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## Debra L. DeLaet on War Crimes and Genocide

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## **Debra DeLaet on War Crimes and Genocide**

In the face of the despair engendered by any confrontation with the realities of genocide, a desire for understanding the processes of genocidal violence that might inspire some hope for a solution is powerful. The desire for knowledge about genocidal violence is connected to important practical questions for students of international relations: by identifying the forces that drive genocide violence, might the international community be in a better position to stop future instances of genocide? If genocidal violence cannot be effectively stopped, can it be punished in meaningful ways that bring some sort of justice to its victims? Obviously, there are no easy answers to these questions. However, the books reviewed here help to shed some light on the complicated psychological, social, and political dynamics that shape mass political violence and its aftermath. It is not clear that these books provide many grounds for hope, but the lessons they offer may mitigate the general despair stemming from a belief that forces which drive genocidal violence are unknowable, unstoppable, or, ultimately, immune to punishment.

**Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder by Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley. Princeton University Press, 2006. 288 pp.**

In Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder, Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley seek to explain what seems unfathomable for many observers—the slaughter of masses of innocent civilians in genocides and other mass political murders throughout history. Chirot and McCauley examine psychological, ethnographic, sociological, historical, and political explanations for mass political murder. At the same time, they consider mechanisms that have emerged in various societies that limit group violence. In doing so, the authors emphasize two seemingly paradoxical conclusions: 1) that mass political murder occurs under “normal” conditions rather than being the product of abnormal or criminal psychology; and 2) that genocide happens less frequently than one might predict based on their observations of the causal forces that make genocidal violence possible. In the authors’ view, “mass killing is neither irrational nor in any sense ‘crazy,’” but represents normal psychological responses to group conflict and competition (7). Yet most conflicts, and even most wars, do not become genocidal. A primary objective of their work, then, is to explain this paradox.

The authors begin by considering the question of whether modern genocides differ in any meaningful way from historical mass political killings. They conclude that, although genocide has occurred throughout history, modern states have increased the conditions under which genocidal violence emerges by re-tribalizing human groups in large-scale societies. The authors assume that competition and conflict among groups is, at some level, inevitable. The question of why inter-group competition and conflict escalates to genocidal violence in some cases remains unanswered.

While broadly considering the causes of genocidal violence, the authors explore examples of mass political murder in various historical periods to support their argument that mass political violence is “normal.” They also examine ancient as well as modern examples of inter-group conflicts in which victors are restrained in their use of violence and do not seek to eliminate their enemies in order to explore why most violent conflicts do not become genocidal. Ultimately,

they suggest that mass political killing exists on a political continuum. By locating historical cases along this continuum, and by exploring the psychological, social, and political factors that have shaped these cases, the authors hope to shed light on the conditions that lead to genocidal violence and the factors that might enable human societies to control or prevent genocide.

Ultimately, Why Not Kill Them All? is a synthetic work that seeks to provide a taxonomy of the potential causes of genocidal violence. The authors identify four main motives—convenience, revenge, simple fear, and fear of racial or ethnic “pollution”—that can turn basic inter-group conflict into mass political violence. The authors do not claim that all of these factors must be present for genocidal violence to occur but merely argue that at least one of these motivations is present when mass political murder occurs, either historically or in modern cases. In addition to identifying these motives, the authors also claim that various psychological mechanisms are at play when ordinary people are convinced to engage in mass political murder. These mechanisms include desensitization to killing, organization, emotional appeals (fear, anger, hate, love, disgust), and essentializing others.

The historical breadth of the work is useful in documenting the continuity of mass political murder historically. Similarly, the authors’ broad, multidisciplinary consideration of the possible psychological, social, and political causes of genocidal violence makes the work a comprehensive overview of the logic of mass political murder. However, the breadth of the work ultimately diminishes its utility in isolating variables that cause genocide in particular cases. The authors offer *plausible* explanations for why genocidal violence occurs without putting forth any concrete evidence of why genocide occurs in specific cases. For example, it seems reasonable, on the surface, to assume that hate as an emotion is always in play when genocidal killings occur. But asserting that hate can cause people to overcome their aversion to killing does not prove that hate was a motivating factor in specific conflicts, or, more to the point, in the case of particular perpetrators. The authors of this work put forth plausible assertions without supportive evidence that could lead a reader to reasonably conclude that this or that variable is more likely to be a cause of genocidal violence. Thus, in terms of contributing to our understanding of the specific conditions under which mass political violence occurs and how we might prevent it, this book is of limited utility.

**The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda by Scott Straus. Cornell University Press, 2006. 273 pp.**

In The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda, Scott Straus applies a microscopic lens to the critical case of genocide in Rwanda in order to examine the causes of genocidal violence. Straus carefully scrutinizes the possible explanations for the genocide in Rwanda with three methods: 1) interviews of convicted perpetrators in Rwandan prisons who had pled guilty; 2) a micro-comparative study of genocidal dynamics at the local level; and 3) in-depth interviews of individuals who emerged as particularly aggressive killers during the genocide.

In his comparison of genocidal dynamics at the local level, Straus examines not only regions where genocidal violence was prevalent, but also localities where large-scale violence occurred at lower levels than in communes with high levels of violence. This comparison helps Straus isolate the key variables that appear to have driven genocidal violence. In the end, Straus’s rigorous and multi-layered methodological design is a model of social science research that

should be read widely, not only by scholars of genocide and human rights, but also by other scholars of international relations and the social sciences.

Straus's findings are rich in detail and are worth reading in their entirety. His primary findings can be summarized briefly. First, he argues that war and the insecurity with which it was accompanied were necessary conditions for the Rwandan genocide. Prior to the Tutsi rebellion in the early 1990s, underlying ethnic animosity and mistrust existed but had not exploded into genocidal violence. The Tutsi military challenge and subsequent insecurity emboldened hardliners and undermined moderates, thereby creating the context in which pre-existing ethnic classifications could be used to mobilize ordinary Rwandans to participate in genocide. At first glance, this finding might seem uncontroversial. However, in the face of widely-held beliefs that racial animus and "age-old tribal hatreds" made genocide inevitable, the finding is important. Fear in an insecure political environment—and *not* ethnic hatred—was the key variable that drove perpetrators to kill on such a large scale. Most perpetrators were "ordinary men" who were motivated primarily by fear rather than hatred.

Second, the strength of the Rwandan state facilitated the large-scale mobilization of civilians to perpetrate mass political violence. Whereas international relations scholars increasingly examine failed states as incubators for mass political violence, Straus reminds us that strong state institutions can be used (and, in the Rwandan case, may have been necessary) to mobilize genocidal violence. In this regard, political elites connected with national institutions played a crucial role in mobilizing mass political violence in Rwanda. Straus shows that local elites connected with the state played a significant role in shaping the nature and extent of the violence in various localities. In places where hardliners were in positions of power, genocidal violence was particularly extreme. In regions where genocide was delayed and/or the overall levels of violence were lower, key local political figures resisted pressures to participate in or mobilize civilians in the effort to target Tutsi.

Finally, Straus concludes that ethnic differentiation was a key variable in facilitating genocide in Rwanda. However, his conclusion is not based on the commonly held view that genocide is driven by the demonization of an ethnically-differentiated Other, although some perpetrators certainly did hate the Tutsi. Instead, Straus contends that ethnicity provided a reliable marker for identifying "the enemy" in a time of war. Governing elites, especially hardliners, were threatened by the Tutsi insurgency and actively encouraged Hutu civilians to equate *all* Tutsi with the enemy. In this way, pre-existing ethnic categories helped to legitimize killing in the context of war, but ethnic divisions were not at the heart of the genocide. Instead, many Hutu perpetrators killed Tutsi not because they hated them but because they genuinely feared them as security threats.

The implications of Straus's findings are simultaneously simple and profound. Genocidal violence is *not* inevitable. Although genocide can be planned from above, it must be implemented, to at least some degree, from below. If political elites at the local level refuse to participate or to mobilize civilians, the state may not have sufficient "civilian soldiers" on the ground to carry out genocidal plans. Similarly, while ethnic differentiation may be inevitable, it does not need to degenerate into genocidal violence. Finally, the Rwandan case suggests that perpetrators are often motivated by fear in an environment of political insecurity. If there is a

way to minimize the security concerns of individuals living in conflict zones (to be sure, no easy task), it may be possible to reduce the likelihood that war turns genocidal.

Of course, there are no simple ways to translate the advancement of scholarly understanding into practical efforts to stop genocide. Yet, by unflinchingly exploring the dynamics of genocide at the micro-level, Strauss demonstrates that we can understand how genocide occurs, thus giving rise to some small hope that the international community can put into place appropriate responses that might limit the devastation wrought by genocide.

**The Witnesses: War Crimes and the Promise of Justice in the Hague by Eric Stover. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 252 pp.**

There is a burgeoning literature on global efforts to pursue international justice for war crimes and human rights abuses. Most of these studies focus on the various institutions that have been developed towards this end, perhaps most prominently war crimes tribunals and truth commissions. The voices of the elites designing or leading these institutions have often been prioritized, whereas scholars have brought in the voices of victims too infrequently. Eric Stover's book, The Witnesses: War Crimes and the Promise of Justice in the Hague, is a corrective to this trend and refreshingly privileges the voices of victims in his study of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

While completing research for another book on war crimes in Bosnia and Croatia, Stover was motivated to conduct this study after being confronted with the anger of several women from Srebrenica when he asked what they thought of the war crimes tribunal. Stover had presumed that all victims would support trials as a way of bringing justice to perpetrators. Instead, he found that a substantial number of victims resented the court as "too little, too late" in some cases and as illegitimate in others. After being confronted by this disconnect between his presumption that victims would uniformly welcome trials and the reality of the mixed reactions of victims to the war crimes tribunal for Yugoslavia, Stover decided to conduct a study focused on the perspectives of victims.

As his primary methodology, Stover interviewed 127 people about their opinions and attitudes towards the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The interviewees include Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, and Croats. Eighty-seven of the interviewees are witnesses who actually have testified before the ICTY. His analysis focuses mostly on information he garnered from the interviews of these witnesses. Other interviewees included seven potential witnesses who were not called to testify and thirty-three current or former members of the ICTY staff, journalists, and human rights workers who had worked with ICTY witnesses. Stover's objectives in conducting extensive interviews of victims and witnesses are three-fold: 1) he wants to examine the reasons that witnesses choose to testify before international criminal tribunals; 2) he seeks to expand our understanding of the experiences of witnesses who testify; and 3) he considers the fate and concerns of witnesses after they testify. These are all important issues, and in gathering evidence about these issues from the case of the former Yugoslavia, Stover makes an important contribution to the literature on post-conflict justice.

His findings can be briefly summarized in the following manner. First, witnesses identified a variety of reasons for choosing to testify before the ICTY. Foremost among these reasons was a

sense of “moral duty.” Surprisingly, perhaps, revenge was not a major motivation. Second, in terms of the experiences of witnesses who testified before the ICTY, Stover found that testifying could be a psychologically traumatizing experience and that victims were not sufficiently prepared for, or aided during the process, to deal with their own psychological needs. While a small percentage of Stover’s interviewees reported feeling a sense of catharsis from testimony, most felt emotionally drained and ambivalent about whether anything positive would result from their testimony, either for themselves or for the community more broadly. At the same time, few witnesses reported being overly traumatized by their experience. In addition to psychological effects, witnesses’ choice to testify often had negative social consequences, including threats and intimidation from members of different ethnic groups living in their communities, not only for themselves but also for friends and family back home. In this regard, Stover’s interviews indicate that fear of negative repercussions was a factor made many victims reluctant to testify. Finally, Stover’s interviews suggest that witnesses had mixed feelings about the aftermath of testifying before the ICTY. Respondents were more concerned about job security and their economic situation than about the punishment of war criminals or post-conflict justice.

Stover comes away from his interviews of victims of and witnesses to mass atrocity in Yugoslavia with a more nuanced perspective on the value of trials than he had when he began the study. He continues to acknowledge the potential ability of war crimes trials to bring some justice to victims by recognizing their suffering. Simultaneously, his interviews helped him to understand the anger and resentment that he confronted when he initially asked women from Srebrenica what they thought about the ICTY. Trials cannot undo the immense suffering of victims, and testifying in trials can re-traumatize victims and lead them to face threats and hostility in ethnically-divided communities. In this way, Stover correctly cautions readers to be mindful of the potential tension between justice for perpetrators, justice at the community level, and justice for individual victims.

The Witnesses will be of interest to scholars of post-conflict justice and human rights as well as legal professionals and human rights activists who work with victims. The book is clearly written, jargon-free, and accessible.

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