with the orthodox definition of the term, according to which it is the *intention* to destroy a group that constitutes genocide.

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[5] The term 'genocide' was occasionally employed in texts of the 1960s and 1970s, in those by Davey (6) and Grassby (1), for example. However, these texts did not pursue a systematic, in-depth study of genocide. Rather, the word 'genocide' was used in order to underline the negativity of interracial relations.

Key phases in research on Australian genocide

In hindsight, Barta's first article can be deemed a door-opening study, with many follow-up analyses drawing upon his theses, either supporting or rejecting them. Figure 1 is based upon a comprehensive bibliography of scholarly research on genocide in Australia published between 1984 and 2006. As it shows, many studies followed Barta's, yet research on genocide did not become systematic before 1997. From then on, however, research has not only increased in quantitative respects, as demonstrated by the annual numbers in publications, but also in a qualitative sense as the methods and themes of research have become increasingly diversified. Moreover, this figure substantiates three peaks in the quantity of publications: the years 1997-98, following the publication of the report on the Stolen Generations, *Bringing Them Home*, which concluded that forcible removal practices amounted to the offence of genocide (Wilson and HREOC 270-275); the year 2001, which saw denials of interracial violence in Australian history by controversial author Keith Windschuttle; and the year 2004, when the publication of *Genocide and Settler Society* by Dirk Moses marked the height of the internationalisation of Australian genocide research.

Fig.1: Scholarly Literature on Australian Genocide 1984-2006
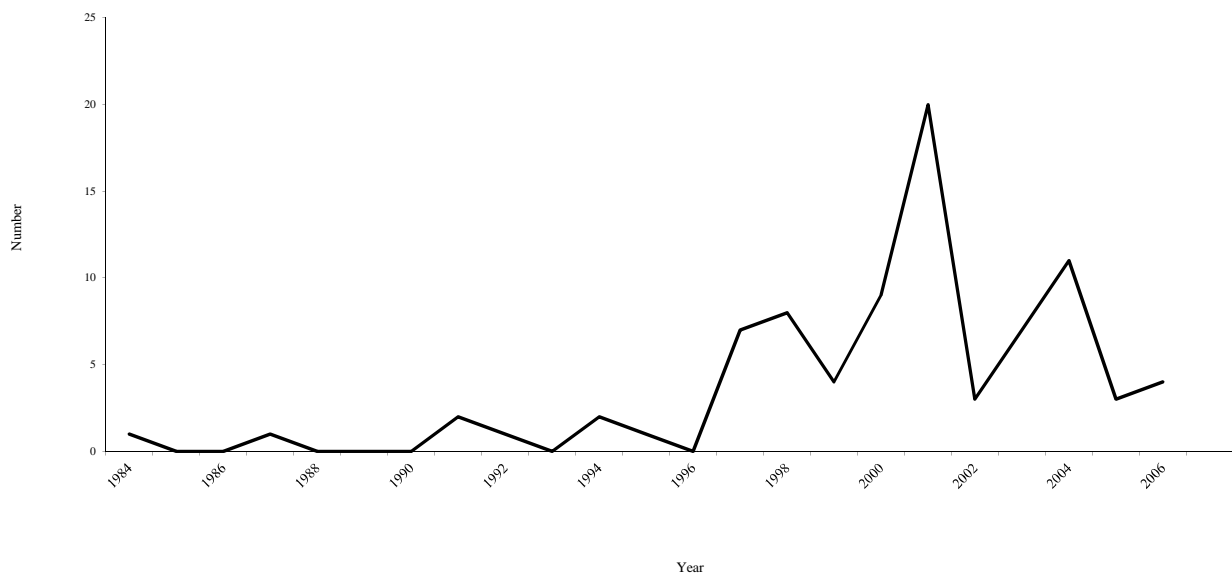
Based on the present bibliography, five key phases can be

identified in the literature that has attributed the concept of genocide to Australian history.

1. **1960s-1984.** The first phase began in the late 1960s and lasted until Barta's first systematic article in 1984. During this phase of revisionist *re*writing, the term 'genocide' was not used; however, the basic facts for subsequent applications of the term had already been established.

2. **1984-1997.** The second phase is characterised by the efforts to apply the concept of genocide to Australian history and to differentiate between genocide and the Holocaust; the argument ran that, although the Holocaust was a form of ultimate genocide, genocide could not be equated with the Holocaust, not least because in Australia there was neither a coherent ideology of extermination nor a centrally organised mass murder. This differentiation has influenced many studies that followed (e.g., Tatz 1992; Gaita 1998; Evans and Thorpe 36; Barta 2001:42-43, 50-54)*.

3. **From 1997.** The third phase marks the actual beginning of systematic genocide research; it began in 1997 with the publication of *Bringing Them Home*, which investigated the abduction of Indigenous children from their families (Wilson and HREOC). As Figure 1 shows, there has been an increase in publications since the publication of *Bringing Them Home*: in 1999, Colin Tatz published his book *Genocide in Australia*, in which he connects, *inter alia*, the killings on the Frontier to article II (a) and the abduction of children to article II (e) of the Genocide Convention. Henry Reynolds followed in 2001 with his monograph *An Indelible Stain*, according to which only isolated killings on the Queensland Frontier amounted to genocide. Also in 2001, a special volume of *Aboriginal History* was devoted to genocide in Australia. The Stolen Generations report also stimulated the first literature rejecting the genocidal interpretation of Australian history;

some of these works are now largely known as part of 'denialist literature'.

4. **From 2000**. The fourth phase began in the year 2000 and is characterised by an increasing internationalisation of research on Australian genocide. For example, many Australian scholars began to publish in international journals such as *Patterns of Prejudice* and to research outside of Australia. Lyndall Ryan started her research at Yale's 'Genocide Studies Program'; in 2000, the 'Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies' was founded; and in 2003, the city of Sydney hosted an international genocide conference. Simultaneously, many scholars began to engage in comparative genocide studies, particularly in the field of colonial genocide, which compared Australian genocide with those in similar settler societies, especially North America, Namibia and South Africa. Alison Palmer's *Colonial Genocide* (2000), for example, compares racial violence in Australia and Namibia, pointing out the different forms of colonial genocides, and concluding that the Australian genocide differed considerably from that in Namibia (191-211). Likewise, in *With Intent to Destroy* (2003), Colin Tatz compares genocide in Australia with genocides in Germany and South Africa, just as Dirk Moses edited the volume *Genocide and Settler Society* (2004), which analysed the interrelations between genocide and colonialism. Without equating genocide with colonialism *per se*, many studies of that period have argued that genocide was already grounded in the colonisation of Australia.

5. **From 2001.** The fifth phase emerged in 2001, after the publication of Keith Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, in which the author claimed that most of the negative facts in Australian history had been fabricated, concluding that there was no evidence supporting the genocide argument (1-10). As a reaction to these denials, many studies started to research the motivations and

methods of denialist literature authors (e.g., Manne 2001; Kiernan; Moses 2003). As Figure 1 demonstrates, the denials quite evidently triggered the increased production of literature on Australian genocide in the year 2001.

It is important to recognise that the literature applying the concept of genocide to Australian history is highly complex and diverse. Much of this diversity is due to the different definitions of genocide underlying the respective studies. It is possible to identify the following themes and aspects to which genocide has been applied in scholarly literature (see Table 1): firstly, the decline in the Indigenous populations (Bartrop; Lukin Watson 178-182; Kocumbias 79-80); secondly, the conflicts on the Frontier of the 19th and early 20th century (e.g., Barta 1984, 1987; Evans and Thorpe); thirdly, regional case studies of Frontier conflicts (e.g., Kimber; Lukin Watson; Reynolds 2001); and finally, the policies of biological and cultural assimilation, including the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families (e.g., Manne 1998; Blum). As Table 1 shows, the most studied themes are Frontier violence and the Stolen Generations.

Table 1: Application of the term 'genocide' to Australian history in select examples of scholarly literature

Name	Application	Related to
Barta	Genocide; own definition (effects of genocide)	Frontier Conflicts
Bartrop	Genocide; own definition (genocidal destruction)	Population Loss
Blum	Genocide; GC	Stolen Generations (WA)
Bradfield	Genocide; GC (Intention)	Stolen Generations
Brunton	No Genocide; GC (Intention)	Stolen Generations
Clendinnen	No Genocide (Genocide is Mass	Stolen Generations

	Murder)	
Evans and Thorpe	Genocide; own definition ('Indigenocide')	Frontier Conflicts
Gaita	Genocide; Intention	Stolen Generations
Haebich	Genocide; Lemkin's *Axis Rule*	Stolen Generations (WA)
Kimber	Genocide; GC	Frontier Conflicts (Central Australia)
Lukin Watson	Genocide; GC	Frontier Conflicts (Qld)
McGregor	No Genocide; GC	Stolen Generations after 1945
Maddock	No Genocide; GC	Stolen Generations
Manne	Genocide; GC	Stolen Generations before 1945
Markus	Ethnocide	Stolen Generations
Minogue	No Genocide	Stolen Generations
Moses	Genocide; GC (Intention)	Frontier Conflicts (Qld)
Palmer	Genocide; GC (Intention)	Frontier Conflicts (Qld)
Reynolds	Genocide; GC (Intention)	Local Frontier Conflicts (Qld)
Tatz	Genocide; GC (Intention)	Frontier Conflicts, Stolen Generations
Windschuttle	No Genocide (no empirical basis)	Frontier Conflicts

Annotation: The rubric 'application' differentiates whether genocide has been employed (=Genocide) or rejected (=No Genocide); GC (=Genocide Convention) and 'Intention' refers to the respective genocide definition used in literature.

For all the thematic and methodological differences in the literature arguing for the concept of genocide in Australia, two major similarities can be discerned:

1. Within Australia, genocide is often seen as a reaction, resulting from Indigenous resistance to colonisation and settlement; thus, in the Australian context, the theoretical concepts of genocide are slightly different from modern European contexts, focussing more upon results and effects than upon an ideology of extermination or a clearly planned intention. Some authors conclude that in Australia, genocide had primarily been committed by settlers, thus making private persons responsible rather than the state. This concept was eventually termed *societal genocide* (Barta 1987).

2. Most studies stress that Australian genocide was rather local, affecting particular Indigenous groups in particular regions, especially the heavily settled regions (Reynolds 2001:119-137). Thus, genocide did not affect all Indigenous groups across Australia, concluding that there had been no coherent and single act of genocide in Australia – there were only *genocidal moments* in Australian history (Reynolds 2001:119; Moses 2000).

Literature critical of the genocide argument

The literature critical of the genocide argument is just as complex as the literature in favour of applying the genocide concept to Australian history. Not all scholars criticising the application of the term 'genocide' are necessarily denialists of inter-racial violence. In fact, most so-called revisionist historians, such as Bain Attwood and Peter Read, have contributed massively to critical interracial Australian history, but have been cautious to use the concept of genocide, often because it is thought to portray Indigenous peoples as passive victims of history. Other historians prefer the term 'ethnocide'; for them, genocide refers to physical atrocities

and murder, whereas 'ethnocide' refers to the destruction of cultures and languages (Markus). Still other researchers insist on identifying genocide only with mass murder, arguing, for one, "[W]hen I see the word 'genocide' I still see Gypsies and Jews herded into trains, into pits, into ravines, and behind them the shadowy figures of Armenian women and children being marched into the desert by armed men. I see deliberate mass murder" (Clendinnen 106).

However, there are also scholars who try to deny violent moments in Australian history by rejecting the application of the term 'genocide'. Such denials are not restricted to the argument for genocide but apply to what is considered negative interpretations of Australian history *per se*. Thus, denialist writing does not form part of genocide research but is part of neo-conventional literature which criticises the focus on inter-racial violence in Australian history. Most of this literature has been published in the journal *Quadrant.* Two broad forms of this denialist literature can be discerned. The first tries to negate the factual basis and evidence upon which interpretations of genocide rest: Keith Windschuttle, for instance, contends that "just four deaths a year [...] must surely rank as just about the lowest rate of violent death ever meted out to indigenous inhabitants anywhere. Yet Tasmania is supposed to have been the site of one of the world's worst examples of genocide" (362). The second form, by contrast, does not negate violent moments as such but tries to downplay their effects by referring to non-Indigenous victims or to national accomplishments (Maddock; Minogue; Brunton). Other authors also claim that genocide should be equated with mass murder and that the contemporary understanding of genocide would, after all, be an anachronistic tool to apprehend the past (Brunton 19-24).

The denialist literature is thus not concerned with the theories of genocide and scholarly questions of further expanding the understanding of how patterns of inter-racial violence emerged, operated and persisted. Instead, it merely reflects a personal choice not to apply a term which has come to be seen as

destroying Australia's 'good reputation'. The denialist debates show that the application of the term 'genocide' to Australian history has a scholarly dimension (to analyse the patterns of inter-racial violence) as much as a political dimension – although the analysis of genocide clearly exceeds the mere question of whether or not genocide 'occurred'. Analytical debates are usually complex and Australian genocide researchers need to stress this complexity much more rigorously to their lay audiences: the application of the term 'genocide' *in scholarship* is not about 'black and white' but about deciphering the complexity of transnational patterns of violence.

Conclusion

Australian genocide research is not only a subject of historiography, but it also has its own history. The argument for genocide is very heterogeneous. It is not merely a question of whether or not genocide has been committed. Instead, many different theoretical and methodological approaches have been developed by Australian scholars, some of immense value to comparative studies and overseas researchers. This study has identified five key phases in Australian-originated genocide research, beginning with a preliminary phase in the late 1960s, stretching through the systematic research of the late 1990s to the comparative analyses of the 2000s. Thus far, the concept of genocide has been argued in cases of disease and population loss, in the Frontier conflicts, and in the policies of biological absorption and cultural assimilation. There are only few studies elaborating on the gendered dimensions of genocide. Pamela Lukin Watson is one of the few authors who have embarked on this theme.

In the literature reviewed in this essay, five different positions on the argument for the concept of genocide can be described: (i) one that argues in favour for the application of the term to Australian history; (ii) one that argues only in some cases for the application, for example, for locally restricted genocide; (iii) one that substitutes for 'genocide' other terms including 'ethnocide'; (iv) one that rejects the use of the term on the grounds of varying

definitions of genocide; (v) and one that minimises the extent of violence in Australian history and thus denies interracial violence, including genocide.

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