Genocide, Harm and Victimisation

Proclamations of *never again* following the liberation of the Nazi concentration and death camps after the Second World War led to the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Convention defined genocide as ‘acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group’. Combining the Greek *genos* for kin, race or tribe and the Latin suffix *-cide* for to kill or murder, Lemkin (a Polish lawyer of Jewish origin) in 1944 coined the term 'genocide' for a practice that arguably has been perpetrated through the ages. However, it is no longer the historical occurrence of genocide that preoccupies social scientists, rather its disturbing recurrence in recent times despite the above, and other international conventions drawn up to protect human rights.

Although genocide is a crime under international law, it has only recently been the subject of the criminological gaze, and more recently still the subject of the victimological gaze (see Rafter and Walklate, 2012). Rafter and Walklate (2012) relate this, in part, to the problems of avoiding charges of victim blaming whereby some people (or groups) are either seen to be more prone to victimisation than others or to have some culpability in their victimhood. However, this is simply not the nature of genocide victimhood; rather, genocide is fundamentally connected to concepts of difference and otherness. Bauman (1995, p 203) demonstrates this well:

'In every genocide, the victims are killed not for what they have done, but for what they are; more precisely still, for what they, being what they are, may yet become; or for what they, they being what they are, may not become. Nothing the appointed victims may or may not do affects the sentence of death - and that includes their choice between submissiveness or militancy, surrender or resistance'.

The crimes, harm and victimisation suffered by those subject to genocide is patent. Although death of members of the group is the ultimate intention, there are recognised processes or common elements that lead up to the final act. Stanton (2013) has identified ten stages that genocides go through (with harms occurring at every stage. In the lead up to the Holocaust, Jewish people were subject to discrimination before being dehumanised, and they and their property violently targeted in pogroms. Such processes can be seen in previous and subsequent genocides. For example, as Jewish people were equated with vermin and disease in the middle of the twentieth century, so too had the Armenian people at the beginning of the century and so were the Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide towards the end of it. Harm can also be inflicted in others ways. 'Destroying' a group can be achieved through murdering the male population of the group, or certain males in the group, and raping and infecting the females with fatal infections, as occurred in the Rwandan genocide, or by forcing the females, children and old men on marches whereby they die through starvation and exhaustion, as occurred in the Armenian genocide.

For the survivors of genocide the lasting victimisation and harm is undeniably immeasurable. Those who survive genocide can and do bear witness to their experiences of humiliation, loss and pain. Oral testimonies can allow an unshielded truth to emerge (see Langer, 1991); and autobiographical novels written by survivors can provide such testimonies through imagery and style (see Levi, 1947; Delbo, 1968). For some, the guilt at surviving and the traumatic experiences are too much to bear. Levi (1947) claimed he could not be a true witness to the horrors of the Nazi death camps as only those who had, those who had faced the *Gorgon,* and not returned, could truly bear witness. Despite surviving Auschwitz, Levi took his own life many years later. The crimes, harms and victimisation of past and present genocides continue to resonate.

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***See also:***

**Readings**

Bauman, Z. (1995) *Life in fragments: essays in postmodern morality*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

Delbo, C., (1968) *None of us will return.* New York, NY: Grove Press.

Langer, L. L. (1991). *Holocaust testimonies: the ruins of memory.* New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.

Levi, P. (1947). *If this is a man*. London: Abacus.

Rafter, N. and Walklate, S., (2012). Genocide and the dynamics of victimization: some observations on Armenia. *European Journal of Criminology*, 9(5): 514–526.

Stanton, G. H. (2013). *The ten stages of genocide.* <http://genocidewatch.org/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html>.

Totten, S. and Bartrop, P. R. (eds) (2009). *The genocide studies reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.