

CHAPTER 8

CONDUCTING A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GENOCIDE

Rationale and Methodology

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INTRODUCTION

An earlier chapter (“Defining Genocide: Issues and Resolutions”) by this author focused on issues of defining genocide, ways of determining whether an event qualifies as being categorized as a genocide or not. Therein, it was shown that once one is in possession of a fundamental definition, it will minimize disputes as to whether an event is or is not a genocide. The key is conceptual precision and an absence of bias for or against a particular event in order to avoid the “politics” of inclusion or exclusion.

In the process of determining an event’s status as genocidal or non-genocidal, considerable research is required on the empirical level. Theories and hypotheses and generalizations serve no purpose until a satisfactory database has been established. The designation “genocide” must fit

the facts and not vice versa. The immediate result is a reliable body of specialized articles and monographs that lay the groundwork for concluding one way or the other whether an event indeed belongs to the category defined as genocide. Certainly, areas of disagreement will always exist as scholars probe the specific identity of a single case of suspected genocide, especially as new evidence is uncovered. In genocide studies, as in other fields of academic investigation, there is always room for additional interpretation. Yet, in most cases of bona fide genocide, differences of opinion will be less about the status of an event's being a genocide than about the *kind* of genocide it is. It is precisely here that the comparative study of genocide enters into the picture.

Comparison is the sine qua non of genocide studies. It lies at the heart of the methodological way of understanding genocide per se and not just on the basis of familiarity with one or perhaps two instances of genocide. In order to break out of the parochial limits posed by knowledge of but one or maybe just two genocides, scholars and educators must survey the field from a broad comparative approach. To do so, researchers must set up categories or clusters of genocide with common elements to set them apart from other sets of genocide having other commonalities. To stress the obvious, comparison is as much about similarities as about dissimilarities; it is a necessary tool with which to stress simultaneously the specific singular identity of a genocidal event that sets it apart from others, and also to highlight common features that individual genocides share with others.

Clearly not all similarities and/or differences are equi-important or insightful. There are degrees of significance, from the trivial to those opening up ground-breaking new vistas. How can one be assured of avoiding the former and compare the more pertinent aspects of genocide shared or not by two or more incidents of genocide?

TOWARD AN ANATOMY OF GENOCIDE

Having already fixed the conceptual epicenter of genocide—*nullification* or a variant thereof—one must have a skeletal grasp of what genocide consists of. That is to say, what is the basic anatomy of genocide? What is its fundamental structure? What are its component parts? To determine this, one must move from the conceptual definition to the descriptive, that is, to the “anatomical parts” of genocide. Like any anatomical scheme, one begins with fundamental and essential segments: the equivalent of muscles, arteries, neural systems, the organs, all the way to the least important and most superficial. In the case of setting up an “anatomical” schemata for genocide, one should not carry the analogy of a

real anatomy too far and take it too literally. Nevertheless, as the following schemata illustrates, it is a useful approach in preparation for a probing comparative approach.

The Anatomy of Genocide

- I. Pregenocide:
 1. General Background (economic, cultural, political)
 2. Specific Antecedents (massacres, propaganda)
 3. Immediate Circumstances (emerging crises)
- II. The Event:
 1. Dramatis Personae
 - i. The Genocidaires and Collaborators
 - ii. The Victims
 - iii. Rescuers and Resistance
 - iv. The Bystanders and Neutrals
 2. The Blueprint of Genocide:
 - i. The plan
 - ii. The means
 - iii. The results
- III. Postgenocide:
 1. The Survivors and Restitution
 2. Trials, Tribunals, and Punishment
 3. Social Reconstruction and Reconciliation
 4. Denial
 5. Long-range Repercussions

Essentially, this schemata is quite simple. Basically chronological, it breaks genocide into three major sequential parts: before, during, and after. Each of these is broken into subtopics. The goal is to achieve both temporal and topical contextualization. Obviously, additional topics can be appended; nevertheless, the fundamental anatomy remains the same, affording a workable way of selecting central aspects of genocide to be compared, thereby insuring a symmetrical approach to comparison. This, in turn, will permit systematic grouping for each instance of genocide, alongside those with which it shares common features, that is, a typology of genocide.

TOWARD A METHODOLOGY OF SYMMETRICAL COMPARISON OF GENOCIDE

Without a systematic comparison of genocide, genocide studies will remain a fragmented field, a hodge-podge of uneven monographs, each devoted to one particular genocide. Yet this problem cannot be overcome

unless genocides, properly identified as such by a governing definition, are also systematically and symmetrically compared according to a set of rational guidelines. These must originate from an accepted anatomy or skeletal structure, serving as a reference point, a source of key aspects of genocide which need to be compared, as a means of distinguishing and, equally importantly, relating genocides to one another as types.

If common agreement of a conceptual definition of genocide can be mustered, then identifying individual cases becomes easier. And once individual events have been categorized as genocides they can then be more readily classified into clusters, into types sharing common characteristics, whether primary or secondary.

Establishing a typology is still in its infancy for two reasons: (1) the lack of agreement as to what is an objective conceptual definition; and (2) the absence of agreement as to what and how to compare. The task of what to compare is made difficult, if not impossible, due to an absence of a workable anatomy of genocide. There is yet no consensus as to how to break genocide down into its essential primary and secondary component parts. Once these have been established, only then can systematic and consistent comparison begin. As to the how to compare genocides, this is a methodological problem still to be developed. Once the *what* and the *how* of genocide comparison have been resolved, valid types or groupings can be set up.

Which leads to the last point: namely, what is legitimate comparison and what is not? There are two broad approaches, one academic (functional) and one political (biased). The latter, basically impressionistic, strives to set up a highly subjective, *vertical* hierarchy of genocides according to nonacademic criteria; ranking genocides according to such fuzzy (essentially subjective) concepts as uniqueness, primacy, significance, importance, impact, et cetera. This approach, ascribing degrees of prominence to each genocide—such as a scale of suffering—is inherently skewed and is employed by those promoting a favored genocide. Intellectually, this kind of pseudo-comparativism is an intellectual *cul-de-sac*. The former, in contrast, seeks to look at genocides *horizontally* and, therefore, in clusters (types) according to objective common criteria such as those suggested in the “anatomy.” For example, a useful rubric is the colonial and postcolonial context in which there have been several genocides.

This comparative approach needs considerable development to overcome monographic parallelism or isolation, and its twin, monographic parochialism. The former leads to single genocides studied by experts independently of each other, one rarely referring comparatively to another genocide, largely because expert knowledge in most cases is limited exclusively to *one* case of genocide, primary knowledge of a second

being fragmentary. The latter, monographic parochialism, is also the result of single-case specialization from which, in this case, one draws unsubstantiated broad conclusions about genocide in general from but one instance, thereby committing the academic sin of leaping injudiciously from the particular to the general, a common temptation to be sure and one encouraged by the Katz (1994) model.

TYPOLOGIES OF GENOCIDE

Typology of genocide depends on two factors: sufficient knowledge about two or more instances of genocide and the creative imagination of the individual scholars in search of further elucidation. An example is the work of Robert Melson (1992). In his pioneering monograph, Melson (1992) studies the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide in the broad context of societies in revolution. Unfortunately, neither Melson (1992) nor other scholars have expanded on the possible central links between genocidal violence and societies in great flux to see whether the factor of revolution is a necessary or an incidental one in the tendency toward genocidal behavior. A broader approach would have raised the question: why do some (or most?) revolutions not culminate in genocidal violence. The origins of violence has puzzled countless scholars. For example, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not lead to wide-scale slaughter—though the collapse of the Tsarist Empire 70 years earlier did descend into multidimensional violence; the dismemberment of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s degenerated into several instances of genocidal violence, but in the divorce between Czechia and Slovakia (1990) there erupted no internecine war. This leads to classifying genocides according to those that were the products of revolution or civil war and those that were not. Why that inconsistency is so is the ongoing task of scholars engaged in comparing genocides according to common features and categories.

In search of comparative elements, the common denominator needs to be carefully defined. For example, as a result of decades of Holocaust study, the concepts “neutral” and “collaborator” were coined; they have been included in the sample anatomy outlined above. For several years these were rather simplistically accepted at face value till more recently, when several scholars reexamined the two categories and expressed serious skepticism about their utility as presently defined. Paul Levine (2002) broke down the status of “neutral” and concluded that in many instances, neutrality belonged more to the category of collaboration or to complicity than to that of a truly disinterested party. The present author took that one step further, declaring neutrality, in matters genocide, to be tanta-

mount to conspiring with the forces of the genocidaires (Huttenbach, 1998). Both legally and morally, neutrality is unacceptable in a genocidal context: to do nothing for the victims is in fact to lend aid to the criminals engaged in genocide. Studies of events in Bosnia and Rwanda bear out this view. What this means is that the previously accepted (in Holocaust studies) broad status of neutrality needs to be narrowed severely, and the previously narrowly conceived concept of collaborator must be broadened to meet the exigencies of reality, of the facts, drawn both from the data of the Holocaust itself, but, more importantly here, from facts associated with other genocides. This is a typical example of the value of the comparative approach in seeking to unlock the problems of genocide study.

The comparative approach is especially useful in avoiding extracting a paradigm for genocide from a single genocide. For years, Holocaust scholars have held the Holocaust up as *the* genocide of all genocides, the event from which everything substantial associated with genocide can be gleaned. This is not only intellectual nonsense, but delays, if not prevents, opportunities to learn about the Holocaust from other cases of genocide.

The role of religion is a case in point. To be sure, Holocaust scholars have been aware of the involvement of Christian churches in the Nazi regime, and, in particular, of the Vatican's spurious policies during World War II. This raised many questions; some but not all have been answered satisfactorily, partly because of the failure to compare the role of churches, both Protestant and Catholic, in other genocidal settings. Again, Bosnia and Rwanda spring to mind. Unlike after World War II, a few clerics are today being brought to trial and held accountable for their murderous participation in recent genocides. If the Vatican provided safe passage to Nazis after the end of the war, then its policy of granting safe havens for criminal priests was even more flagrant and criminal in the case of Rwanda. Here is a rubric or category that cries out for future in-depth comparative exploration. The overall participation of clerics—Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and now Hindu—in genocides is a chapter yet to be fully written and assessed. Far from being benignly neutral, clergymen and their churches have been, are, and will continue to be collaborators in the crime of genocide. Only the comparative approach can permit this kind of broad interpretation resting on a solid base of incontestable evidence.

The phenomenon of denial is another concept (included in the anatomy) that suffers from the noncomparative and the lack of more sophisticated or nuanced understanding. The concept is taken far too one-dimensionally and lacks preparatory theoretical analysis, above all the philosophical implications of both the ideas and acts of denial. In this regard, Israel Charny (1991, 1997, 1999) has done fruitful work on the breadth and depth of denial and on its scope and many facets, despite his

tendency to reach to the point of exaggeration. Nevertheless, not all genocides are denied (one category) while others are denied (another category): if so, why and why not? Apropos nuances: distinctions should be made between, for example, the denials by genocidists and the denial of postgenocide nonparticipants. These are at once related and unrelated categories that should not be lumped indiscriminately into one unmodified term. Then, of course, there is the denial by those who, for academic reasons, do not recognize—perceive—an event to be a full-scale genocide: they should not be accused of the same kind of denial as that expressed by the criminals and their postgenocide sympathizers.

The entire first rubric—pregenocide—needs careful comparative investigation. To locate the beginnings or roots of genocide in the near and more distant pasts is a much desired skill. What prompts this is the hope that by uncovering the causality of an event one can project—by extension—or anticipate genocidal incidents in the future. If one could fix a common past to most genocides, then one might come closer to anticipating and, thereby, preventing a future genocidal crisis. The search for early warning systems is a skill many scholars and politicians concerned with genocide hope to acquire. After all, a primary reason for genocide research is to see whether one or more genocides could have been avoided. Thus, hindsight, one hopes, can be translated into foresight if a pregenocide pattern or patterns can be ascertained.

To come close to this ideal one must first of all search for clues on a comparative level. Each genocide may have had its own distinct past; yet there may also be a common denominator. Only the comparative method will yield results to this problem. If, for example, one defines genocide as a particular mode of human rights violation, then by means of careful monitoring of the violation and/or collective human rights violators, observers of the present could be helped in pointing to a crisis that might mature into genocide. But again, this comparative monitoring of the present with an eye to the past and future relies on (1) the methodology of comparing of the past and (2) on the application of reasoning by analogy to anticipate the future.

CAVEAT EMPTOR

Some words of caution, however. The study of the “genocide past” is not a science; nor is projection into the future. The comparative approach—by definition multidisciplinary—is not infallible, anymore than our view into the as yet nonexistent future. There is nothing automatic or deterministic here. One past may culminate in genocide; another will not. No matter how refined our academic tools and how skillfully we apply them, there

are always the elements of the incomplete past and the unknowable future. The comparative is necessary but it is not the last word in genocide research.

All goes back to accuracy of definition: of genocide and of all terms associated with it in the anatomy. Conceptual and descriptive terminology must lie at the heart of all attempts to understand a particular genocide and genocide in general. Comparison is a way of escaping broad generalities based on insufficient information. It is also a means to another crucial end, namely, contextualization.

Contextualization is one of the byproducts of the comparative approach. Clues to what a genocide was emerge both from comparing contemporaneous events and those preceding and following it. Thus, for example, the Holocaust, whatever is known about it, must also include the full context of when it took place: not just World War II, but specifically, for example, in terms of the *Generalplan Ost*, a much too little known Nazi scheme which, if properly understood, "threatens" to transform our grasp of the Final Solution from an event purely in itself to a part of a greater whole. Similarly, the Holocaust must be contemporalized beyond German history. As the Holocaust raged, Stalin was practicing variants of genocide against a dozen Soviet ethnic minorities. Even as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising flared up, five million people died of manmade (!) starvation in British Colonial India. And even further afield, in the context of the Japanese invasion of China, the genocidal slaughter of hundreds of thousand of citizens of Nanjing took place. And—to come full circle—Fascist Croatia set up Auschwitz-like death camps such as the Jasenovac death camp in which to kill all its citizens of Serbian ethnicity.

Given this contemporaneous contextualization, certain unavoidable questions spring to mind. In full knowledge of these "other" events, some of them indisputably genocidal in character, can one really teach the Holocaust or any other genocide as an event totally apart? Can any one genocide really be meaningfully singled out as "more" significant to human history? Would it not make more sense to make students aware of the several genocidal global violences involved, of which the Holocaust, as each and every other incident, was but one, however tragic? Seen in this fashion, can one not conclude that the Holocaust was an extreme example of political violence, but by no means an out of the ordinary one? The answers—given the comparative approach on a contemporary level—is by no means simple, raising more issues than ones resolved.

There is a second dimension to contextualization, namely, the chronological. It is one thing to focus on one genocide; it is quite another to place it in the context of genocides preceding and following it. Once again, a comparative approach will help one assess in large measure the

import of a genocide when measured against the chronological context of another.

It is one thing to view the Holocaust, for example, as unprecedented and, therefore, "unique" because one ignores what preceded and followed, and quite another when seen in sequence, as part of a genocidal trend, as one among many and not as the one (and *only*) in the twentieth century. This approach by no means diminishes a genocide; on the contrary, it enhances one's ability to understand and comprehend it in the all-encompassing context of human history.

Finally, the comparative approach raises a series of fascinating questions. Is there such a topic as "the history" of genocide? Is there, other than a chronological sequence, a causal one? Do later genocides take some of their cues from earlier ones? Those who teach other histories, such as, the history of revolution, for example, tend to extrapolate linkages and "evolutions." There is no simple answer to these questions. There are many simplistic ones, monosyllabic "yes" and "no," but very few reasoned ones based on a broad perspective. And that is as it should be.

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