

Sean R. Roberts, The George Washington University

As I argue in my recently published book, *The War on the Uyghurs* (Princeton/Manchester 2020), I believe that what the Chinese state is doing to its Uyghur population and other indigenous Turkic Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) fits the description laid out by Raphael Lemkin in his original articulation of the term “genocide,” which he described as “the destruction of a nation or ethnic group.”¹ Lemkin viewed genocide as a process that usually does not entail the “immediate destruction” of the group through mass murder, but that aims to systematically destroy its cultural distinctiveness, collective identity, and way of life, which Lemkin calls the “essential foundations of the life of national groups.”² It is noteworthy that such a process of destruction is both more gradual and more commonplace in history than the attempted mass physical extermination of a people such as was seen in the Holocaust. In my own work, I refer to this gradual, yet intentional, destruction of a nation or ethnic group as “cultural genocide” to highlight its similarities to the pacification and removal of indigenous peoples during processes of colonization elsewhere.³ However, I also emphasize that my use of this term is not intended to suggest one way or another whether such actions qualify as “genocide” by international law. I will leave it to legal experts to make that determination.

My characterization of what is happening to Uyghurs and other related Turkic Muslim peoples in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) as ‘cultural genocide’ emerges from my analysis of both the actions taken by the state against these peoples since 2017 and the context in which they are taking place. The actions themselves are more than the implementation of a random collection of repressive policies. Rather, they form a complex of policies, which are destroying Uyghurs’ sense of nationhood. The context in which they are being carried out is that of China’s settler colonization of the territory Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims peoples view as their homeland. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) wishes to transform this region into a generic part of modern China with a Han majority population and views the indigenous population of the territory as, at best, superfluous to this process and, at worst, as an obstacle that must be removed.

Unfortunately, settler colonizing states do not usually publicly articulate goals of cultural genocide. Rather, they speak in euphemisms that suggest actual intentions while presenting them in a manner that is more palatable to others. In European colonialism during the nineteenth century, cultural genocide was often justified as a “civilizing mission” that was bringing a superior culture to “savages” or as justified in the name of settlers’ security due to the “savage” nature of the native peoples. In China’s case, the state justifies its actions against the indigenous peoples of the XUAR using eerily similar discourse adapted for the twenty-first century – poverty alleviation and counterterrorism. However, it is clear given the states’ intentions for the region’s development and settlement that the actual goal is to remove the native peoples of the XUAR to make way for development that is not actually intended for them, but for others in the PRC.

¹ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) p. 79

² Ibid.

³ Leora Bilsky and Rachel Klagburn, ‘The return of cultural genocide?’, *European Journal of International Law*, 29:2 (2018), 373-396; Robert Van Krieken (2004) ‘Rethinking cultural genocide: Aboriginal child removal and settler-colonial state formation’, *Oceania*, 75:2 (2004), 125-151; Damien Short, ‘Cultural genocide and indigenous peoples: A sociological approach’, *International Journal of Human Rights*, 14:6 (2010), 833-848; Lindsey Kingston, ‘The Destruction of Identity: Cultural Genocide and Indigenous Peoples’, *Journal of Human Rights*, 14:1 (2015), 63-83.