Introduction to the Handbook of Genocide Studies

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Genocide studies is a fascinating and important field. The topics that it addresses – historical episodes of genocide, and certain pathologies of behavior of those involved with or affected by genocide – are harrowing and challenging. Intuition generally fails to explain how, or more importantly why, genocide occurs. The field itself is at least in part predicated on the debate over whether scholarly inquiry can do any better (e.g., Magurshak 1980; Bauer 1990; and Kiechel this volume). Meanwhile a handbook to the field of genocide studies cannot be expected to offer a simple answer to the question of how to explain the inexplicable, nor should it strive to deliver an authoritative one.

Nonetheless, the field is much richer than a canon of historical episodes and studies of their underlying pathologies, and a handbook to the field should reflect that. The Handbook of Genocide Studies accordingly strives to consider the ways in which scholars from different disciplines approach the challenge of shedding light on the events, processes, and legacies of genocide.

The objectives can also be understood in terms of two premises that, taken together, describe what this book is not. The first is that, as a “handbook,” the objective should not be a comprehensive survey of genocide. This noble and important task has been taken on in non-handbook volumes over the years. Those by Chalk and Jonassohn (1990), Charny et al. (1999), Totten, Parsons, and Charny (2004), Valentino (2005), Totten and Bartrop (2007), Kiernan (2008), Bloxham and Moses (2010), Horvitz and Catherwood (2014), Carmichael and Maguire (2015), Naimark (2017), and most recently, Kiernan (forthcoming), to focus on English language publications alone, reveal the large and expanding range such works must encompass, as well as a need to write, update, and re-write these types of histories as time and our understanding of genocide advance.

Instead, this book focuses on Genocide Studies as an academic realm. It endeavors to spell out multiple dimensions of that realm in the space allotted. In doing so, the contributors collectively address a wide range of episodes, including genocides of indigenous populations in the Americas and Africa, the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, twentieth-century genocides in Indonesia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and twenty-first-century genocides in Iraq, Myanmar, and China. Several chapters address other episodes in passing in the course of developing some particular cross-cutting analytical framework, but without dwelling on any particular one for more than a paragraph or two. Inevitably, some historical episodes thought by many in the academy (as well as the larger public) to be a genocide remain uncovered in a specific sense. We have made a conscious decision not to attempt to construct (and we ask that this book not be expected to serve as) an authoritative catalog of genocides. Omission in this context should not be taken as denial, just as inclusion does not represent an affirmation of canonical status.

Overall, the book has been constructed with the notion that Genocide Studies is more than a canon of cases, or even cases and controversies, which compose it.

Second, this book is based on the premise that Genocide Studies is not an academic discipline possessing a common set of tools, methodologies, or even approaches. Rather, it is a field,
unified by subject matter but combining multiple approaches. Understanding of that subject matter comes not from a single discipline superior to all others, but instead from a variety of them. Accordingly, a major focus is to showcase how the subject matter of “genocide” can be (and is) studied from across a variety of disciplines, and how richer our understanding of the subject has become as a result.1

We have approached this task expansively: not just from different elements of the social sciences and history, but also incorporating how the disciplines in humanities and the arts understand genocide as an object of inquiry. This cross-disciplinary approach to genocide studies enables it to showcase the diversity that comprises the field. Different disciplines are defined by their respective approaches to topics and questions, and thus each addresses the common subject matter, genocide, differently. The chapters in this collection incorporate a range of methods, including historiography, archival research, listening to testimony, philosophical inquiry, film studies, and art criticism. Taken together, the diversity of approaches not only showcases the range of genocide studies scholarship, it is able to present a more complete picture of genocide, its origin, its effects, and its legacy.

The book also reflects the youth of the field of genocide studies. As I describe in my own chapter, genocide studies experienced rapid growth of interest, institution-building, and career-staking in the wake of the mid-1990s genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia. In academic terms, that means that much of the field is only two or three generations old. While contributions by Manukyan and Kiechel (respectively) illustrate that the pre-1990s version of the field was by no means poor in its debates, agendas, and ambition, it is the new generations of younger scholars who are defining (and redefining) the field for the twenty-first century. This book endeavors to reflect the full range of this scholarship, incorporating the likes of Ben Kiernan and Mohamed Adhikari, both modern founders of the field, to younger scholars working to include genocide-related issues within the parameters of their own disciplines.

Also reflected in this book is the global character of genocide studies. This is in part derived from the origin of the field. In its nascence, it was cultivated by scholars – of Jewish and Armenian heritage – who were exiles, refugees, or resettled from their homelands. The expansion of the field in the 1990s and 2000s arose out of a recognition that genocide has happened and could happen again on all continents (save Antarctica, void of permanent residents). Contemporary practice of genocide studies increasingly involves partnerships between scholars from or trained in the global north with those from the global south. As was the case with the early years of genocide studies when Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and Armenian survivors of genocide (as well as direct descendants of both), scholars from regions that have experienced genocide are playing a crucial role in developing the field.

ORGANIZATION OF THE HANDBOOK

This Handbook is organized around the idea that diversity has served to define the field of genocide studies. While highlighting diverse approaches, there is nevertheless a need to anchor the field in something. Specifically, we identify a foundation of the field in the definition of genocide in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the

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1 Bloxham and Moses’s 2010 book acknowledged the interdisciplinary nature of genocide studies as well, through the allocation of five chapters to different disciplines.
Crime of Genocide (or the Genocide Convention, for short). The *Handbook* thus begins with Irvin-Erikson’s chapter on the scholarship and advocacy of Raphaël Lemkin in deriving – and ultimately defining – the concept. The chapter serves as the touchstone for those that follow in that the United Nations’ (UN) definition of genocide emerges as a constant point of reference – a common starting point, if not necessarily a universal end point. Other scholars, including some of those represented within this book, support alternative versions of the concept to that provided by the Genocide Convention – Jones (2016) usefully covers several pages’ worth of efforts from multiple scholars. However, if the UN definition is not the best or most workable one, it is the one that serves as common academic and legal currency.

The next section – titled “Genocide Studies: History and Ideas” – is organized around the notion that, once defined, the concept of “genocide” immediately added meaning to existing efforts to analyse certain episodes and patterns of group extermination in history. With analyses that delve back into – but are not restricted to – pre-Lemkin times, MacDonald (Chapter 2) and Adhikari (Chapter 3) both address the utility of the construct of genocide as a core feature of settler colonialism, particularly in the Americas and in Africa (respectively). They both describe the pervasiveness of what we now call and recognize as genocide in colonial pasts – while also recognizing impactful and unremedied legacies of those pasts in the present. Manukyan (Chapter 4), in describing the historiography of the Armenian genocide over time, establishes that the concept of genocide informed how Armenians, both in the region and in exile, came to understand the experience of their own people, particularly with respect to the events of 1915–16. Finally, Kiechel (Chapter 5) addresses how scholarship on the Holocaust, initially rooted in the circumscribed field of Holocaust Studies, related to the emergent field of genocides studies. Initially, it is when the two strands of scholarship – Armenia-focused and Holocaust-focused, respectively – meet that the field of genocide studies starts to take its initial form. It does so anchored with the legitimacy conferred about the concept of genocide by the UN Convention, but with unease and skepticism that there is utility that could be derived from a comparative enterprise (or even anything that challenged the presumption of the uniqueness of either horror).

The debates described by Kiechel that take place concurrently with events in the real world ought to have given more currency to the concept of genocide, but, on account of trends in global politics, instead left it practically stillborn. Weiss-Wendt (Chapter 6) describes the fate of the concept within the context of the Cold War: inspected and considered for use initially, but eventually shelved in the name of great power politics. Kiernan (Chapter 7), addressing genocidal violence in Indonesia and Cambodia, highlights how the episodes themselves had an international dimension that may have had the effect of further forestalling official deployment of the term. The complicity of the United States (although not the United States alone) in these episodes made it even less likely that “genocide” would enter the global legal or political discourse in a meaningful way. Yet, as Simon (Chapter 8) notes, following the end of the Cold War, idealism (in support of a more just global order) and reluctance (to risk blood, treasure, and political capital) led to a breakthrough for the concept of genocide. The global powers used the UN to create two ad hoc international criminal tribunals, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. These two respective venues produced case work and jurisprudence that helped to confirm the recognition that genocide is not an archaic phenomenon, but one that actually occurs in our own time – and thus called for reckoning with what it means to exist in such a world. The legacy of the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia thus includes an effort to construct in an international
atrocity prevention regime, on the one hand, and the expansion and institutionalization of the scholarly enterprise devoted to its study, on the other.

The subsequent chapters illustrate some of the many directions in which the field has developed since the mid-1990s. The first set is categorized under the heading “Genocide Studies as Social Science.” The first subset of this section examines systemic dynamics of contemporary genocide, albeit in two very different ways. Fiskesjö (Chapter 9) highlights the calculus and strategies of the state in twenty-first-century episodes of the genocide, including the one against the Rohingya in Myanmar and that against the Uyghurs in western China. Anderton (Chapter 10) examines how a variety of tools, primarily those in the discipline of economics and many of which have developed over the course of recent decades, can be applied to the effort to understand how genocide emerges.

A second subset within the Social Science section assumes a more micro-level perspective, considering the psychology and sociology of different sets of actors. Specifically, Gudehus (Chapter 11) addresses different approaches to understanding perpetrators, arguing that the appropriate approach to understanding the perpetration of atrocities should involve more consideration of context and process and show less concern with psychological profiling. Kahn (Chapter 12) then uses testimony to shed light on the rescuers (or “upstanders”), finding simple explanations for outlier behavior to be elusive. Next, Faucheux (Chapter 13) takes a similar approach to understanding the legacy of genocide on survivors, arguing that the depth of trauma and grief in post-genocide Rwanda requires multiple tracks, both national and local, for any hope of psychological – and, by extension, social – repair.

The final subset within the Social Science section addresses certain themes that course through genocidal episodes and their aftermaths. Temoney (Chapter 14) addresses the interplay between religion and genocidal processes. Di Lellio (Chapter 15) covers the central role that sexual violence almost inevitably plays in genocide. It serves multiple objectives for the perpetrator while inflicting challenging scars on survivors. Its prevasiveness in genocides reflects the underlying logic of demographic engineering that defines genocide in theory and drives it in practice.

The final section of the book surveys perspectives of genocide from the realm of the arts. The inclusion of this section is predicated on the idea that art can inform us as much about genocide – from the impulse of some to engage in it to the challenge of survivors (or even society writ large) to come to terms with it – as we can from social science. Sometimes art’s metaphors illuminate the inexplicable and the unfathomable in a way that other disciplines simply cannot. Conway (Chapter 16) draws on several science fiction films to illustrate both that the genre frequently incorporates plots or premises that are essentially genocidal, and that film audiences should perhaps consider more consciously the implications of as much. Khoury (Chapter 17) addressed the roles that music plays in different elements of genocide – as propaganda, as solace, as a memorial medium. Lowe (Chapter 18) then considers what we can learn about genocide from the perspective – the lens, quite literally – of photography. Žunić (Chapter 19) draws on several exhibitions and episodes to compare trends in the visual arts in Germany after the Holocaust and in Bosnia after the civil war and genocide in that country in the 1990s. Finally, Sodaro (Chapter 20) address the role of museums – in particular, those devoted to memorialization – as spaces in which individuals, communities, and societies not only attempt to come to grips with genocidal pasts but also how they attempt to frame how other individuals, communities, and societies do so as well.
In a concluding chapter, Jokic (Chapter 21) contemplates the utility of the concept of genocide and, implicitly at least, the field of genocide studies. In doing so, he raises important points about how and when the discourse of genocide is deployed – echoing, in fact, many of the observations and contentions made by Sodaro in the previous chapter.

Collectively, the works in this Handbook create a collage (or perhaps a montage) of scholarship from across a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. As with a collage or montage in art, any particular element might be interesting or enlightening. Yet the complete picture only becomes discernible, if imperfectly so, when all elements are taken into account in tandem and in conversation with one another. Genocide studies may never truly be able to comprehend its core concept, genocide. This Handbook, however, offers a roadmap to a more complete understanding of a truly challenging field.

WORKS CITED


