



## Narrating Destruction: Genocide, Representation, and Historical Responsibility

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines genocide as a multidimensional phenomenon situated at the intersection of law, politics, sociology, psychology, and cultural representation. Beginning with Raphael Lemkin's foundational definition, it traces how the concept of genocide has evolved beyond its legal codification in the 1948 UN Convention to encompass broader forms of destruction that challenge narrow juridical boundaries. Through an integrated analytical approach, the study synthesises major theoretical frameworks—including structural sociology, political strategy, perpetrator psychology, and settler colonial critique—to demonstrate how genocides emerge through the convergence of state power, exclusionary ideologies, and societal complicity. Historical case studies such as the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and the Rohingya crisis illustrate recurring patterns of dehumanisation, bureaucratic coordination, mass mobilisation, and international inaction. The paper further investigates the politics of memory, focusing on denial, recognition, survivor testimony, and the contested narratives embedded in museums, film, and digital media. It argues that representation is not merely a reflection of historical events but an active site of ethical struggle, shaping how societies confront—or refuse to confront—their violent pasts. Contemporary challenges, including ecocide, climate displacement, artificial intelligence, and the algorithmic circulation of hate, expand the field's theoretical horizons.



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Ultimately, the study contends that genocide scholarship must embrace a radical ethics of remembrance rooted in decolonial critique, multidirectional memory, and structural accountability. Remembering genocide thus becomes not only an act of historical preservation but a political and moral commitment to preventing future atrocities.

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### **Introduction:**

Genocide is not merely a historical event; it is a structural rupture that exposes the darkest capacities embedded within modern political life. It constitutes an intentional effort to destroy a human group in its physical, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions, leaving behind landscapes of erasure that persist long after the violence has ceased. Raphael Lemkin's coinage of the term in 1944 was both a juridical innovation and a moral intervention, emerging directly from the crisis of the Holocaust and attempting to capture a crime that previously lacked a precise conceptual frame (Lemkin). Though forged in response to the Nazi extermination of Europe's Jews, Lemkin's definition was immediately capacious, capturing patterns of violence he had already traced in Ottoman assaults on Armenians, colonial destruction of Indigenous peoples, and other episodes of mass atrocity across history. The term's evolution since then reflects a growing global effort to understand why societies turn against segments of their own population, and what responsibilities scholars, states, and citizens bear in confronting this history.

To grasp genocide in its full complexity, one must navigate the demands of law, politics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and cultural representation simultaneously. Lemkin himself understood genocide as more than the physical annihilation of individuals; he defined it as a systematic assault on the foundations that allow a group to continue existing as a coherent and self-sustaining community (Lemkin). This insight directly informed the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which emphasised "intent to destroy" a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Yet the Convention's selective list of protected groups has been a persistent source of debate. Critics such as Helen Fein and Barbara Harff argue that its exclusions—particularly of political and social groups—have narrowed the moral horizon of genocide studies and hindered recognition of crimes that fall outside legal parameters but align with the destructive logics Lemkin originally described (Fein 29; Harff 59). This ongoing tension between legal precision and moral comprehensiveness underscores one of the field's most important dilemmas: how to define genocide in a way that supports judicial accountability without foreclosing broader historical insight.



Understanding genocide requires frameworks that extend beyond legal categories. Sociological scholarship helps illuminate how societies construct the conditions under which mass killing becomes thinkable. Fein's influential idea of the "universe of obligation" identifies the circle of individuals or groups a society feels morally bound to protect; genocide becomes possible when particular communities are pushed outside that circle and rendered unworthy of empathy or defence (Fein 4). This exclusion does not occur spontaneously but often emerges through decades of cultural stereotyping, political rhetoric, and social hierarchy. Zygmunt Bauman's seminal argument that the Holocaust was not a deviation from modernity but one of its byproducts expands this point further. He contends that bureaucratic rationality, administrative efficiency, and technological order—features commonly celebrated as evidence of civilisation—can, under certain ideological conditions, be operationalised for exterminatory purposes (Bauman 13). Bauman's work underscores that genocide is not the chaotic unleashing of ancient hatreds but often a methodically organised project handled through paperwork, filing systems, transport schedules, and modern institutions functioning exactly as designed.

Political science adds another crucial dimension by examining the strategic calculations behind mass violence. Benjamin Valentino's analysis positions genocide not simply as a byproduct of hatred but as a deliberate strategy chosen by leaders seeking to eliminate perceived threats or radically transform society (Valentino). Harff and Ted Gurr similarly show how authoritarianism, political exclusion, civil conflict, and racialised ideology correlate strongly with genocidal outcomes (Harff 61). These insights align with historical case studies: Armenians labelled as internal enemies of the Ottoman Empire; Tutsi communities cast as existential threats by Rwandan extremists; and the Rohingya framed by the Myanmar state as illegal infiltrators threatening national identity. These examples reveal how genocide repeatedly emerges where state power converges with narratives of national purification, demographic engineering, or counterinsurgency.

If political and structural frameworks explain organisational intent, psychological research reveals the mechanisms through which ordinary individuals become participants in extraordinary violence. Stanley Milgram's studies on obedience and Philip Zimbardo's examinations of deindividuation illustrate the frightening ease with which authority, conformity, and situational pressures can override personal morality (Milgram 34; Zimbardo 112). Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* further demonstrates how average individuals—middle-aged German policemen in his case—became willing executioners during the Holocaust, not because of ideological fanaticism but because of obedience, peer pressure, and gradual moral numbing (Browning 19). Ervin Staub's notion of a "continuum of destruction" captures this incremental erosion of empathy, showing how societies slide from prejudice to persecution and finally to



annihilation as violence becomes normalised (Staub 25). These perspectives highlight that genocides do not unfold solely through orders issued from above; they depend on widespread participation, whether active, passive, or coerced.

Historical genocide cases anchor these theories in lived reality. The Armenian Genocide demonstrates how wartime fear and nationalist ideology were manipulated to vilify Armenians as a treacherous minority, enabling the regime to cloak forced marches, starvation, and mass killing under the rhetoric of national security (Kiernan 121). The Holocaust remains the most thoroughly documented and structurally sophisticated genocide. Bauman's insistence that its brutality emerged from modern administrative systems rather than primitive brutality reshapes our understanding of how ordinary state mechanisms can become instruments of destruction (Bauman 28). Rwanda exemplifies rapid, community-mobilised genocide driven by radio propaganda, extremist militias, and a state apparatus determined to eliminate a minority. Bosnia reveals how genocide can unfold even under international observation, exposing the limits—and sometimes failures—of global peacekeeping. Contemporary genocidal campaigns in Darfur and Myanmar show how atrocity persists in the twenty-first century, manifesting through aerial bombardment, militia violence, and digital propaganda. Taken together, these cases reveal recurring patterns: ideological scapegoating, state coordination, mass mobilisation, and international hesitation or denial.

The field deepens further when genocide is placed in conversation with colonialism. Patrick Wolfe's description of settler colonialism as a "logic of elimination" reframes policies such as forced removals, reservation systems, and assimilation through residential schools as part of an ongoing genocidal structure rather than isolated abuses (Wolfe 387). Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire show that European colonial violence—characterised by racial hierarchy, dispossession, and routine brutality—prefigured the totalitarian ideologies that later devastated Europe itself (Fanon 190; Césaire 36). Achille Mbembe's theory of "necropolitics" crystallises this by arguing that state power often operates through the management of death, determining which populations may live safely and which must survive under constant threat (Mbembe 16). These frameworks disrupt conventional understandings of genocide by showing how slow violence, cultural destruction, and long-term structural domination can be as devastating as direct mass killing.

The politics of memory and representation is another essential axis of genocide studies. Gregory Stanton identifies denial as the final stage of genocide, marking an attempt not only to conceal the crime but to destroy the memory of the victims and rewrite historical narratives (Stanton). Fatma Müge Göçek and



others argue that denial is not merely an aftereffect but a fundamental part of the genocidal process itself, enabling perpetrators to maintain power and preserve national myths. Denial manifests through outright rejection, definitional manipulation, justifications framed as self-defence, or euphemisms such as “ethnic cleansing” or “population transfer.” These tactics are evident in Turkish narratives about the Armenian Genocide, Serbian revisionism surrounding Bosnia, and Myanmar’s insistence that its actions in Rakhine State constitute counterterrorism rather than targeted destruction.

Recognition itself is deeply political. Judith Butler’s idea of grievability highlights how certain lives are publicly acknowledged while others remain unrecognised, shaping global responses to atrocity (Butler 37). Strategic alliances often determine which genocides states are willing to name. Many nations avoided recognising the Armenian Genocide for decades due to diplomatic relationships with Turkey. The failure of the UN Security Council to unanimously recognise Srebrenica as genocide, blocked by a single veto, demonstrates how geopolitical interests shape historical truth. Diaspora activism, survivor testimony, and human rights campaigns attempt to counter these hierarchies, but recognition remains uneven and fiercely contested.

Survivor testimony is perhaps the most ethically charged form of representation. Jean Améry described testimony as a form of resistance—a refusal to allow dehumanisation to define the meaning of a life. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasise that traumatic accounts often appear fragmented or nonlinear because they reflect experiences that exceed conventional narrative structures (Felman and Laub). Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory shows how trauma carries across generations, shaping identities and political activism long after the original survivors have passed away (Hirsch 6). Testimony therefore functions not only as evidence but as a moral relationship between past and present, demanding careful listening and contextual sensitivity.

Museums and memorials give physical form to these memories. From Yad Vashem to the Kigali Genocide Memorial and the Srebrenica–Potočari Centre, these institutions curate narratives that shape public understanding and national identity. Yet they are not neutral spaces. Their design, emphasis, and omissions reflect political choices and cultural priorities. Some privilege national redemption narratives; others foreground victim testimony or structural analysis. The politics of what is included and excluded demonstrates that memorialisation is an arena of struggle, not a passive archive.

Media and film intensify these debates. Popular films such as *Schindler’s List* and *The Pianist* bring genocide into mainstream consciousness by personalising suffering, though they risk Hollywoodizing atrocity and smoothing complexity into narrative arcs that emphasise redemption (Bauman; Browning).



More experimental works like *Son of Saul* refuse spectacle, using disorientation, limited perspective, and sensory immersion to evoke trauma without exploiting it. Documentaries such as *The Act of Killing* illustrate how perpetrators narrate their own crimes, revealing denial, pride, and impunity. The digital age compounds these dynamics: smartphones document atrocities in real time, while disinformation campaigns and algorithmic amplification—as seen in Myanmar—become tools of mobilising hatred. Representing genocide is therefore both necessary and ethically fraught, requiring careful balance between visibility and respect, testimony, and sensationalism.

Justice, accountability, and prevention remain central yet elusive goals. International tribunals—from Nuremberg to the ICTR and ICTY—have established vital legal precedents, affirming that individuals, not just states, can be held criminally responsible for genocide. Yet these institutions face critiques of selectivity, political influence, financial cost, and distance from affected populations. Truth commissions and reparations programmes attempt to broaden the scope of justice by addressing historical grievances and promoting reconciliation, though they often struggle to transform entrenched inequalities or satisfy divergent expectations. Post-genocide governance must juggle stability, accountability, and democracy, a balance many societies find extraordinarily difficult to maintain.

Prevention remains the field's most urgent yet unrealised promise. Stanton's "Ten Stages" model and Harff's statistical indicators offer early-warning tools (Stanton; Harff 65), while the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) reframes sovereignty as a duty rather than a shield. Yet implementation falters due to political resistance, Security Council vetoes, competing national interests, and selective humanitarianism. Case studies consistently show that warnings are abundant, yet action is rare—not because dangers are invisible, but because political will is absent. This gap between knowledge and action is one of the most troubling realities confronting global governance today.

Contemporary debates push genocide studies toward new frontiers. Climate change, forced displacement, and ecological collapse raise questions about ecocide and structural extermination. Artificial intelligence introduces risks of automated surveillance, algorithmic discrimination, and digital manipulation, even as it offers tools for monitoring conflict indicators. Deepfakes, identity erasure, and digital propaganda complicate memory and truth. The field must evolve to address these emerging threats, integrating technological, environmental, and epistemological inquiry into its frameworks.

What ultimately binds these diverse strands together is an ethical imperative. Studying genocide cannot be reduced to cataloguing atrocities or refining definitions. It demands a moral stance grounded in solidarity, critical memory, and commitment to structural transformation. Michael Rothberg's notion of



multidirectional memory urges us to see remembrance not as a competition over victimhood but as a shared space of interconnected histories that can foster alliances across communities (Rothberg 3). Decolonising genocide studies requires dismantling Eurocentric assumptions, valuing Indigenous and Global South epistemologies, and recognising that colonial violence is not a past event but an ongoing structure.

Memory is not archival; it is active. To remember genocide is to resist erasure, to challenge state power, and to cultivate political agency. It is a call to remake the world so that the conditions enabling destruction lose their foothold. The ethical task is therefore not only to recount what happened but to understand the systems that allowed it to happen and to work consciously toward futures where such systems cannot flourish. Genocide studies, at its best, becomes not just an academic field but a form of historical responsibility—a commitment to ensuring that the past becomes a catalyst for justice rather than a recurring wound.

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