

# Introduction

## WHY STUDY GENOCIDE?

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“Why would you want to study *that*?”

If you spend any time seriously investigating genocide, or even if you only leave this book lying in plain view, it is likely you will have to deal with this question. Underlying it is a tone of distaste and skepticism, perhaps tinged with suspicion. There may be a hint that you are guided by a morbid fixation on the worst of human horrors. How will you respond? Why, indeed, study genocide?

First and foremost, if you are concerned about issues such as peace, human rights, and social justice, there is a sense that with genocide you are confronting the “Big One,” what Joseph Conrad called the “heart of darkness.” That can be deeply intimidating and disturbing. It can even make you feel trivial and powerless. But genocide is the *opposite* of trivial. Whatever energy and commitment you invest in understanding genocide will be directed towards comprehending and confronting one of humanity’s greatest scourges.

Second, intellectually, to study genocide is to study our historical inheritance. It is unfortunately the case that all stages of recorded human existence, and nearly all parts of the world, have known genocide at one time or another, often repeatedly. Furthermore, genocide may be as prevalent in the contemporary era as at any time in history. Inevitably, there is something depressing about this: Will humanity ever change? But there is also interest and personal enlightenment to be gained by delving into the historical record, for which genocide serves as a point of entry. I well remember the period, half a decade ago, that I devoted to voracious reading of the genocide studies literature, and exploring the diverse themes this opened up to me.

For the first time, events as varied as the European witch-hunts, the War of the Triple Alliance in South America (1864–70), the independence struggle in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, the global plagues of maternal mortality and forced labor – all were revealed to my bleary eyes. (I was researching case-studies for the Gendercide Watch website ([www.gendercide.org](http://www.gendercide.org)), which explains the eclectic choice of subject matter.) The accounts were grim – sometimes relentlessly so. But they were also spellbinding, and they gave me a better grounding not only in world history, but also in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and a handful of other disciplines.

This raises a third reason to study genocide: it brings you into contact with some of the most interesting and exciting debates in the social sciences and humanities. To what extent should genocide be understood as reflecting epic social transformations such as modernity, the rise of the state, and globalization? How has warfare been transformed in recent times, and how are the “degenerate” and decentralized wars of the present age linked to genocidal outbreaks? How does gender shape genocidal experiences and genocidal strategies? How is history “produced,” and what role do memories or denial of genocide play in that production? These are only a few of the themes to be examined in this book. I hope they will lead readers, as they have led me, towards an engagement with cutting-edge debates that have a wider, though not necessarily deeper, significance.

In writing this book, I am standing on the shoulders of giants: the genocide scholars without whose trail-blazing efforts my own work would be inconceivable. You may find their approach and humanity inspiring, as I do. One of my principal concerns is to provide an overview of the core literature in genocide studies; thus each chapter and box-text is accompanied by recommendations for further study.

Modern academic writing, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, is often riddled with impenetrable jargon and not a little pomposity. It would be pleasant to be able to report that genocide studies is free of such baggage. It isn't; but it is less burdened by it than most other fields of study. It seems this has to do with the experience of looking into the abyss, and finding that the abyss looks back. One is forced to ponder one's own human frailty and vulnerability; one is even pressed to confront one's own capacity for hating others, for marginalizing them, for supporting their oppression and annihilation. These realizations aren't pretty, but they are arguably necessary. And they can lead to a certain humility – a rare quality indeed in academia. I once described to a friend why the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) moved me so deeply: “It's like he's grabbing you by the arm and saying, ‘Look. We don't have much time. There are important things we need to talk about.’” You sense the same reading much of the genocide-studies literature: that the issues are too vital, and time too limited, to beat around the bush. George Orwell famously described political speech – he could have been referring to some academic writing – as “a mass of words [that] falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details.”<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the majority of genocide scholars inhabit the literary equivalent of the Tropics. I hope to take up residence there too.

Finally, some good news for the reader interested in understanding and confronting genocide: your studies and actions may make a difference. To study genocide is to study processes by which *hundreds of millions* of people met brutal ends. But

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there are many, many people throughout history who have bravely resisted the blind rush to hatred. They are the courageous and decent souls who gave refuge to hunted Jews or desperate Tutsis. They are the religious believers of many faiths who struggled against the tide of evil, and spread instead a message of love, tolerance, and commonality. They are the non-governmental organizations that warned against incipient genocides and carefully documented those they were unable to prevent. They are the leaders and common soldiers – American, British, Soviet, Vietnamese, Indian, Tanzanian, Rwandan, and others – who vanquished genocidal regimes in modern times.<sup>2</sup> And yes, they are the scholars and intellectuals who have honed our understanding of genocide, while at the same time working outside the ivory tower to alleviate it. You will meet some of these individuals in this book. I hope their stories and actions will inspire you to believe that a future free of genocide and other crimes against humanity is possible.

*But . . .*

Studying genocide, and trying to prevent it, is not to be entered into lightly. A theme that has not been systematically addressed in the genocide studies literature is the psychological and emotional impact such studies can have on the investigator. How many genocide students, scholars, and activists suffer, as do their counterparts in the human rights and social work fields?<sup>3</sup> How many experience depression, insomnia, nightmares as a result of immersing themselves in the most atrocious human conduct?

The trauma is especially intense for those who have actually witnessed genocide, or its direct consequences, up close. During the Turkish genocide against Armenians (Chapter 4), the US Ambassador to Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, received a stream of American missionaries who had managed to make their way out of the killing zone. “For hours they would sit in my office with tears streaming down their faces,” Morgenthau recalled; many had been “broken in health” by the atrocities they had witnessed.<sup>4</sup> My friend Christian Scherrer, who works at the Hiroshima Peace Institute, arrived in Rwanda in November 1994 as part of a United Nations investigation team, only a few months after the slaughter of a million people had been terminated by forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) (see Chapter 9). Rotting bodies were still strewn across the landscape. “For weeks,” Scherrer writes,

following directions given by witnesses, I carefully made my way, step by step, over farmland and grassland. Under my feet, often only half covered with earth, lay the remains of hundreds, indeed thousands, of unfortunate individuals betrayed by their neighbors and slaughtered by specially enlisted bands of assassins . . . a state-sponsored mass murder . . . carried out with a level of mass participation by the majority population the like of which had never been seen before. . . . Many of those who came from outside shared the experience of hundreds of thousands of Rwandans of continuing, for months on end, or even longer, to grieve, to weep internally, and, night after night, to be unable to sleep longer than an hour or two. When they returned to Europe, many of my colleagues felt paralyzed.

He describes the experience as “one of the most painful processes I have ever been through,” and the writing of his fine book, *Genocide and Crisis*, as “part of a personal

process of grieving.” “Investigation into genocide,” he adds, “is something that remains with one for life.”<sup>5</sup> Even as a latecomer to the Rwandan genocide – and as someone who has never visited the country – I remember being so shaken by reading a massive, agonizingly detailed human rights report on the genocide<sup>6</sup> that I dreamed about Rwanda for many nights, feverish visions of encountering Hutu roadblocks, of smuggling desperate Tutsis to Burundi. . . .

Now that interest in genocide is growing exponentially, and the field of comparative genocide studies along with it, this may be a good time to undertake a survey (say, of members of the International Association of Genocide Scholars) to ascertain how common such symptoms are among those who devote their lives to the theme. Meanwhile, I encourage you – especially if you are just beginning your exploration – to be attentive to signs of personal stress. Talk about it with your fellow students, your colleagues, or family and friends. Dwell on the positive examples of bravery and love for others that the study of genocide regularly provides. If that doesn’t work, seek counseling through the resources available on your campus or in your community.

## WHAT THIS BOOK TRIES TO DO, AND WHY

I see genocide as inseparable from the broad thrust of history, both ancient and modern – indeed, it is among history’s defining features, overlapping a range of central historical processes: war, imperialism, state-building, class struggle. I perceive it as intimately linked to key institutions, in which state or broadly political authorities are often but not always principal actors: forced labor, military conscription, incarceration, female infanticide.

I adopt a comparative approach that does not elevate particular genocides over others, except to the extent that scale and intensity warrant special attention. Virtually all definable human groups – the ethnic, national, racial, and religious ones that anchor the legal definition of genocide, and others besides – have been victims of genocide in the past,<sup>7</sup> and are vulnerable in specific contexts today. Equally, most human collectivities – even vulnerable and oppressed ones – have proved capable of inflicting genocide. This can be a painful acknowledgment for genocide scholars to make, and for that reason it is routinely avoided. But it will be confronted head-on throughout this volume: there are no sacred cows here. Respect for taboos and tender sensibilities takes a back seat to the imperative to *get to grips with genocide* – to confront it in as clear-eyed a way as possible; to reduce the chances that mystification and wishful thinking will cloud recognition, and thereby blunt effective opposition.

The subject of genocide has never been more prominent in the public and academic debate than it is today. As one indication, consider the awarding of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award to Samantha Power for her 2002 work, *“A Problem From Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide*, which criticized Western passivity in the face of genocide.<sup>8</sup> Power’s book rapidly became a nucleus around which a mainstream interest in genocide could coalesce.

*“A Problem from Hell”* was as much culmination as catalyst, however. The field of comparative genocide studies has been developing for almost six decades. But it

languished between the 1940s, when Raphael Lemkin coined the term “genocide” and the UN Convention was propounded, and the early 1980s, when Leo Kuper published his field-defining contribution, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (1981).<sup>9</sup> In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the field blossomed, with the formation of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) in 1994, and the publication of dozens of monographs and comparative studies – thousands, if we include the literature focused on the Jewish catastrophe under Nazism.

Despite this proliferation, comparative genocide studies arguably has yet to find its introductory textbook. Some important edited volumes have come closest to establishing themselves as core texts (notably Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn’s *History and Sociology of Genocide*, and Samuel Totten *et al.*’s *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*).<sup>10</sup> As a single-authored work, the classic in the field probably remains Kuper’s *Genocide*, but it is now well over two decades old, and its author sadly deceased. Meanwhile, two fine encyclopedias and a couple of specialized bibliographies have been published, but these are costly and unwieldy for the student or general reader.

Excellent and accessible books on genocide have been published in recent years, though the large majority adopt a specific disciplinary perspective. A partial exception is probably the best of these texts, Alex Alvarez’s *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide*, which approaches the subject from the angle of both political science and sociology.<sup>11</sup> Various scholars have explored psychological perspectives, including Roy Baumeister, Ervin Staub, and James Waller.<sup>12</sup> Martin Shaw has added an important volume on *War and Genocide*, from an international relations and conflict studies framework.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, highly stimulating work has begun to emanate from the discipline of anthropology. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Beatriz Manz, among others, have done important work on genocide and crimes against humanity. Their work has been bolstered by two anthologies of anthropological studies edited by Alexander Laban Hinton.<sup>14</sup>

Last but not least, a rich body of case studies and comparative-theoretical material has accumulated – one this book leans on heavily, with appropriate citation. Thus it now seems an opportune moment to offer a comprehensive introductory text: one that samples the wealth of thinking and writing on genocide in an interdisciplinary way, with a broad range of case studies, and with a unified authorial voice.

The first part of *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* seeks to ground readers in the basic historical and conceptual contexts of genocide. It explores the process by which the Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin first named and defined the phenomenon, then mobilized a nascent United Nations to outlaw it. His story constitutes a vivid and inspiring portrait of an individual who had a significant, largely unsung impact on modern history. Examination of legal and scholarly definitions and debates may help readers to clarify their own thinking, and situate themselves in the discussion.

The case study section of the book (Part 2) is divided between longer case studies of genocide and capsule studies that complement the detailed treatments. I hope this structure will be conducive to discussion and comparative analysis.

The first three chapters of Part 3 explore social-scientific contributions to the study of genocide – from psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science/

international relations. Let me indicate the ambit and limitations of this analysis. I am a political scientist by training. As well as devoting a chapter to perspectives from this discipline, I incorporate its insights elsewhere in the text (notably in Chapter 2 on “Imperialism, War, and Social Revolution,” and Chapter 16 on “Strategies of Intervention and Prevention”). Likewise, Chapter 14 on “Memory, Forgetting, and Denial” touches on a significant discussion among professional historians, while the analysis of “Justice, Truth, and Redress” (Chapter 15), as well as parts of Chapter 1 on “The Origins of Genocide,” explore relevant developments and debates in international law.

Even if a synoptic examination of these disciplines’ insights were possible, given space limitations, I would be unable to provide it. The massive proliferation of academic production, of schools and subschools, has effectively obliterated the “renaissance” man or woman, who once moved with facility among varied fields of knowledge. Accordingly, throughout these chapters, my ambition is modest. I seek only to introduce readers to some useful scholarly framings, together with insights that I have found especially relevant and simulating.

This book at least engages with a field – genocide studies – that has been profoundly interdisciplinary from the start. The development of strict disciplinary boundaries is a modern invention, reflecting the growing scale and bureaucratization of the university. In many ways, the barriers it establishes among disciplines are artificial. Political scientists draw on insights from history, sociology, and psychology, and their own work finds readers in those disciplines. Sociology and anthropology are closely related: the former developed as a study of the societies of the industrial West, while in the latter, Westerners studied “primitive” or preindustrial societies. Other linkages and points of interpenetration could be cited. The point is that consideration of a given theme under the rubric of a particular discipline may be arbitrary. To take just one example, “ethnicity” can be approached from sociological, anthropological, psychological, and political science perspectives. I discuss it principally in its sociological context, but would not wish to see it fixed there.

Part 4, “The Future of Genocide,” adopts a more forward-looking approach, seeking to familiarize readers with contemporary debates over historical memory and genocide denial, as well as mechanisms of justice and redress. The final chapter, “Strategies of Intervention and Prevention,” allows readers to evaluate options for suppressing the scourge.

“How does one handle this subject?” wrote Terrence Des Pres in the preface to *The Survivor*, his study of life in the Nazi concentration camps. His answer: “One doesn’t; not well, not finally. No degree of scope or care can equal the enormity of such events or suffice for the sorrow they encompass. Not to betray it is as much as I can hope for.”<sup>15</sup> His words resonate. In my heart, I know this book is an audacious enterprise, but I have tried to expand the limits of my empathy and, through wide reading, my interdisciplinary understanding. I have also benefited from the insights and corrections of other scholars and general readers, whose names appear in the acknowledgments.

While I must depict particular genocides (and the contributions of entire academic disciplines) in very broad strokes, I have tried throughout to find room for

individuals, whether as victims, perpetrators, or rescuers. I hope this serves to counter some of the abstraction and depersonalization that is inevitable in a general survey. A list of relevant internet sources, and a filmography-in-progress, may be found on the Web page for this book at <http://www.genocidetext.net>.<sup>16</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

- 1 George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" (1946), in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974). Available on the Web at <http://www.resort.com/~prime8/Orwell/patee.html>.
- 2 The Second World War Allies against the Nazis and Japanese; Tanzanians against Idi Amin's Uganda; Vietnamese in Cambodia in 1979; Indians in Bangladesh in 1971; soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front in 1994. See also Chapter 16.
- 3 Writing the first in-depth study of the Soviet "terror-famine" in Ukraine in 1932–33 (see Chapter 5), Robert Conquest confronted only indirectly the "inhuman, unimaginable misery" of the famine; but he still found the task "so distressing that [I] sometimes hardly felt able to proceed." Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 10. Donald Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, who interviewed a hundred survivors of the Armenian genocide, wrote: "During this project our emotions have ranged from melancholy to anger, from feeling guilty about our own privileged status to being overwhelmed by the continuing suffering in our world." They described experiencing "a permanent loss of innocence about the human capacity for evil," as well as "a recognition of the need to combat such evil." Miller and Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley,

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- CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 4. After an immersion in the archive of S-21 (Tuol Sleng), the Khmer Rouge killing center in Cambodia, David Chandler found that “the terror lurking inside it has pushed me around, blunted my skills, and eroded my self-assurance. The experience at times has been akin to drowning.” Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 145. Brandon Hamber notes that “many of the staff” working with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa have experienced “nightmares, paranoia, emotional bluntness, physical problems (e.g. headaches, ulcers, exhaustion, etc.), high levels of anxiety, irritability and aggression, relationship difficulties and substance abuse related problems.” Hamber, “The Burdens of Truth,” in David E. Lorey and William H. Beezley, eds, *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory: The Politics of Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DL: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002), p. 96.
- 4 Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 278.
  - 5 Christian P. Scherrer, *Genocide and Crisis in Central Africa: Conflict Roots, Mass Violence, and Regional War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), pp. 1, 7.
  - 6 African Rights, *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance*, rev. edn (London: African Rights, 1995). The reader who manages to make it through the 300-page chapter titled “A Policy of Massacres” is then confronted with another 300-page chapter titled “Genocidal Frenzy.”
  - 7 “Genocide has been practiced throughout most of history in all parts of the world, although it did not attract much attention because genocide was usually accepted as the deserved fate of the vanquished.” Kurt Jonassohn with Karin Solveig Björnson, *Genocide and Gross Human Rights Violations in Comparative Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 50.
  - 8 Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
  - 9 Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).
  - 10 Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons and Israel Charny, eds, *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views* (New York: Routledge, 2004) (2nd edn).
  - 11 Alex Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).
  - 12 Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1999); James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ervin Staub, *Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
  - 13 Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide: Organized Killing in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).
  - 14 Alexander Laban Hinton, ed., *Genocide: An Anthropological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Alexander Laban Hinton, ed., *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).
  - 15 Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. v–vi.
  - 16 Readers who are interested in the background to my engagement with genocide studies can consult the short essay, “Genocide: A Personal Journey,” at [http://www.genocidetext.net/personal\\_journey.htm](http://www.genocidetext.net/personal_journey.htm).