

**Holocaust and Genocide Studies:
„Looking Backward, Moving Forward“**

Veranstalter: NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam

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This expert symposium, a hybrid event featuring both in-person and virtual addresses, marked 20 years of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Amsterdam / NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. The event, taking stock of the accomplishments of the past and looking to the future of scholarship in the field, sought to bring together the intellectual communities and bodies of knowledge from the study of war, genocide and the Holocaust, which have too often remained unproductively cloistered from one another.

Following brief welcoming remarks from NIOD director Frank van Vree (Amsterdam), Nanci Adler (Amsterdam) provided a concise overview of the growth of Holocaust and Genocide studies in the past two decades, and of NIOD's own development as an impactful institution at the heart of academic and societal discussions on war, Holocaust and broader forms of political violence and repression.

The first session addressed the question whether the Holocaust is a universal history and a global memory. Keynote speaker AMOS GOLDBERG (Jerusalem) narrowed his focus, asking what are the relations between Holocaust studies and post-colonial studies. Goldberg asserted, based on an appraisal of two leading journals in Holocaust studies, *Yad Vashem Studies* and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, that – within the margins of the major institutions of Holocaust studies – scholars have rarely integrated post-colonial perspectives into their work on the Holocaust. The two fields, he noted, are difficult to reconcile. Goldberg argued that the reason for this is because the two narratives, the story of the Holocaust and antisemitism, and the story of post-colonialism and western racism, convey radically different historic and political mes-

sages. The Holocaust has largely been cast as a deviation from Western modernisation and enlightenment, the paradoxical moral of the story being that, through strengthening of democratic values, civil society and the mitigation of extreme ideology, we can protect ourselves from such horror. In contrast, the post-colonial narrative sees the Holocaust not as an aberration but the norm. Goldberg emphasised this divide by drawing on the issue of Israel and Palestine. In Holocaust studies, Israel is seen as a minimum form of justice for a persecuted people. In post-colonial narratives, Israel – long the perpetrator of harm and violence upon Palestinians – is seen as the latest case of settler-colonialism. Goldberg made no conclusions, rather leaving his observations to build a clearer image of the very complex relationship between these two historical narratives.

In her response, EVA KOVACS (Vienna) noted her agreement – the influence of post-colonial perspectives on current Holocaust studies has been marginal and controversial. That being said, she argued that post-colonial theories have fertilised a growth in the memory of the Roma Holocaust, which, until recent decades, has been obfuscated, even neglected. Kovacs then sought to situate a third narrative – that of the crimes of communism in the eastern bloc – within the conversation. The asymmetry of remembrance standards between Nazism and Communism, she argued, has resulted in the growth of memory cultures surrounding the crimes of communism in recent decades.

In the first session's final response, KRISTIN PLATT (Bochum) underlined the crucial importance, moving forward, of investigating the encounter, or ambivalence, between these two fields, and of pursuing interdisciplinary research methods. She observed that post-colonial studies emphasise the subject position of the researcher, which has not been the case in Holocaust studies, and that the institutionalisation of genocide studies in the academic world has been slow.

In the brief discussion that followed, LAURIEN VASTENHOUT (Amsterdam), returning to the panel's key question, suggested that, given the Holocaust is not central to historical narratives in so many countries, it is

perhaps misleading, even eurocentric, to suggest that the Holocaust is a universal history.

The keynote address of the second session, delivered by STATHIS KALVYAS (Oxford), addressed the relationship between war and genocide. Kalvyas highlighted several identifiable problems with the concept of genocide, which he argued have led to two extremes within the literature on genocide and its relation to conflict. Firstly, Holocaust exceptionalism, whereby the Holocaust is an ideal type, a genocide of such unique characteristics that it comes very close to being an outlier. Secondly, conceptual stretching, whereby many cases of mass-violence against civilians during war have been included within the concept of genocide, thus hollowing it out. To counter these extremes, Kalvyas outlined an integrated conceptual typology to aid scholars in categorizing various forms of political violence. The typology made two key distinctions, the first between domestic and international dimensions of political violence, and the second, a simple distinction between the presence of state and non-state actors. Kalvyas asserted that, through this typology, scholars would be able to salvage a concept of genocide – its core characteristic being the intent to destroy a group – from conceptual stretching, but still integrate it into the broader study of the diverse forms of political violence during war.

In her response, ISMEE TAMES (Amsterdam) probed deeper into the relationship between war and genocide. She argued that studying WWI, and in particular its „total“ nature – i.e. the mobilisation of entire societies, the need for victory at any cost, and the othering of entire populations – allows for a better understanding of how societies and empires mobilise towards mass-atrocity and genocide. Illustrating her argument through reference to the violent treatment of the Wagogo people of Tanzania (by both German and British colonial forces), Tames noted how WWI saw the emergence of widespread fear and paranoia, radicalised violence in occupation zones, deportations, starvation politics and new forms of forced labour, thus highlighting the complex historical relationship between war and genocide.

In the session's final response, JOLLE DEM-

MERS (Utrecht), echoing Tames' thoughts, outlined her belief that – despite the scholastic security offered by neat and distinct concepts of political violence – scholars must endeavour to debox political violence, studying the mutability and complexity of political violence, and the ways in which violence mutates and transforms. Demmers concluded by arguing that scholars must take this approach when tackling contemporary and new forms of political violence, notably internationalised inter-state conflicts, such as the US-led coalition against ISIS, which draw together often unstable configurations of local militias, national militaries, and private contractors in the execution of political violence, certainly in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but also across Africa.

The third session asked for the future of Genocide Studies, and keynote speaker DIRK MOSES (Chapel Hill) presented his own radical vision of the future. Though beginning by acknowledging important advances in the study of genocide and mass-atrocity, and even a welcomed changing of the scholastic guard, Moses, like Kalvyas earlier in the day, outlined several clear problems with the concept of genocide. Namely, that the term functions ideologically and holds such weight that it serves to blind us to other forms of political violence. The radical solution outlined by Moses was to replace the term „genocide“, which he sees as beyond saving, with a new term – „permanent security“, the striving of states (and armed groups seeking to found states) to make themselves invulnerable to threats, a paranoid policy response that necessarily results in civilian casualties by striving for the unobtainable goal of absolute safety. Moses acknowledged that critics would argue that diverse forms of political violence – such as aerial bombing – could not be compared to genocide because the intent to destroy whole groups does not exist. To this he responded, quite simply, by asking, „what does it matter to civilians if they are killed by violence inflicted with genocidal or military intent?“. Replacing genocide with permanent security, Moses argued, would avoid the moral hierarchies, lamentable legalistic hair-splitting and ultimately lead to a less narrow and restricted study of all forms of violence against civil-

ians. Finally, Moses noted that – while genocide is based on ethnic and racial categories – permanent security eschews these anthropocentric notions, instead adopting a non-anthropocentric notion of earthly security and survival.

In the initial response to Moses' radical proposal, OMAR MCDOOM (London) first acknowledged the benefits of replacing „genocide“ with a catch-all term such as „permanent security“, capable of subsuming all types of extreme violence against civilians. Firstly, the concept of permanent security would sidestep the conceptually complex issue of intent that has bedevilled the field of genocide studies since its creation. Secondly, the proposed concept overcomes bias towards certain groups, a positive, as it should not matter if someone is targeted because he or she is Jewish or a communist. McDoom however voiced to risks of replacing „genocide“ with such a term. Firstly, the risk of false moral equivalences – that is to say, is the US drone operator who kills IS combatants but also foreseeably kills civilians, as morally reprehensible as the Nazi soldier that deliberately and cruelly tortured and humiliated his victims before dispatching them? McDoom argued that these are not crimes of moral equivalence. Secondly, he argued that getting rid of the term „genocide“ in its entirety would change the field (Genocide and Holocaust Studies) beyond recognition, perhaps leading it blend back into the fields from which it emerged, Peace Studies, War Studies and Security. McDoom concluded by arguing that Genocide Studies should keep its lexiconic infrastructure, but that – for new types of atrocity that don't intuitively fall into existing categories – scholars should endeavour to describe new terms and recognise conceptual distinctiveness.

In a final brief response to this session, UĞUR ÜMIT UNGOR (Amsterdam) outlined three areas which, in his eyes, constitute potentially rich and valuable areas of study for future scholars of genocide studies: geographic variety (i.e. why do genocides vary in their outcomes locally?), oral history (i.e. integrating survivor and perpetrator testimonies into our conceptualisations) and digital research (i.e. engaging rigorously and sys-

tematically with the wealth of digital open-source materials relating to conflict and mass-violence that now exists online).

CAROL GLUCK (New York) opened the final session, 'Reflections', by stating her belief that we are living in a transitional – or bridging – period. The 20th century, she outlined, is behind us, politics is playing differently and we are living through the end of living memory of the Holocaust. Against this backdrop, Gluck outlined what she views as the 20th century legacies of the field of Genocide and Holocaust Studies. Firstly, the goal of justice, which was first pursued through trials but grew into a „justice cascade“, linked to movements for restitution and redress for the victims of genocide and human rights atrocities, changing concepts of responsibility and, in particular, calling governments to account. She identified a second cluster of legacies, relating to the goal of peace, the movement from war to peace, from authoritarianism to democracy – what Gluck termed the realm of transitional justice, of reconciliation, truth and the ensuring that society would not always be divided into victim and perpetrator. Finally, Gluck highlighted cautions that have come about throughout the 20th century. She noted that, though ideas are global, they are not universal, arguing that she would absolutely not use this term to refer to the Holocaust or any other memory trope. Secondly, pointing to differences in national processes of transitional justice, we have learned that local context is important. Thirdly, scholars have learned to be humble about the limits of concepts and practices, of truth telling, reconciliation and of collective memory as a means to bring people together. Finally, in terms of 20th century lessons, scholars must accept that we have overlooked much, namely colonial genocides, and that our concepts and categories would be different today if we had started with the crimes of empire rather than those much closer to home. Gluck concluded by arguing that, in the 21st century, a crucial challenge will be to enlarge the compass of our studies, working empirically on the ground and engaging with new forms of violence.

In the final address, SINISA MALESEVIC (Dublin/Amsterdam) tackled the sociology of

genocide, emphasising that genocide is ultimately a social relationship, imposing groupness on both victims and perpetrators. Sociology, he argued, can help to elucidate these groups. Malesevic outlined three historical factors crucial to the study of genocide and the way in which it develops: coercive capacity, ideological penetration in society (which serves to legitimise coercion and dehumanise „others“) and the central importance of interpersonal or micro-level group dynamics that birth perverse moral universes.

This symposium provided an original setting for eminent scholars, from across disciplines, to engage in scholarly dialogue and to probe the gaps, limitations and possibilities of Genocide and Holocaust studies. As noted by Üngör in his concluding remarks, the aim of the symposium was not to provide concrete answers but to stimulate new and ongoing conversations, and in this it surely succeeded.

Conference overview:

Session 1: Contexts: Is the Holocaust a universal history and a global memory?

Keynote: Amos Goldberg (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Response: Eva Kovacs (Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Vienna / Institute of Sociology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest)

Response: Kristin Platt (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Institute for Disapora and Genocide Research)

Discussion between Goldberg, Kovacs, Platt and Laurien Vastenhout (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam)

Session 2: Connections: How are war and genocide related?

Keynote: Stathis Kalvyas (All Souls College, University of Oxford)

Response: Ismee Tames (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam)

Response: Jolle Demmers (Universiteit Utrecht)

Discussion between Kalvyas, Tames and

Demmers

Session 3: Chronicles: What is the future of genocide research?

Keynote: Dirk Moses (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Response: Uğur Ümit Üngör (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam)

Response: Omar McDoom (Department of Government, London School of Economics)

Discussion between Moses, Üngör, McDoom and Adler

Session 4: Reflections

Reflection: Holocaust, Genocide and Transitional Justice: Carol Gluck (Columbia University, New York)

Response: Uğur Ümit Üngör (NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam)

Reflection: „The Sociology of Genocide“: Sinisa Malesevic (University College Dublin / Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study Amsterdam / NIOD, Amsterdam)

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