1

Introduction: Emotions and Mass Atrocity

Thomas Brudholm and Johannes Lang

"The energy that actually shapes the world," George Orwell wrote as German bombs rained down on London in 1941, "springs from emotions – racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war."[1] The same year, across the British Channel, the influential French historian Lucian Febvre urged fellow historians to pay closer attention to emotions. Emotions, he warned, "will tomorrow have finally made our universe into a stinking pit of corpses."[2] Febvre was convinced that those who wished to understand political upheavals like Nazism or mass atrocities like the Holocaust would have to think carefully about the emotions involved. That is what this book sets out to do.

Mass atrocity is an umbrella term. It refers to those types of political violence that violate international law and shock the so-called conscience of humanity. This includes war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide: intentional, excessive, illegal violence against an alleged enemy. As a concept, "mass atrocity" evokes at least two very different images. One is the image of the more-or-less spontaneous massacre: those brief episodes of excessive violence, perpetrated by overexcited soldiers in the "fog of war." This is mass atrocity as war crime. The other image that comes to mind has little in common with the emotionally charged massacre. This second image is that of full-blown genocide: a long-term, systematic policy of total annihilation – industrialized, bureaucratized, state-run murder, most hauntingly symbolized by the smokestacks at Auschwitz. Which of these two images of mass atrocity do we have in mind when we invoke the concept? Our answer is bound to affect how we think about the role of emotion. Let us look at two examples.

[1] George Orwell, "Wells, Hitler and the World State" [1941], in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 1995), 188–193, here 190.

[2] Lucien Febvre, "Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past" [1941], in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke, transl. K. Folca (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 12–26, here 26.

Consider, first, the massacre that occurred in My Lai during the Vietnam War. In 1968, over the course of four hours, a company of American soldiers destroyed an entire village, killing between four and five hundred unarmed women, children, and old men. In the weeks and months leading up to the massacre, the company had suffered heavy casualties from landmines and booby traps, and the young soldiers were feeling increasingly frustrated, angry, and afraid. All the while, the enemy remained elusive. On the eve of the attack on My Lai, the soldiers were informed that the village would be swarming with Viet Cong and that the area should be considered a war zone. Expecting fierce opposition, the Americans went in firing at anyone and anything that moved. They met no resistance, and the military assault quickly deteriorated into outright slaughter. Soldiers lined up civilians and executed them at point-blank range. Some of the men raped their victims before killing them; a few took their scalps. The savagery knew no bounds. One villager was beheaded and a woman died from a round of gunfire into her vagina. In the aftermath, commentators as well as several of the soldiers involved claimed that the Americans had been carried away by emotions; their adrenaline surging, they had unleashed their fury on the villagers. On this account, the violence was a form of battlefield frenzy. The perpetrators basically lost their minds.[3]

This bottom-up, micro-level account of mass atrocity places emotions at the center of the explanation. Now compare such an account to the most intensely studied case of mass atrocity: the Holocaust. While most scholars are willing to recognize that emotions play a role in certain episodes of mass atrocity, like My Lai, they have tended to deny the importance of emotion in large-scale, long-term, state-run atrocities like the Holocaust. In *The Destruction of the European Jews*, the pioneering Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg famously described how the bureaucratic and technological machinery of the German state had allowed Nazi perpetrators to suppress their emotions and rationalize their actions.[4] In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman took this argument a step further, proposing that Nazi genocide was a *direct result* of modern rationalization: of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic routinization. Bureaucracy "made the Holocaust," Bauman wrote, and "it made it in its own image."[5] The very idea and choice of physical extermination, he insisted, were products of routine bureaucratic procedures:

[3] For a critical assessment of this version of events, see Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1992).

[4] Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* [1961] (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

[5] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* [1989] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 105.

means–ends calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application, and a commitment to finding rational solutions to perceived problems as they arose. The victims, Bauman claimed, were "killed in a dull, mechanical fashion with no human emotions," killed "so that an objectively better world – more efficient, more moral, more beautiful – could be established."[6] The contrast with My Lai could not be sharper.

But the contrast is misleading. On the one hand, it is unlikely that the massacre at My Lai was a simple result of emotions run amok, and not also a foreseeable consequence of official policy. After all, My Lai was located within a so-called "free-fire zone" – an area wherein anyone unidentified could legitimately be considered an enemy, thereby blurring the crucial distinction between civilians and combatants. On the other hand, the widespread perception of the Holocaust as cold, industrial murder overlooks the roles that emotions played in Nazi genocide. In our book, we reflect on mass atrocity in both senses of the term, both as massacre and as state policy. Our starting point is that emotions are not only involved in the face-to-face and more spontaneous forms of killing; emotions also help shape the very structures and ideologies of genocide and other gross human rights violations.

While the literature on survivors and the aftermaths of genocide and other mass atrocities has produced sophisticated theoretical discussions on emotion,[7] the more structurally and politically oriented historical and social-scientific literatures on the causes and dynamics of mass atrocity have had relatively little to say about the matter. Wary of reducing historical events to matters of individual psychology, historians and social scientists writing about mass atrocity rarely treat emotion as an object of study in its own right. Standard reference works in the field, such as the *Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* or the *Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, include very little reflection on emotion.[8]

This marginalization of emotion in historical and social-scientific analyses of mass atrocity is symptomatic of what has been a larger intellectual tendency

[6] Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 92.

[7] Examples include Mihaela Mihai, *Negative Emotions and Transitional Justice* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016); Sonali Chakravarti, *Sing the Rage: Listening to Anger after Mass Violence* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue: Jean Améry and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008); Margaret U. Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[8] *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

across the historical and social-scientific disciplines. At the beginning of the twenty-first century there was a growing sense that historians and social scientists had neglected the emotions. In a widely read article from 2002, Barbara Rosenwein argued that "most historians" had "shied away from the topic."[9] "Most social scientists," William Sewell noted a few years later, "avoid emotion like the plague."[10] This marginalization of emotion in history and the social sciences was partly a consequence of Nazism and the Holocaust. As sociologist Nikolas Rose writes, the Nazis' "spiritualization of the biological and biologization of the spiritual ... seemed to reveal, for all time, the consequences of a way of thinking in which the person and the body became seen as one."[11] After the Holocaust, many scholars hesitated to explain social and political events with reference to biology or the body because they associated such thinking with "reactionary politics that tied humans to a fixed nature – to be progressive, to aim for social change, justice and equality, required keeping biology in its place."[12] And keeping biology in its place often meant keeping the body, including its emotions, out of the humanities and social sciences.

There were also theoretical arguments for shoving emotions to the margins of historical and social-scientific research. The structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, forcefully argued that it is cultural norms, social structures, and collective actions that arouse and give shape to emotions, not the other way around. "Men," Lévi-Strauss wrote, "do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual"; on the contrary, "each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act."[13] In this view, "emotions explain nothing: they are always *results*," always "consequences, never causes" – and subsequently of little explanatory value to history or social science.[14]

Moreover, Lévi-Strauss offered a common methodological objection to the historical or social-scientific study of emotion. Emotionality or "affectivity," he wrote, "is the most obscure side" of human beings, in many ways resistant or "refractory" to explanation, and thus, by its very nature, "unsuitable for use in

[9] Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002), 821–845, here 821.
[10] William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 248.
[11] Nikolas Rose, "The Human Sciences in a Biological Age," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (2013), 3–34, here 10.
[12] Rose, "The Human Sciences," 10.
[13] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 70.
[14] Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, 71; emphasis in original.

explanation."[15] From this perspective, emotions are too ephemeral, too subjective and opaque to be suitable for the type of historical or social-scientific analysis that looks for hard, enduring, observable facts. Even large swaths of philosophy, the philosopher Peter Goldie observes, have until recently been relatively uninterested in the emotions. Much work on the philosophy of mind, writes Goldie, has had a tendency "to assimilate emotion into more familiar (and supposedly better understood) kinds of mental state such as belief and desire, leaving the 'feeling' side [in other words, the more diffuse, experiential aspects of emotion] to the psychologists."[16]

So what *is* an emotion? This question might at first sight seem rather banal, for on one level we all know the answer: emotions are forms of bodily arousal – engendering a feeling of pleasure or dislike, attraction or repulsion, attachment or rejection, approval or condemnation that accompanies and colors our perception of the world. Yet this obvious answer, based on our own experience, gives rise to more complicated questions. For what is it that causes an emotion to occur? What distinguishes one emotion from another? And can or should we distinguish between emotions, passions, sentiments, and moods? Is it correct to define emotion as something subjective and inner, or should we conceptualize it also as something outside and beyond individual bodies and minds? Researchers are vigorously debating these and similar questions, but the answers remain contested.

"The history of emotion research," writes philosopher Jesse Prinz, "can be regarded as a battle between two opposing sides," between the cognitivists and the non-cognitivists.[17] The cognitivists argue that emotions essentially involve thoughts and judgments – that there is always cognition in emotion. In this view, it is cognitive appraisals that cause emotions to arise. The non-cognitivists deny this, arguing that emotions can occur without cognition. Non-cognitivists insist on a distinction between perception (understood as the sensory experience of the world) and cognition (defined as more complex mental processes, such as conceptual thought, memory, language, and judgment). This distinction between perception and cognition allows the non-cognitivists to argue that emotion is a result of perception, not cognition. From this standpoint, it is possible to view thought and emotion as wholly separate phenomena. The cognitivists counter that such a distinction between perception and cognition is artificial. The body is not a passive receptor of sense

[15] Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, 69.
[16] Peter Goldie, "Introduction," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–15, here 1.
[17] Jesse J. Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 50.

impressions, they argue; cognition is already involved at the level of basic perception, for what we sense or perceive depends on cognitive processes such as attention, memory, and judgment.

One central question in this debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists is whether emotions should be seen as essentially thoughtful (and hence meaningful) phenomena, or whether they can be seen as automatic bodily reflexes. Different philosophies of science are at stake here. A strictly cognitivist approach invites us to *interpret* the emotions and look for *reasons* why people feel the way they do. A strictly non-cognitivist approach allows us to see emotions more as *causes* that *explain* human action. But this contrast between cognitivist and non-cognitivist conceptions of emotion is overdrawn. Most of the time, cognitivists and non-cognitivists agree that emotions (or affects) are meaningful; that they represent something beyond themselves. Emotions have a content and an orientation; they are *about*, *of*, or *toward* something or someone. Emotions represent what the non-cognitivist Jesse Prinz calls *concerns*: people, objects, and events in our environment that are of personal importance to us. When we feel, it is because we attend to something or someone we judge to be important, and the bodily feelings that arise from this judgment affect our way of thinking and makes us want to act in particular ways.

When considering how cognitively complex, how murky and inexplicable, or how reflex-like an emotion appears, we should be aware that we are dealing with a continuum. Some emotions, like fear in the face of immediate danger, are bound to be more reflex-like, while others, like nostalgia, will involve more cognitive complexity. Some emotions seem more unreasonable, more difficult to explain or repress, than others. And then there is the issue of temporality. Emotions unfold in time and space; what might begin as an inexplicable, unexpected, or reflex-like response quickly gets entangled in a web of other emotions and interpretations. When feeling states extend over time, we speak of moods, attitudes, or sentiments; when they extend beyond individuals, we speak of atmospheres; and when feelings contradict each other, we talk of ambivalence. In the humanities and social sciences, some scholars prefer the term "affect" to what they see as the more individualistic and cognitivist concept of emotion. Affect theory moves beyond the psychology of specific emotions, exploring instead the spatial and relational expressions and effects of what are often diffuse and dispersed bodily energies.

The chapters of this book draw on both affect theory and more cognitive conceptions of emotion. The central point for us is not so much whether cognition causes emotion or emotion cognition, but rather that the two are enmeshed and irreducible to one or the other. Sometimes thoughts give rise to

emotions; at other times, emotions inspire thoughts. Some emotions, like sadness, slow down thinking, while other emotions, like joy, accelerate it. Sometimes thoughts subdue emotions; at other times emotions overwhelm thought and impair judgment, a fact that has given emotions their reputation as irrational forces of human nature. But emotions are in themselves a-rational; like thoughts, they can be reasonable or unreasonable, appropriate or inappropriate, functional or dysfunctional, depending on the context.[18] Emotions are the experiential *qualities* of our encounter with the world, and recent work in psychology suggests that we need emotions if we are to function as effective decision-makers.[19] "In order to make up our minds," wrote the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, "we must know how we feel about things."[20]

Yet it is precisely this subjectivist, psychological conception of emotion that has made it such a problematic concept for historical and social-scientific analysis. As we have seen, historians and social scientists tend to insist that explanations of collective phenomena should be sought at the social and political levels, not in the hidden recesses of individual psychology. A focus on the emotional aspects of mass atrocity will, in this view, merely lead to a voyeuristic detour into individual subjectivities, detached from larger social and political considerations. The functionalist historian Hans Mommsen, for instance, cautioned that investigations into the subjective dimensions of the Holocaust would not contribute to an explanation of the violence, but would merely encourage a morally problematic and intellectually unsatisfactory "descent into the trivialities of the unspeakable."[21]

Such objections to the social and political relevance of subjective experience may seem reasonable. But is this kind of objection also an argument against the social and political relevance of emotions? If so, it is an argument that rests on a reductionist view of emotions, seeing them merely as individual, subjective feeling-states. This strictly psychological conception of emotions as *inner* movements of the soul, body, or mind is so familiar that we take it for granted. Yet this conception of emotion is actually quite recent, from a historical point of view: it originated in the early nineteenth century and gained widespread acceptance with the emergence of modern psychological

[18] See Prinz, *Emotional Construction*.
[19] See, for example, Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001), 814–834.
[20] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* [1973] (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 82.
[21] Cited in Christopher Dillon, "'Tolerance Means Weakness': The Dachau Concentration Camp SS, Militarism, and Masculinity," *Historical Research* 86, no. 232 (2013), 373–389, here 375.

science. The psychological conceptualization of emotion ran counter to the original meaning of the term. The root of the word "emotion," the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, is the Latin *movere* – "to move" – and the French word *emotion* originally referred to movements *of* and *among* people rather than within them. The word first appeared in the fifteenth century to describe social and political commotion, not internal states of mind, and the term subsequently entered English in the sixteenth century to portray "the great tumultes and *emotiones* that were in Fraunce between the king and the nobilite."[22] In other word, the concept of emotion was from the very beginning associated with political upheaval and collective violence, with the struggles between the king and those who dared to oppose him.

The etymology and conceptual history of "emotion" suggests that emotions should not be reduced to merely private, subjective phenomena. More than individual feeling-states, emotions are also powerful social and political forces that can be harnessed and shaped in the service of collective action. Emotion *moves* people, motivates them, and for this reason Rosenwein argues that emotions are "an inseparable part of the social process."[23] Sewell writes that "high-pitched emotional excitement is a constituent ingredient of many transformative actions" and often "shapes the very course of events."[24] This implies that scholars cannot truly understand historical change – or the institutions, ideas, and actions of historically turbulent periods – without considering the role of emotions. More specifically, for us, this means that we cannot adequately understand or explain mass atrocities or their aftermaths if we do not grapple with the multilayered nature and complicated effects of the emotions involved. The history of mass atrocity is steeped in emotion, and we must take care not to domesticate these emotions. Emotions are not merely epiphenomena of larger social and political dynamics, as many structuralist and cognitivist accounts would have us believe; emotions also have a momentum and a life of their own. Emotions can be manipulated, they can be detached from their original objects and sources and redirected for other purposes. We should take emotions very seriously, and see them as the powerful moral, political, and historical forces that they are.

Scholars across the humanities and social sciences have begun to rediscover the importance of emotion. Over the past two decades a rapidly growing body

[22] Cited in Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch, and Katrina O'Loughlin, "Introduction," *Emotions and War: Medieval to Romantic Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–23, here 1.

[23] Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1.

[24] Sewell, *Logics*, 249.

of work on the history and theory of emotion has even encouraged some scholars to talk of an "affective" or "emotional" *turn* within history and the social sciences, as well as within a number of humanistic disciplines.[25] This surge of interest in "affect" and "emotion" across the humanities and social sciences is one of the most thought-provoking developments in recent intellectual history, and the aim of our book is to extend some of the force of this "emotional turn" to the study of mass atrocity. Do emotions play crucial roles in this kind of organized violence, even if individual perpetrators may feel nothing? Is ideology primarily a set of beliefs – a worldview – or more like an embodied sensibility? Is mass atrocity rational or irrational? Our book sets out to show how recent work on emotion offers fresh perspectives on these and other questions, but also how the study of mass atrocity, in turn, can shed new light on the theory and philosophy of emotion.

Our book is an interdisciplinary effort. Authors come from backgrounds in philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, and history. This multiplicity of perspectives allows the book to move from the individual and psychological level to a consideration of the social, political, moral, and historical dimensions of the violence and its aftermath. In doing so, we trace how the character and role of emotions shift across these various levels and dimensions of human action and experience. We explore emotions from the perspective of the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders. The book has three parts. The first part argues for the centrality of emotions among the *causes and dynamics* of mass atrocities. The second section analyses a variety of emotional *responses* to the violence, focusing both on specific emotions, such as horror, shame, and disgust, as well as the role of larger clusters of affect and sentiments in political-humanitarian responses to mass atrocity. The final part deals with the significance of emotions and attitudes in processes of *moral repair and collective remembrance* in the aftermath of mass atrocity.

PART I: CAUSES AND DYNAMICS

Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman has written that social scientists have had a tendency to accept two basic ideas about human nature:[26] one, that people are generally rational, and their thinking is usually sound; and two, that emotions explain most of the occasions when people do not behave rationally.

[25] See Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011), 434–472; Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Johannes Lang, "New Histories of Emotion," *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (forthcoming, 2018).

[26] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2011).

The first premise, that human beings are generally rational, suggests that we should look beyond people's emotions and analyze the *real reasons* behind their feelings. This assumption has led some scholars to view genocide and other mass atrocities as rational – that is, as logical, strategic solutions to perceived social and political problems.[27] Such an approach has much to offer. The problem is that it easily makes us lose sight of the emotions, turning them into what the historian Jörn Rüsen has described as "a kind of background music" with "no real function" in historical analysis.[28] The second premise mentioned by Kahneman, that emotions disrupt rational thinking, has led other scholars – those who do acknowledge, or even privilege, the role of emotions in mass atrocity – to characterize the violence as irrational: a result of delusional beliefs and misguided emotions, typically fear and hate.[29]

These two competing narratives about mass atrocity, as either rational or irrational violence, share the assumption that emotion and rationality are two separate things, typically at odds with each other. If mass atrocity is rational, then emotions must play a marginal role; if the violence is emotional, then surely it must be irrational. The underlying dichotomy here – rationality versus emotion – has a long history, and is part of what Barbara Rosenwein calls a "grand narrative" about modernity. According to this narrative, "the history of the West is a history of increasing emotional restraint."[30] Over time, we are told, Western civilization learned, through effective self-discipline, control, and suppression, to master the supposedly irrational, emotional aspects of human nature. All "the great theorizers of the twentieth century" told versions of this same story, Rosenwein points out, including Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Norbert Elias, and Michel Foucault.[31] We became civilized by becoming rational, and we became rational by disciplining our bodies and overcoming our emotions. This understanding of modernity was also the point of departure for Bauman's analysis. The Holocaust, he argued, revealed a danger at the core of a disenchanted, secular, rational modernity, wholly stripped of sentimentality. The Holocaust was not a reversion to barbarism, not the result of primitive hatreds or coarse prejudice; on the contrary, says

[27] Examples include Scott Straus, "'Destroy Them to Save Us': Theories of Genocide and the Logics of Political Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 4 (2012), 544–560; Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Bauman, *Modernity*.

[28] Jörn Rüsen, "Emotional Forces in Historical Thinking: Some Metahistorical Reflections and the Case of Mourning," *Historein* 8 (2008), 41–53, here 43.

[29] See Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1996) for a famous example of such an argument.

[30] Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions," 827.

[31] Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions," 828.