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10 Extreme Violence and Desecration in the Armenian Genocide

In considering which forms of violence are characteristic of genocide, institutionalized and professionalized forms are usually named. Building on this, it becomes essential in the study of genocidal processes to recognize the interdependencies of organizations and inter-organizational processes, worldviews and structural orders, situational dynamics, and individual actors. Thus, the term “institutionalized violence” is commonly used to emphasize systematic planning and political intent. The acts of extreme violence observed in the Armenian genocide (1915/16), however, have often been interpreted in research as indications that “old hatreds” or “religious enmity” played a causal role. The emphasis on “affect-driven violence” was often used to imply a low level of institutionalization and to relativize the political intentions as a whole. The assumed difference between the “cold” systematic nature of the violence of genocide and the “emotionalized” violence of minor institutionalized pogroms or massacres has rarely been opposed, although acts of the most extreme cruel violence have occurred in every genocide. Perhaps it should be emphasized at the outset that we do not speak of genocide as an act of violence characterized by a particular totality or extremity. Genocide is not distinguished from other acts of collective violence, especially from massacres in war, by the number of dead, or by a particular form of cruelty, but above all by the intention to erase a community from the future of a nation. Nevertheless, it is striking that genocides are characterized by a particular space of possibilities of the cruel. Various approaches have been provided in violence research to explain the “irregularity” of such excessive acts of violence: from the figure of dynamic “escalation” to “forward panic”;¹ in each case, when excessive acts of violence can be observed, a momentary lack of planning and a low level of systematicity (and intention) is assumed. It is noteworthy that, when it comes to the challenge of assessing extreme violence, the focus of research is mainly on the processes of dehumanization but also on acts of violence in prehistory and early history or in antiquity in order to be able to deepen the aspect of a possible “traditionalization” and “ritualization.”

In the following, the tendency to interpret the excessiveness of violence as a sign of missing institutional actors or institutionalizations of intentions is contra-

1 Randall Collins, “Emotional Dynamics of Violent Situations,” in *Framing Excessive Violence: Discourse and Dynamics*, eds. Daniel Ziegler, Marco Gerster and Steffen Krämer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17–37.

dicted. Moreover, it is also asked what function episodes of excessive violence have in genocidal processes. The following chapter is therefore based on two observations. Firstly, it is striking that elements of the violent situation are understood as aspects of the respective violence. For example, due to the institutionalization of the perpetrators (as police or military personnel), it is concluded that it is institutionalized, “regular” violence, whereby the excessiveness of the violence is then assumed to be an indication of the excessiveness and irregularity of the perpetrators. Secondly, it is taken into account that excesses of violence form independent, self-contained sequences. This observation is already a first argument for evaluating violent excesses in genocidal processes differently than it is usually done. The present discussions start from the fact that specific visualizations are reconstructed in situations of extreme violence. Above all, it is assumed that these are public acts and, moreover, acts that are explicitly addressed to the public.

Pre-modern Violence?

Violence is primarily considered a “means” of genocidal politics, aiming at the exclusion, expulsion, and extermination of the other group. Not least, Zygmunt Bauman drew attention to the fact that physical violence should not be seen as a means but as an element of different practices. These practices include the definition of belonging and non-belonging, the enforcement of “ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural homogeneity,” the construction of “joint historical memories” and a shared cultural heritage, the establishment of new laws, the institutionalization of special units, and the enforcement of enemy patterns.² While it is widely accepted that genocidal processes must be seen as very complex social processes involving different groups of actors and to be framed within ideological identity politics and social goals, it is surprising that attempts to explain extreme violence are dominated by the idea that atrocities can only be explained by the pathologies of individual perpetrators. Cruelty is considered to be an indication of individual intentions or a particularly intense personal “delusion”; this characterizes most notably the research within the scope of the more recent “perpetrator research.”³

In the difficulties that can be noted in seeing cruel assaults as a form of violent action regularly used in genocide and war, the classical thinking of violence

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 64.

³ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Gerhard Paul, ed., *Die Täter der Shoah: Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002).

from a perspective of theories of power plays a role. Even Hannah Arendt, who recognized that violence in modernity requires explanation and attempted to differentiate violence from power, stopped short of seeing violence in an ends-means context. Can one not even interpret “the history of warfare in our century” as the “growing incapacity of the army to fulfill this basic function” so that acts of violence result?⁴ For Arendt, violence is “incapable of speech”;⁵ it is a technique. The meaningfulness of violence results from the purpose for which it is used. Where there is cruelty, it is an indication of a missing or destroyed political order.⁶

While, on the one hand, it can be critically noted that realized processes of violence are always verbalized, not only in their ideological justifications but also in the organization itself, on the other hand, it must be asked whether or not cruelty is precisely violence’s “own” language: as it has certain cross-cultural intelligibility in the images and figures it uses. Extreme cruelty is characterized by a particular ambiguity between destruction and the creation of images of the destroyed. It should also be observed that acts of extreme cruelty, when they occur in genocide, are not single acts but are repeated. Moreover, they are not acts that take place in secret but are committed in public.

In addition to Arendt’s argument that cruelty is an indication of a decayed authority structure, a “catharsis thesis” is especially common: Here, the relationship between violence and catharsis, which can be ultimately linked to Sigmund Freud and René Girard, possibly follows the search for a “meaning” of violence above all. Girard opposed the idea that violence is regarded as irrational, as well as the idea of seeking violence in relations of conflict or guilt and innocence. For Girard, there is always something unconscious in violence. It allows, once directed against a concrete victim, one’s desires for violence to be appeased.

The metamorphosis from peaceable citizens into raging beasts is too terrifying and too transitory for the community to accept it as issuing from within itself. As soon as calm has been miraculously restored, the past tumult will be looked upon as a supreme example of divine intervention. Angered at discovering himself ignored or misrepresented, a god has made known his wishes in a thoroughly godlike manner. Having accepted a final victim, a victim of his own choice in which he may also be incarnated, he silently withdraws from the scene. He will be as benevolent from afar as he was terrible in propinquity.⁷

4 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1963).

5 *Ibid.*, 19.

6 *Ibid.*, 44.

7 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 143.

The first act of violence reconciles the individual with the community, and it reconciles communities. The victim is “purified” through violence because the victim transforms into a “sacred victim.”⁸

It can be assumed that one of the essential processes integrated into excessive violence is the dehumanization of the victims. The final purpose of the cruelty aimed at the individual is the concrete killing, a killing that is prolonged and that can be witnessed during the execution. Extreme violence draws primarily on the visibility of the mutation of the being and the body of the other. Psychologist and conflict researcher Herbert C. Kelman has already examined the conditions under which this becomes possible in terms of the alteration of moral thresholds. Concerning situations of state violence, Kelman assumed that the dehumanization of the victims, the denial of the “identity” of a person, makes it possible for an empathic relationship to no longer be established with the group of victims.⁹ In addition, classic approaches from developmental psychology can be drawn upon. For example, psychologist Albert Bandura and his research teams have identified the cognitive mechanisms that determine moral action. The learning of moral norms regarding right and wrong actions is accompanied by the emotional states of coherence or satisfaction. In processes of dehumanization, moral self-judgment mechanisms are suspended.¹⁰ According to Bandura, the effect of dehumanization is related to relationships between individuals and groups and fields of action in social and political systems. Dehumanization describes a general process that is not dependent on particular social framings or political structures but rather is associated with generalized hostility.

Also frequently cited are Martha Nussbaum’s studies on the relationship of dehumanization with emotions.¹¹ She focused on the concept of objectification and differentiated seven levels of dehumanization:

1. Instrumentality: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. Denial of autonomy: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.

⁸ René Girard, *Das Ende der Gewalt: Analyse des Menschheitsverhängnisses* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983), 50.

⁹ Herbert Kelman, “Violence without Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers,” in *Varieties of Psychohistory*, eds. George Kren and Leon Rappoport (New York: Springer, 1976), 282–314.

¹⁰ Albert Bandura, “Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency,” *Journal of Moral Education* 31, no. 2 (2002): 101–119.

¹¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

3. Inertness: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. Fungibility: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. Violability: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. Ownership: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. Denial of subjectivity: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.¹²

Perhaps it is precisely in the attempt to work with the concept of objectification that the possible limits of classical theories of dehumanization become clear. This includes the consideration of whether the recognition of the other as (another) human being is actually suspended in violence. Thus, the question is to consider whether one of the most striking examples of dehumanization could be read in a completely different way. For example, after the “Anschluss” of Austria to the German Reich, male Viennese Jews were forced to clean pro-Austrian slogans from the sidewalks in the course of “rubbing parties.” Was this not in fact a matter of public humiliation following the seizing of public power, as well as a deliberate infliction of suffering directed against the humanity of the other, rather than an act of objectification?

In the development of sociological research on violence since the mid-1970s, different parameters of classical social theories have gradually been tested. A significant step was seen in the work of the German sociologist Heinrich Popitz.¹³ Popitz initially derived forms of violence from describing different forms of power. Nevertheless, in describing killing – although most theories of violence still deal with impersonal “violence” rather than concrete “killing” – he recognized that killing is detached from embeddings in certain forms of power.¹⁴ It has a logic of its own, consisting of the relationship between the absolutely terrible and the absolutely supreme. Killing is not only an act of absolute power. It is the symbol of the “residual” victory over the other and thus an act that breaks up the space of the political into spaces of political ideologies or religions. With the killing, the “triumph” over the other is shown, the killing following at the same time

¹² Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995): 257.

¹³ Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht: Autorität – Herrschaft – Gewalt – Technik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986); Heinrich Popitz, *Phenomena of Power: Authority, Domination, and Violence*, eds. Göttlich Andreas and Jochen Dreher, trans. Gianfranco Poggi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32–34.

legal as well as personal legitimations, but it also opens, with its destruction of the integrity of the victims, a reinforcement of the integrity of the perpetrator.

With these remarks, presented here merely as propositions, a way is opened to the suggestion of Émile Durkheim to see violence not at the limits of power and order but at the core of the respectively valid moral conception in groups. Randall Collins also included this aspect in his reflections, describing an “overt brutality” that can be understood following Durkheim and would happen where boundaries between groups become relevant.¹⁵ Collins distinguished “overt brutality” from “callousness”: “brutality routinized and bureaucratized, cruelty without passion.”¹⁶

In Collins’s interpretive approach, based on a civilizational differentiation, cruelty is no longer associated with a process or the idea of a situation. Collins discusses an idea of sacrifice, which he sees as religious and interprets as a pre-modern connotation. His analysis excludes the totalitarian and fascist ideologies of the 20th century, although both ideologies had integrated strong religious figures that interacted in close association with national figures. To be sure, Collins also sees forms of cruelty regularly in modern societies. However, for him, these are not at the center of modern violent processes. Extreme violent processes may be explained as institutionalizations of traditional war hunts, victimization practices, or punishment practices. It is also clear from the fact that Collins states that atrocities are usually carried out in an inconspicuous manner and are difficult to justify that he does not see cruel violence as a possible characteristic of “modern” violence.

Modern society has seen an abrupt decline in ferocity. Torture, mutilation, exemplary punishment have disappeared as ideals; while these practices still occur they do so privately and secretly—in the hidden interrogation rooms of police stations, in the personal interaction between guard and prisoner—rather than as the explicit, ceremonial enactments fundamental to the social order. Executions are now to be humane and relatively painless, and are carried out in private; their justification is generally held to be of a rational, educative, warning nature, not passionate vengeance. Ferocity in war becomes atrocity, to be hidden, or even expiated, not gloried in. The heads of male-factors are no longer displayed on spikes, but buried from view.¹⁷

In the examination of genocides, but also in many aspects of the Holocaust, it can be seen that the atrocities have by no means been banished from visibility. In the investigation of the genocide in Srebrenica or even the immense violence in the Congo, this can very easily be made clear. Especially with regard to the Armenian

¹⁵ Randall Collins, “Three Faces of Cruelty: Towards a Comparative Sociology of Violence,” *Theory and Society* 1, no. 4 (1974): 415–440.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 431.

genocide, the atrocities can be traced in almost all reports by embassy staff, travelers, military personnel, or missionaries of various European nations.

In a private letter to the Legation Councillor in the Foreign Office, von Rosenberg, the director of the German Christian Charity-Organisation for the Orient (*Christlicher Hilfsbund im Orient*; an association of the protestant churches), Friedrich Schuchardt, sent a report by the Swedish missionary Alma Johansson about the events in Musch and Mamuret ul Asis:

Masses of these bearers, made up of children, old people, and those who had been exempted, died along the way due to the cold and deprivation. Whenever anyone fell down from weakness, he was beaten by the gendarmes riding with them until he either attempted to walk again or fell down dead. . . . The women were taken with the children to the next villages, locked by the hundreds into houses, and burned. Others were thrown into the river. Yes, even higher officers always came to visit us now, and they proudly told the same stories. . . . The worst tortures began there at the beginning of May. The people who were arrested were clamped into pieces of timber, their feet were shod with nails like horses, their beards, eyelashes, their fingernails and teeth were pulled out, they were hanged upside down, and similar things were done to them. Naturally, many of them died, but some of them received medical treatment and were sent to the missionaries and so we saw what had happened. In order that the screaming could not be heard during the tortures, drums and pipes were played around the jail. Some of them confessed to things during this terrible suffering simply to confess something in the hope of being freed.¹⁸

Schuchardt also sent a report by the German missionary and later doctor Magdalena Didszun, who recounted the beginning of the deportation from Hadjin:

The list is headed by women who were only a few days or even hours away from giving birth or who had just given birth and requested permission for some extra time, which was not granted, and so many of them were completely ruined because they were forced to give birth in an open field under terrible pain and deprivation. The crippled, lame, and blind were partly treated in the same manner. . . . The wife of an Armenian pastor was terribly beaten because she was unable to give up a book demanded from her as it had been burned. The protestant wife of a preacher, who was in jail with her, took care of her and testified that she had to be carried out from time to time by four people. [. . .] Glowing coals were put under people's clothes, needles stuck under their fingernails, etc. Similar things happened in Schimakle.¹⁹

18 *Der Direktor des Deutschen Hilfsbundes für christliches Liebeswerk im Orient Friedrich Schuchardt an den Legationsrat im Auswärtige Amt Rosenberg, Constantinopel, den 22. November 1915* (The Director of the German Aid Society for Christian Charity in the Orient Friedrich Schuchardt to the Legation Counsellor in the Foreign Office Rosenberg, Constantinople, 22 November 1915), Documents from the Political Archives of the German Foreign Office (www.armenocide.net: 1915-11-22-DE-001). Translation by Vera Draack.

19 Ibid.

The question of whether it is precisely the extremity of this violence that leads to the systematic nature of the processes of violence being ignored can already be raised here. The extremity of violence lies in the transgression of what we see as the human risk in violence because the cruelty makes the possibility of surviving impossible. The violent situation becomes “hell”; it is perceived and recounted because the narrative can connect to existing narratives, but also because the perpetrators do not have to be named. Extreme violence is about nothing but violence and death itself. The cultural and religious stories of violence are reconstructed narratively in order to be able to describe the situation and “understand” it. It is noteworthy that the more extreme the violence, the more the attempt to clarify the political contexts of its causes is abandoned. Does not extreme violence, in the irrationality attributed to it, have more to do with hatred and enmity, with extraordinary emotions?

The conviction that modern society is based on a taming of violence seems to allow only for the solution that Collins formulated and is frequently encountered in the literature – which finds empirical examples only with great difficulty: that in extreme violence, something traditional must express itself, a traditional affect, at least an unconscious cultural heritage. For, in fact, the techniques and images of cruelty “resemble” each other. However, the fact that we know the staged scenes of cruelty and mostly do not even have to look at them anymore to complete them in our imagination says nothing about whether the power mechanisms behind these stagings are identical.

The arguments that work with the figure of institutionalized versus traditional, unregulated violence also explain why cruel acts in genocides have received little attention from researchers so far. This is because cruelty seems to contradict the systematic policy of persecution with which genocides are carried out. The logic and practices in genocides are developed outside the individual perpetrator. They do not seem to be triggered by the transgression of physical boundaries but by a pure, politically motivated will to exterminate.

What is overlooked, therefore, is that even if cruelty follows “old” practices, they by no means repeat “old” functions in genocide. Cruelty indeed leaves behind images that we think we recognize because they can be connected to historical, religious, or traditional stagings. Nevertheless, not only the intentions but also the practices are modern, institutionalized – and “cold.”

Excessive Violence in the Armenian Genocide

Narratives of violence against women dominate the Armenian genocide. This cruelty has also been described in contemporary sources: the rape and extreme injuries and mutilations, the cutting open of the bellies of pregnant women, and the disfigurement of unborn children. Repeatedly, there was systematic torture or burning of living persons. The memoirs of the survivors also testify to how excessive the violence against children was.²⁰

It is not the intention of this contribution to describe the practices of violence in detail because the question of the representation in scientific analysis is not least directly related to the ambivalences of violence itself. Cruelty challenges questions of understanding, but it also challenges questions of fascination, which the situations can evoke because they seem reduced to violence. No one has identified the relationship between fascination with violence and the relativization of violence as accurately as Elias Canetti, who describes a “feeling of superiority to the dead”²¹ that can develop in situations of political violence. “The feeling of strength, of standing alone against the dead,”²² brings together the perpetrator and bystander. They are united in the confrontation with the killing and the dead, and it is the power they can both take in the situation that leads to the transformation of the situation: from an experience of killing and death to an experience of one’s survival and overcoming of death.

The moment of survival is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands. . . . He sees himself standing there alone and exults in it; and when we speak of the power which this moment gives him, we should never forget that it derives from his sense of uniqueness and from nothing else.²³

In the view of death, one’s agency is magnified because one’s own authority to act is strengthened by the power to stand outside of death itself. In doing so, the perpetrator can perceive the killing as abhorrent²⁴ because this shift to the level of the final threshold of life and death obscures the political intentions and makes the perpetrator invisible as a murderer.

²⁰ Mıhran Dabag and Kristin Platt, *Verlust und Vermächtnis: Überlebende des Genozids an den Armeniern erinnern sich* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2016).

²¹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 650.

²² *Ibid.*, 286.

²³ *Ibid.*, 285.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

In this respect, any scholarly writing of excessive cruelty runs the risk of repeating the minimization and displacement of the individual victims as well as the relativization of the act. The depiction of violence can lend a fascination to the extreme, and the transgression is also directly rooted in the fact that cruelty in public processes of violence does not only follow the purpose of committing violence. This purpose is closely accompanied by the objective of “image making.” The risk that the scientist can step into the role of the voyeur, and that the situation under investigation could become a sensation, is indeed taken here as grounds to refrain from the concrete depiction of acts of violence. However, this observation at the same time underpins the hypothesis that cruelty is not primarily aimed at dehumanization but rather has to do with social and political knowledge on the one hand and cultural images on the other. Not only do the images of violence play a role, as would be argued in approaches that emphasize the transmission of violent practices, but also the images of the self. Violence strengthens these notions of one’s self because with the victory over death, the notion of the self reaches a moment of uniqueness²⁵ and eternity.

In this context, one can ask which proximity to violence is considered a transgression. Thereby, the question of “understanding” is close at hand. Does understanding fail in the face of particularly excessive violence?²⁶ Does scientific analysis fail here? The basic framework for understanding violence is characterized by the possibility of recognizing a connection between means and goal, as Hannah Arendt emphasized.²⁷ Another response looks at the forms of violence institutionalized in rules and practices of power and order in a given society. In doing so, it becomes clear that the boundaries of understandable and permissible violence are measured by the structures of a perpetrator society, not by the experience of the victims.

Jean Améry also failed to break with this perspective. Although he saw the transgression in the form of violence itself, he assigned the moment of “transgression” to the generalized experience of a world trust: “But only through torture did he [the human] learn that a living person can be transformed so thoroughly into flesh and by that, while still alive, be partly made into a prey of death. Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world.”²⁸ The

²⁵ Ibid., 285.

²⁶ Liebsch and Mesink ask this question from a socio-philosophical perspective: Burkhard Liebsch and Dagmar Mensink, “Vorwort,” in *Gewalt Verstehen*, eds. Burkhard Liebsch and Dagmar Mensink (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 7–20.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).

²⁸ Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 40.

possible answer to the question of the transgression of “permissible” force can be oriented to legal issues, such as the applicable law of war and criminal law. Atrocities are associated with the collapse of a state monopoly on using force, the emergence of lawless spaces, and the loss of normative orders. This creates a possible contradiction with the need to reconstruct executive interactions in the study of genocide trials. At first glance, atrocity demands considering individual willingness to use violence and individual “intention to use violence.” Jan Philipp Reemtsma called the violence that purposefully seeks to destroy the body “autotelic violence.” This appears challenging or even impossible to explain because it is described as senseless: “this type of violence has become foreign to us”²⁹ as it is considered incompatible with Western self-understanding and reliance on state monopolies on violence. Reemtsma uses the term to describe violence performed for the sake of killing, which goes against rules and norms but does not want to be legitimized either.

For an understanding of violence in genocide, which is based on the endeavor to determine rational motives, systematic planning, and ideological intentions, brutalized violence consequently forms a contradiction. Where extreme violence is enacted, no precise objectives seem to be pursued. However, following the discussion above on whether extreme violence in genocide fulfills a function of dehumanization and thus of a “prelude” to genocide, the opposite can be explored: the consideration that cruelty belongs precisely to genocide. In the current scholarly controversies attempting to redefine the function(s) of dehumanization,³⁰ there is a specific denial that extreme cruelty serves to overcome empathy.

Thus, it is debated whether the assumed connection can be maintained, that dehumanization must first occur to make murder possible – a connection primarily associated with the concentration camps. Not least because of the density of research on the perpetrators in “*Einsatzgruppen*,” this assumption is now difficult to sustain.³¹ As conditions that lead individuals to become perpetrators in genocide – and this means that they kill repeatedly, routinely, and systematically – aspects of self-definition and understanding of the mission, and certainly also particular desensitization and routinization, now come into view. In studies that argued against the thesis of the dehumanizing phase as a precondition, it is emphasized that the morals and norms of action were not determined by psychologi-

29 Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence: An Essay on a Modern Relationship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 64.

30 Johannes Steizinger, “The Significance of Dehumanization: Nazi Ideology and Its Psychological Consequences,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 19, no. 2 (2018): 139–157.

31 Johannes Lang, “Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 2 (2010): 225–246.

cal relations but by the social and political conditions of the respective group. In general, there was no objectifying attitude toward the victims. Also, the feelings during the actions and the attitudes toward the victims were not free of intersubjective emotions (such as hatred and contempt).³² Moreover, it could not be shown that humanization had limited the cruelty.³³ The victims would have been instrumentalized, not dehumanized.

Based on these objections, not only is a critical approach to the thesis of moral disintegration necessary,³⁴ but new considerations must also be introduced into the ongoing discourse that relates directly to practices of violence. Particular attention must be paid to dealing with the physicality of violence as well as the visibility of cruelty. Cruelty follows its own procedural course. Dehumanization is not a condition of cruelty, but it may not be the immediate goal either because violence does not leave behind a non-human but the image of another human: a distorted death, a disfigured living, a humiliated and exposed individual. Is the capacity to inflict cruelty a general human capacity of a human to act, a capacity that is institutionally formed or that arises in a situation of violence?

In order to understand cruelty, it is necessary to link the acts of cruel violence to ideological elements rather than the dynamics of violent situations. Above all, it should be noted that a horribly injured person is still recognized as a human being: they are shown, in part, exhibited. We do not need to look to understand the image of cruelty because we know the images of barbarity.

Thus, what Elias Canetti observed very precisely becomes relevant: that the transfer to a situation of life and survival, the imagination of the triumph over one's death, makes it possible to see cruelty, to participate in cruelty. The cruelty is thereby made possible not by dehumanizing the victims but by exalting one's own self and the mythical idea of self-strengthening through the death of the other. Cruelty makes the border between death and life immediately visible. It delays dying and challenges the individual to understand death. The death of the other becomes an extension of one's own life.

Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands. It is as though there had been a fight and the one had struck down the other. In survival, each man is the enemy of every

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 241.

³⁴ Albert Bandura, *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2016); Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193–209; Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 3 (2006): 252–264.

other, and all grief is insignificant measured against this elemental triumph. Whether the survivor is confronted by one dead man or by many, the essence of the situation is that he feels unique. He sees himself standing there alone and exults in it; and when we speak of the power which this moment gives him, we should never forget that it derives from his sense of uniqueness and from nothing else.³⁵

In the Armenian genocide, but also in other genocides, as well as in the Holocaust, there were periods of extreme cruelty. These periods were repeated, and one can recognize in them certain forms of ritualization. At the same time, these acts mostly came to be carried out outside massacres, so the thesis of escalation does not apply. Furthermore, in the phases of extreme violence, the moral legitimization frames of the perpetrators remained in place; they were not put to the test. On the contrary, they were confirmed. This can be explained if we take into account that the violence was public, that it followed specific visualizations, that it further exhibited regularity, and that genocidal politics, in essence, already represents a transgression of the conceivable.

In the Armenian genocide, acts of extreme cruelty occurred in several regions, but especially in Diyarbakir. In April 1915, the Armenian quarter in Diyarbakir was sealed off, and some 300 public figures were arrested, including representatives of political parties and churches.³⁶ This was followed by arrests of state officials, lawyers, prominent intellectuals, merchants, bankers, and landowners.³⁷ Immense torture was carried out against those arrested. The urban public and numerous representatives of mosques and government officials were all witnesses to the torture.

In Diyarbakir, the Armenian community had already been subjected to extreme violence in 1894–96 as part of the Hamid massacres. Under the impression of possibly well over 25,000 dead, the Armenian community remained stricken with great insecurity. Diyarbakir's Armenian and Aramaic communities had already experienced a decline in importance since the 1840s. The High Porte's attempt to expand Turkish governance in the territories of present-day Anatolia was based on the strengthening of Turkish nationalism and the establishment of a Turkish national ideology that declared the territories of historic western Armenia to be the heartland of Turkishness. Until the First World War, the majority of the population in the provinces of South Anatolia was non-Turkish. The policies pursued by the Young Turks aimed at permanently changing the demographic balance. Population policies, i.e., resettlements and expulsions, were also part of

³⁵ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 285.

³⁶ Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 360.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 361.

the Ottoman governments' policies in the 19th century. The Young Turk movement did not only want to change the demographic balance. It also sought to erase the historical and cultural traces of Armenian life and history in the country. The Turkish government's policy was accompanied by the deliberate use of Kurdish aspirations to strengthen its influence in the region, mainly over the issue of land ownership. After the 1890s, villages repeatedly passed into Kurdish ownership. A clarification of the question of power was increasingly sought after 1909 through negotiations with the Kurdish tribes and new appointments of valis or targeted assassinations of Kurdish tribal leaders.

When a nationwide mobilization began in 1914 with Turkey's entry into the First World War, the mobilization in Diyarbakir introduced a new form of violence into an already politically heated urban atmosphere. Goods from Armenian stores and factories were confiscated over the legitimization of the military measures; people still employed in official positions (banks, post office) lost their posts. On 19 August 1914, the market was deliberately set on fire. Within five hours, some 1,200 stores owned by Armenians were destroyed.³⁸ The following weeks were marked by public, targeted agitation, mainly aimed at constructing the image of Armenians as rich, as "different," as strangers, in whose hands were businesses and land. The unique complexion of politics in Diyarbakir is evident in the fact that Dr. Reshid, who took over the power of the government in Diyarbakir in March 1915, was a leading figure of the Committee of Union and Progress. The incumbent governor was deposed, and a large number of posts in the police and judiciary were filled. Circassian brigands, whom Reshid had selectively recruited, were deployed. These units, known as "Kassab Taburu" (The Butcher's Battalion), amounted to approximately 300 men each, organized under 12 battalion lines.³⁹ However, members of the Diyarbakir police and political parties were also involved in the violence.

On 16 April 1915, a wave of arrests began, and from 19–21 April, members of political parties, social and cultural associations, and public life were targeted for arrest; this was followed in May by the arrest of not only public service employees, lawyers, bankers, manufacturers, merchants, and artisans, but also the priests and community leaders of the Armenian Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, and the Armenian Protestant Church.

The above named, a good many of the Armenian higher class, and a large number of those who had already been imprisoned were subjected to all possible sorts of flogging and tor-

³⁸ Thomas K. Mugerditchian, *The Diyarbekir Massacres and Kurdish Atrocities* (London: Gomidas Institute, 2013), 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–25.

tures. Hagop Bozo and some of his associates were shoed and compelled to run like horses. They drove red-hot horseshoes in the breast of Mihran Bastajian and his associates. They forced some others to put their heads under big presses, and then by turning the handles they crushed the heads to pieces. Others they mutilated or pulled their nails out with pincers. In other more slow cases, they first pulled the nails with pincers, then pressed the fingers under a heavy press, after which they cut the fingers one by one. Darakji Hagop was operated on his private parts. Others were flayed alive. Some were taken to the slaughterhouse, killed and their flesh distributed as if for sale to the butchers! Police Ohan and his friends were crucified and had long nails driven through their hands and feet . . . Such were the tortures and excruciating pain and agony of the victims so that the survivors offered all that they had left them. They begged and implored their tormentors not for their lives, but for a rifle shot that would put a quick end to their earthly existence.⁴⁰

In the weeks that followed, the violence spread. Massacres occurred in the surrounding villages, and deportations from Diyarbakir began. There were repeated public killings of selected individuals, including women, whose bodies were displayed. The extreme violence in Diyarbakir stands out again in its heightening violent murder of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

The extreme transgression unquestionably had a political objective. Thus, the Committee of Union and Progress needed to establish a comprehensive situation of violence that was visible and audible. This was intended to intimidate the Kurds of the region in order to prevent possible Armenian-Kurdish solidarity. However, it was undoubtedly also meant to enable the violence that followed.

In order to understand that violence should and does work to mobilize violence, it is necessary to consider the nature of torture, which consists in the disfigurement of the tortured, combining injury and exposure to distort the bodies of the victims into the grotesque. This involves the infliction of pain in order to be able to represent the pain. Therefore, a mechanism can be observed that is intended to work precisely against dehumanization: the tortured person is supposed to emerge as a human being in pain; they are supposed to become visible in their identity, not as an individual, but as a representative of the group on behalf of which he is tortured. The distortion of the bodies is thereby transferred into situations that follow an aesthetic of the demonic. The torture is not aimed at obtaining information or producing a truth but serves to prove that in the torture, the “truth” of the being of the tortured comes out. From the tortured body it

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35. On the history of the genocide in Diyarbakir, see Hilmar Kaiser, *The Extermination of Armenians in the Diarbekir Region* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2014); Ümit Üngör Uğur, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij, eds., *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbakir, 1870–1915* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*.

emerges that the tortured is the demon. Torture turns the victim into a demon. It makes him the enemy.

Last but not least, the sexualization in genocidal violence should be noted, the humiliation of the men who have to watch the rape of their wives or the murder of their children.⁴¹ In the violence, power is enacted, humiliation is legitimized, and a new social order is established. The public space in which the cruel scenes take place becomes the legitimation of violence because the spectators, and indeed all the participants, become witnesses to the exposure of the hostile nature of the tortured. The excessiveness is legitimated in the torture itself because in it, the truth emerges for the spectator. The horror is no longer one of violence. A shift takes place in the excessiveness. It is not the violence as such that is perceived to be cruel. The horror is described as a glimpse into the abyss of humanity that is opened up by the encounter with the other, with the ideological evil. The torture turns the Armenian into a demon. It is not the one who performs the violence who carries the destructiveness in themselves. In the extreme violence of the sheer torture, a shift takes place. The other is the fundamental evil who carries the destruction.

To this end, we can once again quote Canetti, who sees violence as a practice of bringing the other into one's own order.

There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it. Man always tends to avoid physical contact with anything strange. In the dark, the fear of an unexpected touch can mount to panic. Even clothes give insufficient security: it is easy to tear them and pierce through to the naked, smooth, defenceless flesh of the victim.⁴²

The forms of violence that can be described as religious or prehistoric are always about deliberate, targeted re-staging. Creating a public sphere involves sacrificial framing that seemingly shifts the violence away from political goals and focuses entirely on the victims.

The excessive violence that came to light in the Armenian genocide can therefore be seen as “preparation” on the one hand and, on the other, as playing an essential role in legitimizing the action. It reshapes violence from violence against a political enemy or against an enemy in a political space to violent action against a fundamental enemy that stands in absolute opposition to one's own self. Moreover, the cruelty construes something like a “necessary sacrifice” since, at the end

⁴¹ In this respect, too, events differed in Diyarbakir, which, unlike other places from which deportations were made, was not located in the immediate war zone. See Mugerditchian, *The Diyarbakir Massacres*, 47.

⁴² Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 7.

of the violence, there is supposed to be the experience of one's own survival. The ritualization of extreme violence seeks to subordinate the act of violence to a higher, sacred purpose. Extreme violence thus leads to a depersonalization of the victims, the erasure of their individual persons, and the reduction of their physical nature, but it does not dehumanize; it transforms. With these observations, attention is no longer directed to the possible function of extreme violence but to the concrete manifestations of extreme cruelty and thus to the visualization of figures of the demonic, of the fundamentally other, of the enemy who is no longer political.⁴³ The humanity of the other is not negated, but its social being, its social subjectivity, and its social existence are denied.⁴⁴

Violence and Presentation

The interpretation of the challenges in understanding extreme atrocity proposed here ignores other possible psychological responses. This contribution has solely concentrated on social and cultural aspects, not least because, concerning the violence in the Armenian genocide, it is also a question of how the recurrence is to be assessed, in particular about the genocidal violence against Pontos Greeks (1919–1924) and against the Kurdish population in Dersim (1937–1938). After all, looking at the individual periods, it seems possible to assume a “landscape of violence” in general, which would ultimately mean shifting the violence from the respective political intentions to a “culture of violence.”

Indeed, such an interpretation can also be used to avoid addressing questions about the distinct political continuities and actualizations in Ottoman Turkish politics. That extreme cruelty raises the question of continuities yet nevertheless seems to follow the attempt to understand the cruel acts: the argument becomes accessible that the violence is re-staged as a traditional practice in the region. On the other hand, a “cultural tradition” does not make the practice of violence more likely at all because violence is not an automatic response to a political purpose but a comprehensive, multilayered organization between planning, intention, institutionalized action, and personal transgressions. Ultimately, it must always be acceptable to the individual perpetrator.

⁴³ In this respect, one should agree with Adrienne de Ruiter, “To Be or Not to Be Human: Resolving the Paradox of Dehumanisation,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885120984605>.

⁴⁴ Lang, “Questioning Dehumanization.”

The events of 1938 in Dersim were preceded by a series of massacres of the Kurdish population and resettlements. From the perspective of Turkish nationalism, Dersim has always described a unique geographical space: a space of the indeterminate, the dangerous, the opaque.⁴⁵ In the genocide in Dersim, a variety of highly aggressive demonizations and enemy constructions stand out. The “Kurdish gangs” were stylized into “beasts” in the political speech of public discourse. The violence that dominated the genocide in Dersim can be characterized by the term “overkill.” Witness accounts, including those of the perpetrators, indicate that Kurdish men who were killed with machine-gun salvos were stabbed again with bayonets or burned. Women and children were killed and violated, and their bodies were robbed.⁴⁶ People were tortured and then shot and drowned, stabbed and shot, stabbed and burned. This form of overkilling fulfills a task that is ambivalent from the outside but makes sense in genocide because it allows the perpetrator to deny their own actions as murder and simultaneously accept them as such. The extreme violence is unbelievable for the individual; it is unreal, outside the describable, and hardly compatible for the perpetrator with the role of a young family man or an old veteran. On the other hand, the multiple killing underlines the necessity of violence because it has produced the demonic character of those to be killed.

The extreme violence in genocide is not the result of brutalization, much less an escalation or dynamization of conflict processes. This becomes clear when one seeks an explanation for the numerous beheadings and the handling of the heads, which were carried away and displayed as proof of death.⁴⁷ However, not only were the heads carried away and photographed, but so were the decapitated bodies that remained.⁴⁸ Thus, the interpretation that the form of beheading reconstructs an “old” punitive policy or an even older “signing” of enemies no longer presents itself. Interestingly, the violence in Dersim is also about the production of a perpetrator-public. The cutting, collecting, and taking of heads and the portraiture and self-portraiture reinforced the perpetrators’ self-perception. The violence becomes mythical through its demonstrative visualization – in doing so, it modifies the perpetrator and the act.

The perpetrator is not the perpetrator of the killing of Kurds. It is no longer about bandits at all. With the deed, he does not join the previous operations but a history that lies in the memory of the young Turkish nation. The perpetrator is

45 Ozlem Goner and Joseph T. Rebello, “State Violence, Nature, and Primitive Accumulation: Dispossession in Dersim,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (2016): 33–54.

46 Faik Bulut, *Dersim Raporları* (Istanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayın, 2013), 345–347.

47 Ibid., 311–313.

48 Ibid., 357.

the master of life and death. This needs publicity – a publicity that both conceals and exonerates. Brutalization is a form of marking the other and of bringing the “truth” of being to the fore. Through the violence itself, the cruelty is inextricably linked to the exaltation of the perpetrators. With the images of this violence, the continuity of the particular historical periods of violence is purposefully presented and produced by the perpetrators: the perpetrator thereby becomes a historically effective perpetrator, part of a history that surpasses his individual self.

Conclusion

The political violence implemented by the nationalist policies of the Committee of Union and Progress and Kemalist Turkey is outstanding for its systematic and public nature, the processes of radical discrimination against otherness, and the actualized cruelty, especially the unrestrained murder of women and children. In the Armenian genocide, all traces of Armenian life were destroyed, from the geography of the regions to social and economic life. In this framework, the desecrations, which not only affected the corpses of those who had just been killed or the sacred buildings and objects, must be addressed. Cemeteries were desecrated, and bodies were pulled from their graves. Close connections between identification (of the other as a demonic other) and depersonalization, the destruction of social entities, and the strengthening of nationalist ideologies, perpetrator trafficking, and publicity were established.

This relativizes the thesis of dehumanization in genocide as a prerequisite for being able to kill. A negation of the individuality of the victims in the violence can be proven, but a transfer into another “identity” (as a demonic enemy). This depersonalization is not a precondition for being able to kill; it is the purpose of killing. What it enables is a sense of solidarity among the perpetrators: the cruelty introduces into the violence a mythicization in which the perpetrators feel an exaltation of their own selves, and the knowledge of moral transgression can be legitimized. Extreme violence allows perpetrators to occupy a role in a cultural and historical narrative because it authorizes in a particular way. This authorization is not function-related, but it concerns narratives of generation, of accomplishing a historical task; it concerns existence, the very question of life and death.

When we read the memoirs of perpetrators, it is crucial not to explain the killing but the ability to kill recurrently. In order to be able to examine the activities of, for example, gendarmerie units or the military in particular, from the point of view of their “recurrence” and thus their duration, that is, to extend the question of “why” a person kills concerning the consideration of why a person kills repeatedly,

one will perhaps first look for figures of analysis that make it possible to examine the structural elements of a situation. Particular attention is paid to social orders, group hierarchies, a particularly non-contradictory belief, or stable authority structures. Going beyond this, the study of violent practices allows us to identify situational understandings and definitions, examine interactions, and understand that rituals and routines of action are negotiated.

If one approaches the question of the individual's capacity for violence from a micro-sociological and social-psychological perspective, as it is done here, then one explicitly positions oneself critically toward ideas of regulating action through strict rules and norms.⁴⁹ Thus, it must be explicitly emphasized here that there is a common interpretation of the situation – this includes common emotions: hatred, frustration, pride, and anger. Last but not least, a general narrative is created, which is also based, among other things, on the construction of having proven oneself together in and through the offense. The certainty of social recognition by the public, the certainty that the accomplished deed will be recognized as a deed for the national community, must also be mentioned.

In collective violence research, there is the concept of the “phantom community,” within which is the idea that people follow an imagined knowledge in situations in which they act. The atrocity of the violence against Armenians made the violence itself more likely. This is not because the perpetrator was “desensitized” or the acts were normalized but because violence is consciously constituted as a violent event with the symbolic and social meaning constructed in the violent situation. Once again, violence is not a “means.” The practices of killing transfer killing into a symbolic order.

Violence is realized as political violence, specifically directed against the victim group to destroy the victim group's identificational, cultural, and political coherence through the violation and destruction of their private, social, and cultural spheres. The individual forms, the persecution of individuals as religious others, as social or political others, the sexualized violence, the destruction of sacred places, the vilification of the other religion as “infidel,” the desecration of cemeteries, and the desecration of the dead are practices that are not developed situationally. They are learned and practiced. They follow images.

Therefore, from the perspective of genocide research, it would have to be added that violence must be practiced and understood. When people are driven down a canyon to be drowned, this does not arise out of the situation. The path must be planned, as must the removal of the bodies – the biggest problem in

⁴⁹ According to Collins, structures, norms, or beliefs only have meaning in retrospect, when the reflection or legitimization of actions and behaviors is about their rationalization.

genocide. When people who have been murdered are left in the open, this not only reflects contempt but also enables a displacement for the perpetrators. The one who has no value in death can be killed.

The interactive negotiations in a violent situation bring into play perceptions and cognitions that allow the violent situation to be viewed as an action situation, i.e., a situation that involves a call to action and allows individuals to recognize themselves as competent actors (because they have been selected, trained, and empowered to discipline and overcome themselves). In systematic, institutionalized violent situations, perpetrators can consider their actions as an affirmation of moral and personal autonomy. This encompasses extreme acts of cruelty. Extreme atrocities combine both symbolic effects (cohesion of groups of perpetrators) and positional relations (gaining power by the perpetrators). They are not in opposition to the institutionalized character of violence, but in the institutionalized situation of violence, they strengthen the possibility of not experiencing the required action as a break with one's moral understanding; this is because cruelty shifts violence from the everyday to the extraordinary, from the immediate to the symbolic.

Genocide changes situations, relationships, and the present permanently. This occurs not "by means of" violence but "in" violence. The violence in genocide is a mediation between symbolic and structural relations. Only in this way does it become evident why violence is chosen to achieve a radical change to orders and lives.

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