

Genocidal Culture: Christianity and the Normalization of Mass Violence

Presenter: Doris Bergen

This paper develops a new concept—genocidal culture—that links two long-term projects: my research on Wehrmacht chaplains and the Holocaust, and a series of classes I have taught on “Religion and Violence in Comparative Perspective.” The class is a history of genocide with a focus on the roles of religion(s) in selected cases, approached in reverse chronological order, from genocide in Rwanda to genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. The latter topic loops back to the present with examination of the situation in Canada, labeled by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as “cultural genocide” of Aboriginal people. Cultural genocide involves repression of language, religion, and traditions, and it proceeds, accompanies, and follows the killing of people. That repression has a flip side: the imposition of the language, religion, and culture of the conqueror. I call the imposition side of the equation “genocidal culture.” The aggressors’ culture dominates people, places, and things. Accounts from occupied Soviet territories show the Germans marking buildings they claimed with a cross. The symbol of Christianity, in other words, became shorthand for the German occupying presence. Genocidal culture rewards, supports, and buffers the perpetrators of violence and their beneficiaries. The German notion of “Kultur” —Germans as a “Kulturvolk” —fed this dynamic. But as in colonial settings, the Germans rampaging through conquered territory rarely even bothered to pretend to be there for the good of the local populations; their goal was not to spread their “Kultur” to others but to impose it on people and spaces to which they presumed they had a right. In this system, Christianity served multiple purposes, which I will explore using an array of sources —photographs, chaplains’ reports, and accounts from Jewish, Polish, French, Roma, and Russian eyewitnesses—and locating them in a comparative frame.