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978-0-521-70681-0 - Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World

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Excerpt

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1 INTRODUCTION

Extremely violent societies

This book suggests a new approach to explaining mass violence. It tries to explore what is going on in societies before, during, and after periods of widespread bloodshed, and it attempts to trace the social roots of human destruction. The study includes an outline and rationale for the new approach, probes its potential in several case studies, and offers general conclusions about processes typical of what I call “extremely violent societies.”

Violence is a fact of human life. Some people may be lucky enough not to experience it. But no society is free of violence, of murder, rape, or robbery. This book, however, deals with extraordinary processes that entail unusually high levels of violence and brutality, which is why I speak of “extremely” violent societies.

“Mass violence” means widespread physical violence against non-combatants, that is, outside of immediate fighting between military or paramilitary personnel.¹ Mass violence includes killings, but also forced removal or expulsion, enforced hunger or undersupply, forced labor, collective rape, strategic bombing, and excessive imprisonment – for many strings connect these to outright murder and these should not be severed analytically.² By extremely violent societies, I mean formations where *various population groups* become victims of massive physical violence, in which, acting together with organs of the state, *diverse social groups participate for a multitude of reasons*. Simply put, the occurrence and the thrust of mass violence depends on broad and diverse support, but this is based on a variety of motives

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 / Introduction

and interests that cause violence to spread in different directions and in varying intensities and forms.

This phenomenon differs from what many scholars and other observers see in mass violence – briefly put, a state’s attempt to destroy a population group, largely for a certain reason, and often called “genocide.”

To begin with, the problem mostly goes beyond the assault of just *one* victim group. Under Nazi Germany, for example, Jews were targeted for killings, but so also were disabled people, Roma and Sinti, political opponents, Soviet prisoners of war, the Polish leadership – broadly defined, and “guerrilla-suspect” rural dwellers; perhaps twelve million foreign nationals were deported to Germany as forced labor, and millions of Eastern Europeans, Greeks, and Dutch were plunged into famine. During World War I, Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Kurds in the Ottoman Empire died in forced resettlement and massacres, and many Turks were also killed. Under Soviet rule from the 1930s to the 1950s, wealthier peasants or individuals with suspicious ‘bourgeois’ origin, people uprooted by the collectivization of agriculture, political opponents, foreign prisoners of war, and citizens belonging to ethnicities who became collectively suspect, were arrested, banished, resettled, or killed. While the treatment of these various groups, and the time, duration, and manner of their persecution may have differed, as did their mortality figures and ratios and their fates afterwards, I suggest that in many ways their suffering should be examined as a whole. A scholar who would look only at the persecution of urbanites, or of ethnic Chinese, or ethnic Vietnamese, or the Cham, Lao, Thai, etc. minorities in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, in isolation, rather than as the outcome of a single process or of interrelated processes, would appear strange. Such a view would be an obstacle to analysis.³ Whereas many scholars insist on strictly distinguishing between the different phenomena of violence, I am interested precisely in the links between the different forms.⁴

Many historians have attested to the “wide-scale voluntary, and indeed willing or even enthusiastic, participation” of men, whether officials or not, in mass killings.⁵ Theoreticians of warfare, among them Clausewitz, have argued that the particularly destructive character of wars originates from the input of the element of “raw violence” by the mass of people, which made armed conflicts even more brutal after the beginning of mass conscription and popular participation in

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

3 / Introduction

politics. It is this involvement that led to a “genocidal tendency in war” per se.⁶ Recently, the argument has been made that “ethnic cleansing” (and sometimes “genocide”) occurs under particular conditions as a perversion of democracy in the early stages of a country’s experience in popular political participation.⁷ Others hold that “national democracy can be compatible with war and genocide” more generally.⁸ I would add to this that it is mass participation which often gives modern mass violence its ghastly pace and thrust and which makes policies of destruction actually materialize.

Each mass slaughter is multi-causal. Some genocide scholars have concluded that the interaction of a variety of factors and processes results in an escalation of human destruction – but it appears unclear how this happens more specifically.⁹ If a variety of people in considerable numbers join in the organization of mass violence, they do so out of a variety of interests, backgrounds, or attitudes. Their different reasons seem to lend urgency to their use of force. To boil it down to one cause that brought them all together to participate (ideological, retributive, economic ‘genocide,’ etc.) makes little sense if the shocking power of violence stems precisely from a mixture of various factors. It seems more promising to ask questions about the overlap of attitudes and interests that brought them together. What did they agree upon, for how much time, and with what different purposes?¹⁰ Such questions may enable us to explain why mass violence started or intensified at certain points and slowed down or ended at others.

Mass violence cannot be viewed as freak event, inexplicable or occurring outside of history (as some view the murder of European Jews); it requires broad contextualization. By asking which reasons brought so many different people to participate in or support mass violence, and why different groups were victimized, the extremely violent societies approach tries to place human destruction in the context of longer-term societal developments. In fact, when inquiring into what is going on in such countries, it seems less and less possible to me to neatly separate cause and effect. Instead, one should inquire into the entire social process of which mass violence is only a part, the relationships between structural and physical violence, between direct violence and dynamic shifts in inequality, and between social groups and state organs. As a historian, I seek to complement the dominant political histories in the field by a social history of mass violence.

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Christian Gerlach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 / Introduction

True, to explain mass violence, it is simplistic to tell only the story of government policies and some rogue regime such as the Nazi government persecuting the Jews. But while an inquiry into extremely violent societies pays special attention to the social contexts of mass violence, this does not mean that it can disregard the role of the state. In fact, so strong are the interrelationships between state and society that they cannot be understood in terms of dichotomous, isolated units. Governments may give orders and try to manipulate people, but they also devise or modify policies according to perceived public pressure and opinion. “The state” is part of society, and reflects its rules and norms, or those of powerful groups, which it then tries to impose or stipulate in turn; and modern functionaries or officials are also citizens with their own agendas and judgment, which means that they are not just cogs that carry out government policies exactly as formulated. If anything, I expect that I will be guilty of maintaining too strong an emphasis on official policies (which my earlier works have not really neglected either). This emphasis is also to be expected because state operations are better documented in the official and other records historians tend to use. Popular involvement in mass violence inevitably leaves less of a paper trail.

By focusing more widely than just on government intentions, the extremely violent societies approach enables us to study far more actors and to take all of their intentions into account, including social and political groups, officials from various ministries, agencies, etc. The agendas of non-state actors often have a major impact on determining the targets, timing, and forms of assault. In the case of such participatory violence, it may become difficult to assign *sole* responsibility for physical violence to one authority or figure, but it is possible to assess each group’s contribution. In any case, assigning responsibility for mass violence is no zero-sum game – if there is popular participation, and public-popular cooperation in violence, this need not diminish the guilt of either officials or non-officials, as the chapters on Indonesia and anti-guerrilla warfare will demonstrate, and as the historiography on Nazi Germany has shown. My approach is designed to take into account every sort of actor, from top to bottom levels, within or outside an official apparatus.

That said, this study blurs the distinction between perpetrators in a strict sense and unaffected bystanders.¹¹ Chapters like the one about the role of economic incentives in the destruction of the

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Christian Gerlach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

5 / Introduction

Armenians will draw into question the very concept of the ‘perpetrator,’ because people whose acts would hardly be defined as murder or even criminal were in no small degree conducive to the death of Armenians. Therefore I shall rather use the more inclusive term of ‘persecutor.’

If one thinks beyond government acts against one group, it may also become possible to overcome the much criticized division between ‘perpetrator history’ and ‘victim history’ as in Holocaust studies that can even let victims appear as groups somehow falling outside of society. Victims and others are part of one interactive process, in which the former are not just passive or even reactive, but seek support, alliances, or counteraction.

Results and restrictions of the genocide approach

This section explains why I do not find “genocide” a useful framework for exploring some of the phenomena at hand, and why I think an alternative framework may be fruitful. For “genocide” marks an approach – one of several imaginable ways to think about mass violence¹² – that lays specific emphasis on the history of ideas and of political systems.

A state turns against a group in society that is mostly ethnically defined – this is the story mostly told in genocide studies. The genocide approach focuses on regimes vulnerable to turning to “genocidal” acts, such as Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Rwanda, or Cambodia. Many argue that a turn to “genocide” happens in a crisis of the state or of government.¹³ Genocide scholars concentrate on how such regimes mobilize bureaucratic machineries, armed formations, and citizens or subjects for violence, most notably through manipulation, propaganda, legislation, and orders; how a persecuted population group, on the basis of an idea of hierarchical otherness, is being excluded, discriminated, stripped of rights, denied its human character, or declared immoral and a threat to the nation. It is excluded from the “universe of obligation.”¹⁴ Using the genocide approach, scholars try to show what grounds are found or invented for rationalizing the destruction of that group (often thought of as premeditated), how mass murder is organized, and how the immoral character of the slaughter is later denied on the basis of the earlier determined rationalizations. Genocide, then,

6 / Introduction

is seen as originating from a failure of a political and judicial system, as well as of public opinion. Genocide scholars often try to isolate one core motive for extermination¹⁵ that is frequently found in the “ideology” of such a regime, mostly pertaining to racism, more rarely to class hatred or religious fanaticism. Then the cure is obvious: prevent or topple such a regime, create a less vulnerable political system, and educate the population about the need for tolerance. For genocide is an action-oriented model designed for moral condemnation, prevention, intervention, or punishment. In other words, genocide is a normative, action-oriented concept made for the political struggle, but in order to be operational it leads to simplification, with a focus on government policies.

More recent works have added that the emergence of modern nation-states has resulted in massive violence against societal groups because they seem to not belong to the majority culture and are suspected of disloyalty, undermining the mission of state policies which they do not subscribe to. This frequently occurs when states have to compete with each other in a conflictual international system; hence genocide is said to often occur in times of war. Several authors now argue that nation-states first turned to genocide during colonialism, particularly in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ The rise of biologicistic racism is emphasized as an important background of this increase in violence. As mentioned, some have also argued that the age of mass politics that began in the early twentieth century has increased rather than minimized the risk of extreme violence because populist movements have tried to overcome or circumvent political problems through violence.¹⁷

But thinking in terms of “genocide” means using a framework that restricts the analysis. Genocide scholars have never agreed what “genocide” actually means. The term is used arbitrarily. Many of them have remained dissatisfied with the definition in the UN Genocide Convention: “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.”¹⁸ Since the 1970s, social scientists have advanced a variety of alternative definitions.¹⁹ Semantically, the term “genocide” means “murder of a tribe.” This implies that the victims of “genocide” are members of an ethnic or racial group, which appears to be the dominant popular assumption, and also the view that prevails in scholarly practice. Even religious differences are being reinterpreted as ethnic, for instance with reference

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Christian Gerlach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

7 / Introduction

to the multi-layered conflict in Bosnia (see also Chapter 7). Speaking of “genocide” then suggests a particular causation. In a primordial interpretation, ethnicity in genocide studies appears more often than not as something natural and long-standing – not historical, constructed, and fluent. In other words, race or ethnicity tend to be interpreted as a given, instead of being subject to inquiry; a point of scholarly destination instead of a point of departure.²⁰ Germans hated Jews, Turks hated Armenians, Hutus hate Tutsis, so they killed them: ethnicity is attributed a causality for mass violence, which may lead to a circular logic. True, if “genocide” is about ethnicity, then “genocide” is about ethnicity. What will we find out with such an “explanation”?

If genocide scholars agree on one thing, it is that “intent” constitutes “genocide.”²¹ This also applies to the UN Genocide Convention, and to Raphael Lemkin, the field’s founding father.²² This emphasis on “policy”²³ has led to a state focus in genocide studies,²⁴ for it is the state to which the “intent” is attributed and that devises policy. The following circular logic is characteristic: “Genocide is primarily a crime of the state and empirically it has not been true that it appears without intent”²⁵ (which rests, of course, on the premise that every act of violence or suffering inflicted unintentionally is just defined as not constituting “genocide”). As a result, genocide studies have tended to construct a monolithic actor out of people (officials and others) that to me seem to have very contradictory intentions. The focus on government rule and state intent makes it difficult to analyze the particular processes at work within societies. A scholar who wishes to prove “intent” for “genocide” might well be expected to regard later phases as mere implementations of premeditated planning, and to be less interested in the huge differences between destructive ideas or intentions and the real outcome in terms of violence.²⁶ This may result in neglecting or downplaying the popular contribution to the genesis of mass violence, which is crucial for the extremely violent societies approach explored in this book.

The biggest problem of genocide studies is the lack of an empirical foundation. This emptiness is obvious at every genocide conference. It may in part be due to the reductionist genocide approach with its emphasis on “proving” “genocide” (however defined) and therefore official “intent.” It may also have to do with the high level of abstraction in the work of political scientists and sociologists who have had a strong position in the field. Whatever progress has been made on the

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Christian Gerlach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 / Introduction

topic in the past fifteen years has resulted from empirical work. For a dense description that helps overcome preconceived perceptions of incidents of mass violence, however, it is indispensable to work with a large pool of primary documents as well as secondary sources. The extremely violent societies approach is derived from empirical observation and made for analytical purposes. It is about a new way of thinking about mass violence (which is why I call it an approach). It means to raise new questions. Its value (or uselessness) will be proven by the analytical gains it precipitates. Therefore, empirical case studies on a broad source basis are crucial to this study.

State-oriented as it is, the genocide approach – while having made important contributions – still captures only some of the causations and developments relevant to mass violence. This book sets a different emphasis. It focuses on processes in the societies involved, while not ignoring government action.

Existing approaches regarding the social origins of “genocide”

While most works in genocide studies are state-centered, a number of ways of focusing more on the social roots of “genocide” have been suggested. Roger W. Smith proposed studying “genocidal societies,” including a wide range of topics such as the relationship between genocide and economic systems, religious stimuli, gender differences, and the participation of younger generations, as well as the consequences of “genocide” on the politics, economy, and social structures of a country, plus the question of whether and how “genocidal societies” recover.²⁷ Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann called for investigations into “the history and nature of societies giving rise to mass death as human-made and thereby influenceable” and into the “social, economic and political circumstances making mass death possible.”²⁸ Taking up some of Marx’s early concepts, Tony Barta proposed explaining mass violence through objective “relations of genocide,” dictated by conflicts of interest between social groups, instead of through “policies,” “intentions and actions of individuals.” He illustrated his case by a sketch of the relations between white settlers and Australian aborigines in the nineteenth century.²⁹ Daniel Feierstein tries to understand mass extermination as “social practice,” as a specific mode of government-sponsored destruction and reconfiguration of social relations,

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Christian Gerlach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

9 / Introduction

which leads to the building of new identities and value principles, for example by hampering what he calls practices of solidarity, cooperation or autonomy.³⁰ However, his conception of changing social relations is focused directly on the fate and environment of just one victim group, and his abstract way of arguing also lets him leave aside wider social contexts and longer-term social dynamics.³¹

None of these authors have tested these approaches empirically. Some who have moved in this direction have in practice maintained an emphasis on government policies. Mark Levene has suggested a geographic focus involving the interaction between several groups over longer time periods in a “zone of genocide,” but he focused on state rule over such a territory and on the relationship between state and citizens.³² A similar contradiction surfaces in Frank Bajohr’s work, which stressed the need to “understand Nazi rule not as top-down dictatorship, but as social practice, in which German society had a part in many ways.”³³ Even though Bajohr promises to explore “a variety of actions and behaviors of society,” he does in fact concentrate on purported popular reactions to official policies against Jews.³⁴ Leo Kuper has offered a book chapter on “Social Structure and Genocide,” but then largely restricted the content to a discussion of colonialism and its consequences.³⁵

Sources

My emphasis on empirical work warrants some remarks about the sources used for this volume. For three of the five case studies, official records are largely inaccessible. This problem is most striking for Indonesia but also applies to East Pakistan/Bangladesh (namely to Indonesian and Pakistani military records). Access to Turkish archives has become gradually easier in recent years, but permissions given are erratic, far from all records are available to researchers, and some scholars may be allowed to see more than others.³⁶ A few Ottoman documents have been published. Oddly, archives in Syria and Iraq have not been used in existing research.

Given the inaccessibility of Ottoman files, research on the destruction of the Armenians has rested on three pillars: records by foreign diplomats, survivor reports, and materials from foreign missionaries. They have provided for a relatively rich and detailed

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Christian Gerlach

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 / Introduction

picture, compared to Indonesia and Bangladesh.³⁷ Scholarship on the Indonesian killings of 1965–66 has been based on a set of sources of exceptionally low quality, including much third-hand information, many journalistic accounts, doctored “confessions” of tortured PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) functionaries and military officers, and anecdotal evidence. Here, almost no missionary reports and exceptionally few survivor accounts are available (though some have been published recently), and those that are available have often been affected by social and political constraints. Aside from the legal implications and censorship, there is still a lot of popular support for the 1965 murders today, with the result that many survivors assert that they and other victims were not or at most marginally involved in communist activities.³⁸ Witnesses are still extremely hesitant to discuss the topic at all.

Under these circumstances, records by foreign diplomats and other foreign observers can be of special value in the reconstruction of events inside a country, although so far they have only rarely been used for Indonesia and Bangladesh.³⁹ My chapters about these two countries make use of US, Australian, and West and East German records.⁴⁰ In the Ottoman case, my material includes correspondence by US, German, and Austro-Hungarian diplomats. For Bangladesh, a substantial amount of journalistic accounts, some memoirs by US missionaries, and additional unpublished records from various UN agencies and Oxfam were also at my disposal.

The limitations of these documents have to be acknowledged. They have their biases, like all sources, and only allow for an inquiry of medium empirical depth, rendering regional or local studies almost impossible and the reconstruction of decision-making difficult. Diplomats (and journalists) were social outsiders – especially significant among a tight-lipped culture like Indonesia’s – residing in a few major cities where embassies or consulates were located. Travel was difficult, though not impossible for diplomats and journalists; cables by foreign correspondents were censored (some tried to bypass this by using diplomatic channels); the number of diplomatic personnel was limited, as was their access to official documents.⁴¹ They relied on certain sets of partisan local informers. White foreigners suffered from chauvinist feelings of superiority on a cultural, racist, or religious basis, which could lead to the portrayal of locals as particularly savage or bloodthirsty. To a limited extent, diplomats were also actors in their