

Tracing Interdisciplinary Research on Atrocity Crimes

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Review of: Barbora Holá, Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, and Maartje Weerdesteijn, *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 984 pp. (paperback). GBP 157.50. ISBN: 978-0190915629

This book constitutes nothing less than an essential guide to scholarship on the causes, consequences, forms, and specificities of three constitutive mass atrocity crimes: war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Barbora Holá, Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, and Maartje Weerdesteijn have put together a rich and comprehensive volume on the state of atrocity studies as a field of academic inquiry by foregrounding leading theoretical and empirical research on all three categories of international crimes. Compared to other handbooks and edited volumes, the book stands out due to how it approaches and conceptualizes the overlapping yet distinct manifestations of the phenomenon it seeks to study. Where Bloxham and Moses primarily considered the crime of genocide,¹ Knittel and Goldberg zoomed in on perpetrators and perpetration of mass violence,² and Rosenberg, Galis, and Zucker predominantly addressed questions of how to prevent large-scale violence,³ Holá, Nyseth Nzitatira, and Weerdesteijn carefully carve out the definitional peculiarities, differences, and similarities of the three atrocity crimes they focus on. They demonstrate that atrocity crime – ‘as a term and concept’ – can travel beyond its legal underpinnings and become useful as an analytical category (p. 4). By conceptualizing atrocity crimes as systematic, large-scale violence against civilian populations, the authors emphasize the intimate interrelation between the overall violent context and the individual acts of atrocity that demarcates mass atrocities from other forms of criminality.

- 1 *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. by Donald Bloxham and Dirk A. Moses (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 2 *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Routledge, 2020).
- 3 *Reconstructing Atrocity Prevention*, ed. by Sheri P. Rosenberg, Tibi Galis, and Alex Zucker (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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While the book stresses the analytical value of subsuming different international crimes under one synoptic notion of atrocity crimes, it does not shy away from explicating the – oftentimes blurry – boundaries between war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Whether crimes are group-selective, or even group-destructive, for instance, significantly influences levels of victimization and manifestations of violent acts. Throughout six overall sections and thirty-seven chapters, such nuances and conceptual frontiers are convincingly uncovered by editors and contributors alike. By drawing on cutting-edge contributions from leading scholars in the fields of international law and international relations, political science, sociology, history, anthropology, psychology, and ethics, the handbook succeeds in accurately depicting, and innovatively (re-)structuring, the hitherto ‘scattered universe of atrocity studies’ (p. 7). This multi- and interdisciplinary approach addresses the compartmentalization of contemporary atrocity studies and enables more fruitful forms of dialogue and exchange across disciplinary boundaries. While the book underscores the value of different disciplines collectively shedding light on the forms, causes, and consequences of mass violence, it explicitly advocates for the field of criminology as a powerful lens to synthesize research on atrocity crime – a worthwhile proposition to bridge disciplinary divides and find common threads in scholarship.

The first section of the book (Chapters 1-3) outlines some general foundations of atrocity studies. *Jeremy Kuperberg* and *John Hagan* start by tracing the respective meanings of different atrocity crimes and their terminological development over time. Assessing legal practices at criminal courts and tribunals, they identify group identity and sexual violence as two fields in which conceptual boundaries between war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide remain porous. *Catrien Bijleveld* then goes on to highlight different methods and methodologies used in the social sciences to study atrocity crimes. Given the various empirical, moral, and practical challenges that come with researching atrocities, she calls for a cross-disciplinary standardization of methods to render scholarship more robust, interconnected, and compatible. *Mark A. Drumbl* concludes the first section by proposing the concept of ‘collectivization’ to understand what makes atrocity crimes so fundamentally different from more common everyday crimes (p. 80). While emphasizing that atrocity crimes are group crimes propelled by collective obedience, he questions whether individualized criminal trials constitute an adequate form of accountability.

Section two (Chapters 4-11) features interdisciplinary insights into the etiology and causes of atrocity crimes. *Barbara Harff* reflects on a research field she has coined and developed since the early 1990s: predictive modelling, risk assessment, and early warning. By reconceptualizing mass atrocities as gross violations of human rights, *Melanie O'Brien* calls for bringing together research and policy on atrocity crimes and human rights in a 'symbiotic and reified' manner (p. 136). *Jolle Demmers* subsequently draws readers' attention to the global increase in intrastate warfare post-World War II and highlights how social boundary drawing, entrepreneurs of violence, atrocity-sustaining alliances, and justificatory frames contribute to the onset of mass atrocities. Akin to research on natural resources and war, *Kieran Mitton* demonstrates how both resource scarcity and abundance are connected to the onset and evolution of atrocity crimes. *Maartje Weerdesteijn* then goes on to investigate the links between regime type and mass atrocities. She not only urges scholars to pay more attention to the relationship of democracy and mass violence but calls for a multi-risk factor analysis to determine why dictatorial regimes commit atrocity crimes. *Jonathan Leader Maynard* demonstrates that ideology, identity, and speech are interdependent phenomena that ought to be studied jointly to understand their collective impact on different atrocity categories. Drawing on case studies like Rwanda, Darfur, and Cambodia, *Rachel Jacobs* and *Scott Straus* emphasize how meso-level dynamics play a key role in escalating, or restraining, large-scale violence against civilians. Finally, *Susanne Karstedt* proposes the concept of 'atrocious organizations' to shed light on relatively neglected acts of atrocities: illegal detention, enforced disappearances, and torture (p. 255).

In section three (Chapters 12-19), the handbook attends to the numerous roles individuals and organizations play in contexts of atrocity crimes, and how acts of perpetration, facilitation, and resistance can shift over time and space. *Alette Smeulers* opens this section by delineating the interdisciplinary field of perpetrator studies, thereby demonstrating that most perpetrators are ordinary human beings acting within highly extraordinary contexts. Similarly, *Roland Moerland* provides an overview of research on bystanders in atrocity situations, stressing how passivity along a 'bystander continuum' can have crime-enabling implications (p. 308). Questioning binary categories of perpetrators vs. victims, *Erin Jessee* studies complex actors and corresponding processes of role-shifting in atrocity crimes. Zooming in on one such highly complex actor, *Myriam Denov* and

Anaïs Cadieux van Vliet then shed light on child soldiers in atrocity situations, and how scholarship can inform legal and policy measures to better prohibit and prevent recruitment. Next, *Ugur Ümit Üngör* aptly illustrates the growing relevance of studying non-state actors in atrocity crimes, including rebel groups, terrorist organizations, and drug cartels. Similarly, *Wim Huisman*, *Susanne Karstedt*, and *Annika van Baar* examine the violence-engendering role of corporations, drawing on their rich empirical database of cross-case corporate involvement from World War II to 2019. As opposed to the previous chapters, *Christopher W. Mullins* then turns the focus to state actors as the principal organizational forces of atrocity crimes. Concluding this section, *Alex J. Bellamy* traces how the international community agreed on a responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes (R2P) before arguing for a ‘responsibility to try’ amidst mixed track records and geopolitical power plays (p. 446).

Section four (Chapters 20-24) specifically considers victims of mass violence and the harms caused by the different categories of atrocity crimes. *Antony Pemberton* and *Rianne Letschert* start by summarizing social scientific scholarship on victimhood before proposing a new form of victimology that draws on practical wisdom and context-dependency. *Helge Brunborg* subsequently points out the relevance and different ways of measuring atrocity deaths and their circumstances – including potential data sources and collection methods. Considering the hitherto understudied impact of atrocity crimes on the non-human environment, *Daan P. van Uhm* demonstrates that the natural world can be a cause, tool, and victim of mass violence. Focusing on one particular part of, or response to, mass atrocities, *Victoria Colvin* and *Phil Orchard* highlight both legal mechanisms around and research on forced migration and widespread displacement. Finally, *Lidewyde Berckmoes* draws readers’ attention to inter- and transgenerational harms of atrocity crimes – a field of inquiry dating back to clinical work with descendants of Holocaust survivors that still increases in relevance.

In section five of the book (Chapters 25-31), scholars focus on different elements of transitional justice to investigate (formal) reactions to atrocity crimes across space and time. *David Tolbert* and *Marcela Prieto Rudolph* kick off this part by outlining the historical evolution, effectiveness, challenges, and future perspectives of transitional justice. Based on this, *Nancy Amoury Combs* concentrates on the many discrepancies between the promises and practices of international criminal law that have become evident in many courts and tribunals

over the past decades. By focusing on ‘sexual violence as practice’ – bottom-up acts of sexual violence that are not systematically authorized by superiors or through policy – *Kim Thuy Seelinger* and *Elisabeth Jean Wood* examine an increasingly widespread category of atrocity crimes that poses serious challenges to criminal prosecution (p. 649). In his chapter, *Jeremy Sarkin* discusses the fascinating and complex relationship between amnesties and truth commissions in post-atrocity contexts. Turning to a relatively neglected topic, *Joanna R. Quinn* subsequently demonstrates how customary, locally grown justice responses can help rebuild societies after mass violence, and what pitfalls they might bring along. *Stephanie Wolfe* then turns to two other important instruments of transitional justice that seem to work most effectively if applied in tandem: public apologies and reparations. In this section’s final chapter, *Nicole Fox* introduces research on memory, memorialization, and memorials as manifestations of transitional justice that come with both compelling promises and potential unintended consequences. Given this section’s emphasis on reactions to atrocity crimes, one or two chapters on the relationship between post-hoc measures (e.g., transitional justice mechanisms) and proactive prevention efforts that mitigate the risk of mass violence, or stop atrocities once they are underway, would have further increased its analytical value.

The handbook’s final section (Chapters 32–37) entails six original case studies that provide readers with relatively understudied examples of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (two case studies for each atrocity category). Focusing on widespread war crimes in Angola, for instance, *Joris van Wijk* addresses why there has been a general absence of accountability mechanisms, truth-seeking, and memorialization after the end of the civil war. In contrast to the Angolan example, *Oliver Kaplan* analyzes how war crimes (and other crimes) committed during the 50-year civil war in Colombia are remembered and addressed in the country today. Turning to the crimes against humanity that claimed the lives of up to one million people in 1965–1966 Indonesia, *Jess Melvin* and *Annie Pohlman* examine the continuities underpinning both the evolution and public forgetting of past atrocity crimes. *Thijs B. Bouwknecht* and *Tadesse Simie Metekia* then juxtapose the Indonesian example with the case of Ethiopia where criminal prosecution and transitional justice were implemented on a massive scale to address the state’s deeply rooted history of crimes against humanity. In the subsequent chapter, *Naomi Roht-Arriaza* investigates the genocide of Guatemala’s indigenous peoples throughout

the 1980s before explicating the positive effects of criminal trials on victim communities – even without notable convictions of perpetrators. The last chapter of the handbook, written by *Kjell Anderson*, then sheds light on the genocide against the Êzidis in the Sinjār region of Northern Iraq perpetrated by the Islamic State and, arguably, still ongoing to the present day.

Overall, the *Oxford Handbook of Atrocity Crimes* signifies a crucial reference for scholars, policymakers, legal professionals, and activists providing comprehensive insights into the causes, actors, victimization, consequences, and reactions that characterize war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The book not only skillfully captures the breadth and depth of existing scholarship; it also constitutes a valuable launch pad to overcome hermetically sealed topical silos and to bring together the plethora of different disciplinary threads that study mass violence. By convincingly tracing conceptual boundaries and commonalities of different atrocity categories, the book serves as a cutting-edge guide to better understand and address those ‘high-impact crimes of severe gravity’ that David Scheffer first described twenty years ago.⁴ The book’s interdisciplinary design and careful selection of hitherto understudied yet highly insightful case studies demonstrate the complexities of scholarship on and prosecution of atrocity crimes in the 21st century. Everyone interested in studying, addressing, or preventing anti-civilian atrocities is therefore well-advised to consult this handbook.

4 David Scheffer, ‘Genocide and Atrocity Crimes’, *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 1.3 (2006), pp. 229–50 (p. 239), doi:10.1353/gsp.2011.0044.

Works Cited

- Bloxham, Donald, and Dirk A. Moses (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2012)
- Knittel, Susanne C., and Zachary J. Goldberg (eds), *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies* (Routledge, 2020)
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