

## Discourses of Mass Violence in Comparative Perspective

**Veranstalter:** Juliane Prade-Weiss, Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich / Dominik Markl, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome / Vladimir Petrović, Institute for Contemporary History, Belgrade and Boston University  
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Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, incidents of mass violence against unprotected civilians have recurred in different shapes or forms, but with disturbing frequency. Genocidal campaigns have surfaced in various political, cultural and geographical contexts, often erupting in massacres on non-combatants, which seemingly disregard any moral feelings or common boundaries. While humanity's long history of atrocities is an undeniable reality, any in-depth understanding of the dynamics at display when such outbursts occur tends to be impeded and distorted by a collective desire for repression. Mapping the discourses surrounding the umbrella term of mass violence – here more broadly understood as comprising mass killings and other forms of violence aimed at exterminating large groups of people – set the digital workshop's main focus. Its interdisciplinary conception was reflected in the heterogeneous backgrounds of its co-organizers, who cover the academic fields of Comparative Literature, Contemporary History and Biblical Studies respectively. Nine speakers presented a wide array of perspectives on the topic; three panels connected political and social sciences, psychoanalysis, philology and linguistics, while also sounding out the influence of ancient religious texts on the rhetoric of mass violence. All presentations were united by their investigation of narratives that either cause, justify or process mass violence, creating a methodological abundance that turned out to be inspiring for future discussions.

The first panel introduced three different

approaches, already establishing some of the common threads that would weave themselves through the entire workshop. CHRISTIAN SCHNEIDER (Frankfurt am Main) introduced the concept and praxis of „re-enactment“ as a fertile keyword for the mechanisms in which mass violence is intergenerationally coped with. Referencing Ulrike Jureit's book *Magie des Authentischen* (1), in which the author analyzes the afterlife of war and violence in staged re-enactments, Schneider observed the desire to repeat and re-perform historic events in intimate settings, including one's household, thereby emotionally appropriating history. Zeroing in on the generation of '68, the first to be born in Germany after the Shoah, Schneider remarked how its members would give their children Jewish names, longing to escape their sense of guilt, all but claiming victimhood for themselves. He reads this as evidence for a desire for „Wiedergutmachung“, not in the colloquial sense of compensation, but in the psychoanalytical dimension of making something \_un\_happen, of seeking redemption. Conversely, the notorious silence of former perpetrators in the NS regime should not be considered a one-sided affair. Schneider cited from a project in which he had interviewed former Napola students, members of elite schools in Nazi Germany, and their children. To his own surprise, Schneider found that in these constellations, silence – muting the fathers' generation's violent memories – had been structured as an intergenerational text within the logic of dreams: Wish fulfilment appeared indirectly, as censorship of the past. Schneider closed by calling for an intergenerational dream which integrates different experiences and whose transitional quality demands a new form of writing history.

Complex entanglements in historiographical and literary texts also informed JULIANE PRADE-WEISS' (Munich) discussion of complicity in documentary fiction. Pointing out how the linguistic dimension in studying the meaning of mass violence is still somewhat neglected, she emphasized a responsibility taken literally: Documentary fiction *responds* to mass violence. In this light, the depiction and analysis of mass violence would participate in its heritage and may even con-

tribute to its justificatory discourse. Any pretension of non-involvement should therefore be confronted as rhetoric safeguarding – a responsibility that translates to the readers as well, especially concerning the complex relational openness between text and reader in documentary fiction. Ambiguities abound where the positions of witness and reader/spectator correlate, the reader as enmeshed in the text as the witness is involved in the event. Talking about examples such as Jonathan Littell's *The kindly ones*, Prade-Weiss showed how (mis-)identifying with the perpetrator might be false in a moral understanding, but could ultimately provide a way of processing trauma. Where Schneider's conclusion expressed hope for a good intergenerational dream, Prade-Weiss voiced her concerns regarding the reception history of Greek tragedy: Casting mass violence in terms of tragedy elicits a problematic relief – providing categories of inevitability, divine intervention and catharsis as cleansing – that way, a genocide inscribed in cultural heritage could more easily be normalized. Quoting from Elfriede Jelinek's play *Rechnitz*, Prade-Weiss instated complicity as an analytically productive term that accounts for the complexity of its subject rather than short-cutting to a wrong sense of clarity. Where responsibility is filtered and complicity distributed evenly over the entire population, eventually no one will be responsible. In contrast to this, Prade-Weiss underlined how documentary fiction could be insightful for a fundamental question: How does the representation of violence relate to its replication and transgenerational transmission?

Schneider and Prade-Weiss added intricate layers to JONATHAN LEADER MAYNARD's (London) opening talk, in which he had articulated his discontent with the current oppositional discourse within the social sciences. Neither a true-believer-model – the notion that mass violence is primarily rooted in ideological motivations – nor a purely sceptical perspective, concentrating on pragmatics in rationalist or situationalist paradigms, could withstand critical scrutiny. Instead, he developed a theory of „hardline security politics“ that employ structural social pressure and radicalized security concerns, thereby tran-

scending specific political systems. Leader Maynard, who considered his remarks as following a neo-ideological approach, thus intended to offer a more nuanced effort in locating the role of ideology in mass violence.

The second panel broadened the workshop's geographical and historical outlook, while at the same time narrowing it down on exemplary studies. VLADIMIR PETROVIĆ (Belgrade/Boston) explored the vocabulary of mass violence with particular emphasis on the term „cleansing“. The notion of „cleansing“ can be found all the way back in Greek and Latin; Petrović struck as noteworthy that it has since been travelling between numerous languages, cultures and epochs. He described the ensuing project as „comparative conceptual history“, an attempt at tracing the term in its dangerous and iridescent potential, separating it into five different, occasionally overlapping categories: religious, colonial, revolutionary, racial and (ethno-)political. Within this model, Petrović discussed a wide range of discourses of cleansing: from the Crusades (where the connotations of „cleansing“ extend to the religious motive of baptism against the „pollution“ of the Holy City) to the French Revolution (the striking „sangue impure“ in the Marseillaise), from the Puritans to the Yugoslav wars. These historical events were further differentiated into „cleansing by eradication“ – the killing and destruction of outer elements – and „cleansing by amputation“, the purification of one's own group. Gathering ample evidence for the impact of the term for the justification and perpetuation of mass violence, Petrović argued that – while being evasive and hard to fixate – it was now covered by „a perpetrators' patina“. He encouraged further research in the multi-faceted field of „comparative conceptual history“ as part of the workshop's possible future agenda. Its relevance is corroborated by the fact that Petrović's most recent book (2) has been suppressed from public libraries in Serbia, his native country.

By recounting the specific case of the Armenian Genocide, TALIN SUCIYAN (Munich) discussed the inner workings of narratives that disguise, deny and subvert historical events. Suciyan evaluated numerous sources of Armenian suffering in the decades that

led up to their mass killing and contrasted them with the prevalent discourse of reform, renewal and modernization in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat period (1839-76) and in Turkey following its foundation (1923). Mostly representing developments in Istanbul and neglecting the plight of the provinces, this gap was widened by mainstream Turkish historiography. Suciyan showed how the Armenian genocide posed a threat to the dominating narrative and therefore had to be distorted and repressed.

Echoing some of Prade-Weiss' remarks on the relation between the historical event, tragedy and documentary, JOACHIM SCHIEDERMAIR (Munich) analyzed the Danish TV series *1864*, set against the backdrop of the Second Schleswig War, explicitly focussing on the narratological insights it provides. „There is no narration without an event“, Schiedermair stated, and subsequently demonstrated how the TV series contained what could be called meta-narrative moments. War and theatre were presented as deeply intertwined by the director Ole Bornedal who thus illustrates how plot construction could be used as a key prerequisite for legitimizing warfare.

Once more shifting the lens, the third and final panel investigated the role of religious texts in discourses of mass violence. DOMINIK MARKL (Rome) introduced his central question – „Do Biblical Texts incite mass violence?“ – by pointing towards an important anachronism: The killing of unarmed civilians, nowadays considered an unlawful act for obvious reasons, would have been hardly as recognizably distinct from conventional warfare in antiquity. Therefore, the Hebrew Bible needed to be understood within the framework of its historical surroundings and neighboring texts, of which Markl produced a few samples: from the Sumerian *Lament for Ur* to the literary form of curses in Assyrian texts. Stressing that most Biblical narratives depict the receiving end of mass violence, Markl showed how those contemporary texts were transformed into „a different kind of treaty – the covenant made between the God of Israel and his people.“ In the *longue durée* of their reception, several allegorical approaches have been taken to make sense of mass violence in the Hebrew Bible, at

times directly influencing the course of events – when, for example, the Crusaders were supposed to formally re-stage the Conquest of Jericho. Markl observed that even relatively harmless texts could serve as a source for the justification of violence through forced interpretations, which goes to show that context and claims to authority had often been more influential in defining interpretation than the actual content. Accordingly, hermeneutical strategies were needed that regard the Bible as a space of interlinking discourses, incorporating the close analysis of its texts as well as the history of its genesis and institutional reception.

The two concluding speakers extended the discussion to Islamic discourses and back into the present. NICOLAI SINAI (Oxford) performed close readings of Qu'ranic statements allegedly advocating militancy and territorial expansion, illuminating inherent ambiguities, contradictions and polyphonic characteristics. Calls to fight „in God's path“ were countered by anti-militant passages hinting at the similarities of the Abrahamic religions; different aspects were stressed in the Medinan and Meccan surahs respectively. Islamic militancy could be understood more plausibly as a kind of re-enactment of the victories of the early conquests. Sinai also pointed out the absence of a claim to the Holy Land as fundamentally distinct from Bible texts, in its place the idea of an emigration to God had gained weight. Despite these divergences, Sinai proposed a methodology not dissimilar to Markl's, emphasizing the historical contexts of Qu'ranic interpretation and politicization.

UGUR ÜNGÖR (Amsterdam) offered a brief history of the ongoing war in Syria, portraying its four main protagonists – Assad's government, the opposition, the Kurds and ISIS – and demonstrating how each side distorted historical narratives to create its own mythology and justify its agenda. He convincingly showed how ISIS' media aesthetics were paradoxically influenced by American TV series and how the Kurdish narrative harkened back to pre-Islamic myths, staking its territorial claim by instrumentalizing ancient tales. Various dynamics analyzed in the previous presentations resurfaced: how re-enactments automatically pro-

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duce re-interpretations and how an imagined glorious past infiltrates present political discourse (a phenomenon once coined „retrotopia“ by Zygmunt Bauman).

Üngör's concluding talk informed the workshop with a painful sense of urgency by connecting the plethora of methodologies presented throughout the presentations with current incidents of mass violence and suffering. Other speakers of the day had also broken the barriers between academic research and active engagement with political and judicial consequences before: i.e., Vladimir Petrovic, who had been working in the intersection between history and law, both in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and in the Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor's Office. This report intends to draw attention to an extremely important project, whose first instalment unfortunately had to happen in a digital workshop setting, but which is scheduled to explore further ground in the future. The path is now paved for a continuous dialogue, in which multiple approaches are animated to cross-pollinate each other and form very productive structural analogies. As became transparent, to truly fathom the justificatory discourses and narratives of mass violence, interdisciplinary exchange and productive discomfort will be required.

#### **Conference overview:**

Jonathan Leader Maynard (London): Ideology and Mass Killing: How Groups Justify Genocides and Other Atrocities against Civilians

Christian Schneider (Frankfurt am Main): Erbschaft der Gewalt – Erbschaft der Schuld? Transgenerationale Prozesse der Gewaltverarbeitung

Juliane Prade-Weiss (Munich): Critique and Complacency: The Problem of Complicity in Documentary Fiction

Vladimir Petrović (Belgrade/Boston): Vocabulary of Extreme Mass Violence: Normalization of Cleansing

Talin Suciyan (Munich): The Annihilating Privilege: Camouflaging Genocide within the Discourse of „Reform“

Joachim Schiedermaier (Munich): War over Peripeties. Ole Bornedal's TV-Drama *1864*

Dominik Markl (Rome): Do Biblical Texts Incite Mass Violence? Textual Pragmatics Versus Reception History

Nicolai Sinai (Oxford): Qur'anic Militancy and the Arab-Islamic Conquests

Uğur Üngör (Amsterdam): Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Motifs in Contemporary Middle Eastern Violence

Notes:

(1) Ulrike Jureit, *Magie des Authentischen. Das Nachleben von Krieg und Gewalt im Reenactment*, Göttingen 2020.

(2) Vladimir Petrović, *Etničko čišćenje: geneza koncepta*, Belgrade 2019. The title translates to „Ethnic Cleansing: Origins of the Concept“.

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