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Transitions of the Late Modern World

Martin Shaw

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

Genocide has never been talked about more than it is today. Representatives of every group whose members have been victims of atrocities are quick to claim the genocide label. In Western countries a new kind of anti-genocide activism has come into its own, urging politicians to act. Although leaders remain reluctant to acknowledge the occurrence of genocide, genocide prevention is now an institutionalized policy objective of the United Nations and the United States. At the same time, genocide has been established as an academic field, many historical episodes have been uncovered, major works have appeared, conferences have been held, and student interest continues to expand.

What, if anything, does this level of interest tell us about the extent, character and causes of genocide in the twenty-first-century world? Does growing genocide consciousness reflect a still-high or even heightened danger of genocide, or merely greater awareness of dangers that may actually be less than in the past? Do episodes such as those in Rwanda and Darfur – the focal points of recent debate – tell us that genocide today is the same kind of problem that it was in the eras of the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust? Or do they indicate a new pattern? How do growing genocide awareness and policy affect the actual incidence of genocide?

All these questions are different angles on the issue of whether, in the twenty-first century, we are in a new historical period of genocide on a world scale. They thus raise the question of historical change, of how the phenomenon changes from one historical period to another, which is the fundamental question of this book. The historical contextualization of genocide has been an emerging interest in genocide research, and I build on some significant work that has been done in the last few years. However comparative genocide studies, as the field is generally known, is mostly interested in continuity rather than change in the forms and causes of genocide. At the same time, the field mostly looks at genocide in domestic or national, rather than world or international,

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political contexts. Investigating the significance of *world-historical change* for genocide, as I propose to do, goes against the grain of much of the genocide literature, and necessarily involves a critical standpoint towards it.

In the first two chapters, therefore, I criticize the set of assumptions that mostly frames the field today, and ask why the themes of change and world-historical perspective have been difficult to address. In Chapter 1, I link these problems to the political and cultural contexts which have powerfully shaped intellectual agendas around genocide. I argue that without emancipating the genocide field from simplistic moral-political interests, it will not be possible to move on. In Chapter 2, I directly criticize the limited, indeed sometimes naive, conceptions of comparative studies that are linked to these interests and significantly shape the field as it exists. These critiques are, of course, preliminaries to the main tasks of the book. I aim to make two specific contributions to the emergent world-historical genocide literature that I discuss in Chapter 3. The first is simply to extend systematically the temporal frame of this strand, which has so far been concerned mainly with colonial and early twentieth-century European genocide, into the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. The second, however, is more theoretically ambitious. I argue that we cannot explain genocide in terms of the most general properties of the 'international system'. Rather, we must recognize that the 'systemic' characteristics of international relations are historically variable. So my key argument is that major changes in international relations have had fundamental implications for patterns of genocide.

In order to explore this case, I examine genocide across the major late-modern historical changes, paying particular attention to periods of transition. In Chapter 4, I revisit the classical locus of genocide, Europe in the early and mid twentieth century. I argue that the reasons for genocide's extreme prevalence and particular forms in this period lay in how nationalist conflicts and political polarization were entwined with the conflicts of the core powers of the international system, in the largest military struggles, and in key regions. These conditions were historically specific: they did not prevail either before the late nineteenth or after the mid twentieth century. Rather, different international contexts produced patterns of genocide in earlier and later periods of modern history which were different from this 'classical' pattern.

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Here I take a distinctive position on international relations as well as on genocide. I explain in Chapter 5 that I see the outcome of the Second World War as a fundamental change, in which the multi-imperial international system that had produced both the colonial and European contexts of genocide was fundamentally undermined. The beginning of the end of this system had a double significance for genocide, which we can see in the transition of the late 1940s. On one hand, the newly named phenomenon was internationally criminalized and disappeared from Europe for several decades. On the other, genocide began to appear widely in processes of decolonization and in conflicts in post-colonial states, in what would come to be called the Third World. I argue, therefore, that this was a transition in the history of genocide, not a transition from a genocidal to a post-genocidal world.

In Chapter 6, I argue that between the late 1940s and the late 1980s, the Cold War (after which this period has generally been named) was a crucial international context of much genocide. However genocide was at least as much a manifestation of more fundamental changes in states, societies and international relations in the global South (another new naming of this time), which are the second major focus of this chapter. In Chapter 7, I consider the significance of the end of the Cold War for genocide. I see this as a further important turning point in worldwide international relations with major implications for my subject, but as a less fundamental change than that of the 1940s. The changes of the late 1980s involved the collapse of the quasi-imperial Soviet bloc, leading to patterns similar to the earlier unwindings of empires, but with some important new features. I discuss these, focusing on how the end-of-Cold War transition was associated with new genocidal violence in former Soviet republics and in Yugoslavia. I argue too that the wars resulting from the new US supremacy also produced genocide, in Iraq after 2003.

However Southern regions remain the main arenas of violent political and armed conflict, and hence also of genocide, as they were during the Cold War. Yet this is not simple continuity: I argue that the 'global' context of the new era has considerably changed both the locations and the forms of these conflicts. This is partly because of the dynamics of regional international relations, but also through the unintended as well as intended consequences of 'global' norms and interventions. Conflict resolution, 'humanitarian' intervention,

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and democracy promotion have all sometimes accentuated, as well as relieved, genocidal conflict. In Chapter 8, I evaluate some of the conceptualizations of and generalizations about anti-population violence that social scientists have produced in recent years. In Chapter 9, I move into a discussion of the regional and global international contexts of genocide in the current period.

In proposing a historical interpretation in which changes in modern genocide are linked to changes in international relations, I inevitably confront the continuities in both. Clearly it would be foolish to deny their significance. The simple fact that some regions have been sites of genocide in different historical periods indicates that historical change does not create blank slates for new conflict. The Balkans were a genocidal region before and during the First and Second World Wars as well as in the 1990s, as were the African Great Lakes in the aftermath of decolonization as well as in the post-Cold War years. More generally, structural forces that shape the international system in one period continue to mark it, albeit in different contexts, in subsequent eras. If 1945 saw the collapse of the classical inter-imperial system, empire remained a key feature of Cold War international relations, due to the superpowers' imperial ambitions, the protracted fallout from European imperial decline, and the quasi-imperial make-up of many new post-colonial states as well as of the Soviet Union. Similar issues remain in the twenty-first century. I discuss these implications of my argument more fully in Chapter 10.

### The scope of genocide

A key question for any historical evaluation of trends is how to understand the scope of genocide. One of the reasons why much research fails to historicize genocide is because it has reified a particular historical pattern as a timeless norm. Genocide has been increasingly defined narrowly in terms of large-scale intentional mass murder, with the Holocaust as the standard. Defined in these terms, it is easily concluded that genocide is rare, and that the task is to compare its relatively few cases *across* the different historical periods in which they happened, rather than to link them to other violence *within* those periods. If the few cases are seen to differ, this will appear an outcome of specific national conditions, rather than of the changing general patterns of international relations over historical time.

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Clearly genocide is not a ‘thing’ which exists outside human discourse, so there is no absolutely right or wrong definition of the phenomenon. It is an idea, of relatively recent origin, and it is right that it should be developed in response to new challenges. Nevertheless we must be able to provide clear and coherent rationales for the definitions we adopt. The core rationale for the ‘mass murder’ criterion can only be that killing is the most fundamental type of violence against fellow humans, more heinous than others, making this alone the ‘ultimate crime’. But this rationale should be questioned: first, because people often suffer more in torture, rape, separation and dispossession than they do in being killed; and, second, because these different forms of violence are usually combined in any given situation, so that what links them is more important than their distinguishing features. Genocide is generally violent, but it cannot be defined by a particular violent method.

For these reasons, most scholars have actually defined genocide as the ‘destructive’ targeting of a population on the basis of its presumed ‘group’ characteristics, rather than as mass murder. Historically the ‘mass murder’ definition is a departure from the mainstream of thinking about the problem. The original concept of Raphael Lemkin (1944) described multi-method group ‘destruction’, with physical violence as only one of a number of methods. The adaptation of this concept in the United Nations’ Genocide Convention (1948), while steering closer to an emphasis on ‘physical’ destruction, maintained the multi-method idea. I have discussed these ideas and the subsequent debates in my last book (Shaw 2007: 17–36), leading me to a concept of genocidal action as ‘action in which armed power organizations treat civilian social groups as enemies and aim to destroy their real or putative social power, by means of killing, violence and coercion against individuals whom they regard as members of the groups’. I also argue that in a broader sense, genocide can be seen as ‘a form of violent social conflict or war, between armed power organizations that aim to destroy civilian social groups and those groups and other actors who resist this destruction’ (Shaw 2007: 154).

A common objection to this and other definitions that see genocide as more than mass murder is that they are ‘too loose’, so that ‘everything’ counts as genocide. This misunderstands Lemkin’s original rationale for ‘genocide’, which was precisely to have an *overarching* concept for targeted, socially destructive anti-group violence. I find this

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idea useful in the same way that 'war' makes sense as a general term for violent action and conflict between organized armed actors. Indeed the two concepts go together in specifying two fundamental types of violence and conflict that are often combined, their fundamental difference being the types of enemy. In war, armed power targets other armed actors; in genocide, it targets largely unarmed civilians. I have remarked that those who confine genocide to the narrow meaning of mass murder are obliged to reinvent general, overarching concepts for anti-population violence, such as Rummel's (1997) 'democide' and Mann's (2005) 'ethnic cleansing'. In my view, neither of these concepts has the power of 'genocide' (Shaw 2007: 64).

Genocide is a general type of violent action and conflict, and should not to be equated with a particular type of historical event, called 'a genocide'. Genocide can occur on a wide range of scales from huge episodes involving millions of victims, to small episodes involving hundreds or even tens. The term 'genocidal massacre' has long been used to refer to localized genocidal killing. However we need equally to recognize limited-scale genocidal expulsions, genocidal mass rapes, genocidal starvation policies, etc. Thus I propose 'genocidal violence' as a general term for targeted, destructive violence against population groups which is perpetrated episodically, locally or on a small scale, in situations where it does not seem appropriate to talk of 'a genocide'. One way to think about this is to compare it to the way we think about war: this too is a type of violence and conflict that can occur on a wide range of scales. 'Wars' are events of a certain size and duration – conventionally, involving 1,000 battle deaths per year – and thinking about war has long recognized the importance of localized clashes, skirmishes, etc., which involve military violence but are not sufficiently sustained or of a sufficient scale to be called 'wars'.

Of course, the idea of genocide as a general concept of destructive anti-population violence, like any useful concept, still has limits. Two are essential: the boundaries between genocide and war, on the one hand, and non-genocidal coercion against civilian populations, on the other. Neither of these distinctions is easy. Genocide frequently, indeed most commonly, occurs in the context of war, so that we often need to determine whether a civilian population is targeted as a means of fighting a conventional armed enemy or because it is regarded as an enemy in itself. This determination is manifestly difficult in many cases, because of imperfect knowledge of armed actors' aims, and because of

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their combined and/or changing aims. Nevertheless it is essential to make the best possible estimate of the relationships of war and genocide, in what can often be called ‘genocidal war’. I return to these issues in discussing the contemporary political science literature on armed conflict, in Chapter 8.

Likewise, genocide often develops in the context of non-destructive political conflict, in which armed political actors engage in coercion against population groups. Imperial and authoritarian rulers (that means virtually all governments until recent times) have long practised targeted coercion against specific sections of their populations, defined culturally, linguistically, religiously and economically. Yet we can talk of genocide only when they aim to *destroy* those groups’ social networks, institutions, way of life, and territorial or physical existence. Again, the determination of when the violence that is generally part of coercive rule becomes destructive is not always easy. Rulers and other armed political actors may move from non-destructive coercive rule to destruction and back again. Non-destructive rule may involve violence, and coercion always remains part of destruction. But this too is an essential distinction.

While both these distinctions are often difficult, they are vital to pinpoint genocidal dynamics in conflict. It is possible to have war and other forms of conflict without genocide, but it is not possible to have genocide without prior social, political or armed conflict. Genocide usually follows from more conventional conflicts, but it may also be followed by them. The relationships are in principle as complex as social, political and armed conflicts themselves. Genocide may be a matter of a general destructive campaign by a central political authority, or a regional strategy by military or paramilitary commanders, or a localized action by informal local social, political and armed networks, or any combination of these.

I have referred more or less interchangeably to ‘civilian social groups’, ‘population groups’ and ‘populations’ as targets of genocide. This is because, while the concept of ‘group’ that has been used since Lemkin in defining genocide expresses the idea of targeting particular populations, it is sociologically weak (as I explained in Shaw 2007: 97–105). Perpetrators ascribe group characteristics to populations which their members, or others, may not necessarily accept or see in the same way. Moreover, while violence may be thought of by perpetrators (and academic observers) as targeted, it may be experienced as

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arbitrary and indiscriminate by victims. Mark Levene (2005a: 56) abandons the group concept altogether and talks of ‘aggregate populations’; I believe the understanding of genocide needs to capture both sides of this process, hence my somewhat looser, more variable language.

The relevance of this understanding of genocide to my project is this. I stated above that genocide has too often been identified with only one of its methods, mass killing, although even in cases (like the Holocaust and Rwanda) in which mass killing became the dominant method, other forms of coercion and violence such as expulsions, dispossession and rape were also involved. I could have added that it has also been too identified with one type of perpetrator (centralized, particularly totalitarian, regimes), although even where this kind of actor organized genocide, others such as local paramilitaries and supportive social groups were often involved.

The crucial issue for my study is that a complex understanding of the methods and actors of genocide action and genocidal conflict points us towards looking for *shifts* in the structures of genocide over time. It is not just that different world-historical contexts produce different patterns or extents of genocide. They may also manifest different forms of genocidal organization, action and conflict, and different combinations of the principal methods of genocide. War, Carl von Clausewitz (1976: 80) famously stated, is more than a chameleon: it constantly changes its forms as well as its appearances. The same is true of genocide.

### On theory and method

Most conceptual work on genocide has been produced by sociologists and social theorists. The most substantial body of empirical work, in contrast, has been produced by historians, although anthropologists, political scientists, legal scholars and others have also contributed. The disciplinary gulf between sociology and history is probably the deepest in the world of genocide research. This situation has arisen although Max Weber long ago made a cogent case that the difference between the two fields should be understood as a division of labour between general concept-producing and individual event-explaining disciplines (I have discussed this in relation to genocide in Shaw 2007: 86–90).



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The distinctive sub-field of historical sociology offers to combine the contributions of both. However it is modestly sized; while it has produced intellectual giants such as Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol, of its major figures only Michael Mann (2005) has dealt with genocide (I continue to engage with his work in this book). Historical sociology has also begun to influence International Relations (Hobden 1994, Hobden and Hobson 2002), within which I partially frame the present project, but there is no large body of historical-sociological IR. Most work follows the major thinkers I have just mentioned in dealing primarily with earlier phases of modernity and the modern state; very little of it deals with the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the main empirical focus of this book. I complained some time ago (Shaw 1998) that we lacked a 'historical sociology of the future' able to deal with the 'global', 'transnational' and 'regional' as well as the 'national' and 'international'. Indeed I proposed my own historical-theoretical account of 'globality' (Shaw 2000), on which I draw in modified form in the present volume. But in applying historical sociology to late-modern and global-era genocide, there are few guides.

Historical sociology implies methodological commitments: abhorring alike 'abstracted' empiricism and ahistorical 'grand theory', it tends, as C. Wright Mills (1959) classically proposed good sociology should, towards middle-range, historically grounded generalization. But what this means methodologically remains underdeveloped. An impressive model is Mann's (1986, 1993) deployment of a theoretical framework to develop concrete historical analyses, using the work of historians as raw material for macro-historical interpretation. This approach has been hailed too in IR (Hobden and Hobson 2002), because he goes beyond comparative history to international analysis, replacing national societies by transnational networks as the units.

A similar approach inspires the present study, but I neither propose a new general social theory nor methodically apply an existing one to the history of genocide. Rather, I move to and fro between critical theoretical engagement and substantive historical-sociological analysis. Partisans of strict theoretical models and rigorous empirical analysis may be equally dissatisfied, but my discursive method reflects my sense of where we are at, not only in the general development of historical sociology, but in the historical understanding of the international system and above all of genocide. There is no tight theoretical model

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that can be simply applied; indeed there is no agreed universe of cases of genocide that any such model could be applied to.

In this book, I have therefore opted for a narrative approach, part critical-theoretical and part historical-theoretical. I simultaneously discuss ideas about international relations and genocide, on the one hand, and the changing historical realities, on the other. If I don't engage in quantitative analysis, this is not because I think the numbers of people murdered, starved, raped, expelled or dispossessed in different situations unimportant; indeed I often quote estimated numbers as indicators of the scale of events. It is rather because numbers are often hugely difficult to establish with certainty – all the more so once we move (as we must) beyond simple body counts to more complex measures of victimization – so that once debates about numbers were made a major focus of the analysis, they would have tended to dominate it. I felt that, before such analysis could usefully be done on a macro-historical scale, it was necessary to develop a narrative frame within which to identify the different kinds of genocidal situation that we find in modern world history.

This book mainly spans 'late' modern history, effectively the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, with nods to the earlier modern history of genocide. It might be thought that this reduces genocide to a manageable number of cases (from the Armenians to Rwanda) in each of which the writer might be expected to have a fair level of expertise. However my approach to the scope of genocide, and especially my argument that more limited genocidal violence should also be recognized, means that I actually have a shockingly wide range of cases to cover. Thus I am exclusively dependent on secondary sources and the empirical judgements of others, although the uses to which I have put their work are my own. It also means that I may have missed some relevant cases and sources, and have got others wrong at least in part. I ask readers' patience with such issues, and I shall be happy to receive corrections and suggestions for improvement. I ask that they consider the overall aims of the book and its chapters, in which world and regional international patterns are the objects of analysis and specific local and national cases constitute supporting evidence.

A further qualification is necessary. I have stated that it is analytically crucial to distinguish genocide from both war and non-destructive coercion, while showing relationships between them. This kind of