
DAVID PATRICK

REPORTING GENOCIDE

MEDIA, MASS
VIOLENCE AND
HUMAN RIGHTS

I.B. TAURIS

The Western world's responses to genocide have been slow, unwieldy and sometimes unfit for purpose. While the UK and US have historically been committed to the ideals of human rights, freedom and equality, their reactions are usually dictated by geopolitical 'noise', pre-conceived ideas of worth and the media attention-spans of individual elected leaders.

Utilising a wide-ranging quantitative analysis of media reporting across the globe, Patrick argues that an over-reliance on the Holocaust as the framing device we use to try and come to terms with such horrors can lead to slow responses, misinterpretation and category errors – in both Rwanda and Bosnia, much energy was expended trying to ascertain whether these regions qualified for 'genocide' status.

Reporting Genocide demonstrates how such tragedies are reduced to stereotypes in the media, which can over-simplify the situation on the ground and can lead to inadequate responses from governments. Patrick seeks to address how responses to genocides can be improved. This will be essential reading for policy makers and for scholars of genocide and the media.

DAVID PATRICK is Post-Doctoral Researcher at the International Studies Group, University of the Free State, South Africa.

'This empirically rich and conceptually sophisticated study is essential reading for anyone interested in media responses to genocide and mass violence.'

PROFESSOR ADRIAN BINGHAM, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

'David Patrick has written a path-breaking account of how genocidal mass violence was publicised and framed by Western media ... *Reporting Genocide* identifies a process of desensitisation towards human suffering. Reports and images that shocked the world in 1945 had 50 years later become merely one item among many in the Western news media.'

IAN PHIMISTER, SENIOR RESEARCH PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

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'This is an urgent and provocative intervention into discussions of how genocide is reported ... The rigour of the book's textual explorations shakes us out of complacent views of Anglo-American newspapers as benignly liberal.'

PROFESSOR MARTIN CONBOY, UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

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David Patrick is Post-Doctoral Researcher at the International Studies Group, University of the Free State, South Africa. He completed his PhD in History at Sheffield University.

‘This empirically rich and conceptually sophisticated study is essential reading for anyone interested in media responses to genocide and mass violence.’

Professor Adrian Bingham, University of Sheffield

‘David Patrick has written a path-breaking account of how genocidal mass violence was publicised and framed by Western media. Focusing on the Holocaust, Bosnia (1992–5), and Rwanda (1994), he examines the ways in which the Anglo-American press reported on three different instances of genocide, and what this tells us about Western attitudes to mass violence. Prominent among the findings of this erudite and measured study is how coverage of the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides was skewed towards the former. Acknowledging Derrida, Patrick too concludes that the dead are counted differently “from one corner of the globe to the other”. Crucially, *Reporting Genocide* identifies a process of desensitisation towards human suffering. Reports and images that shocked the world in 1945 had 50 years later become merely one item among many in the Western news media.’

**Ian Phiminster, Senior Research Professor,
University of the Free State**

‘This is an urgent and provocative intervention into discussions of how genocide is reported. In concentrating on events in Bosnia and Rwanda, Patrick identifies strands of continuity within media representations across historical eras. The rigour of the book’s textual explorations shakes us out of complacent views of Anglo-American newspapers as benignly liberal, demanding that our news media engage more systematically beyond their all-too-narrow presuppositions and frames of reference if they are to provide truly authoritative context in our troubled times.’

Professor Martin Conboy, University of Sheffield

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1

The Crime of Crimes?

Do people really care about genocide? On the surface, the answer seems an obvious 'yes'. Official acknowledgement of historical instances, such as Germany's recent decision to properly recognise the Armenian genocide, continues to grow year on year. Memorialisation of certain events – particularly the Holocaust – gains ever-wider prominence, with celebrities and various public figures eager to be seen commemorating these dark pages in human history. And in the realm of popular media, the likes of *Schindler's List* and *Hotel Rwanda* achieve both box-office success and near-universal critical acclaim. Evidently then, one might assume, crimes of this nature are an affront to the purported liberal values upon which postwar Western civilisation has been built. But as the following study seeks to demonstrate, this may be little more than a self-delusion on grand scale, with the Anglo-American response to genocide being as susceptible to media-framing and the limitations of realpolitik as virtually any other contemporary issue.

Encompassing the darkest aspects of human nature, history is littered with brutal examples of genocide, and it is a darkness which continues to manifest itself in different forms to this very day. But although mass murder may be 'as old as the human race,' it is only in recent decades that interest in such crimes has led to a separate school of study.¹ Before this

academic development, however, genocide had grown to be considered by many as a crime which surpassed all others, a process which had its genesis in the importance placed upon the notion of 'human rights' in the aftermath of World War II. To quote Berel Lang:

On any ranking of atrocities, it would be difficult to name an act or event regarded as more heinous; genocide arguably appears now as the most serious offence in humanity's lengthy – and, we recognise, still growing – list of moral or legal violations.²

While there are a number of different ways in which genocide can be defined, this study will use Frank Chalk's interpretation of genocide as being 'a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership are defined by the perpetrator.'³ Though terms like 'ethnic cleansing' and 'mass violence' will also be utilised throughout, this work is essentially focusing on violence which takes place within a more general process of repression and persecution, which is aimed at a predominantly civilian population.

Yet acts of genocide themselves are not the main focus of this study, with documentation and analysis of genocidal mass violence already an established field. Much less developed is research into how such atrocities are publicised and framed by the media when they occur. Though descriptions and coverage of global atrocities have a long history, it is only in the last 70 years – and even more so with the advent of international communications technology in recent decades – that such events have been reported on virtually as they were taking place. In turn, ordinary people in the West are now *accustomed* to seeing such things in the media. Certainly, as Zelizer notes, 'Nearly every time we pick up a newspaper, turn on the television, or listen to the radio, we learn of another instance that has been added to the repertoire of horrific acts.'⁴ As will be explored in the pages to follow, however, there is little by way of correlation between greater *knowledge* of such crimes and an increased *response* to those same atrocities.

By focusing on the Holocaust, Bosnia (1992–5) and Rwanda (1994) – three historical occurrences which are generally accepted as examples of 'genocide' – this research is able to refine its analysis and, in doing so, provide more specific conclusions regarding media framing of genocide than

would be the case if the scope of this study had been expanded to focus on violence and suffering more generally. Taking these three examples of genocide as its key case studies, this research engages with two primary questions:

- (1) How has the Anglo–American press reported on different instances of genocidal violence in the twentieth century?
- (2) What do the findings of this research reveal about Western attitudes to mass violence?

Structure and Approach

For the purposes of this study, and to provide chronological consistency within the book, Chapter 2 focuses on the Holocaust and its subsequent place in Anglo–American culture. The first half of this chapter engages primarily with the Anglo–American response to the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in April and May 1945 – a crucially important landmark in terms of Western exposure to genocide. Though the Holocaust was not the first genocide of the twentieth century – the cases of the Herero (1904–8) and the Armenian (1915) genocides being two notable prior examples – it was the first instance in which its revelation provoked an enormous surge of press interest and, as a result, it was seen to have a much wider popular impact than previous examples of this crime. Utilising newspaper reports from the time, supplemented by a range of other primary sources, the main purpose of this section is to highlight the societal impact which accompanied the horrific revelations following the Allied advance into Nazi Germany.

With this first section engaging with the idea that the liberation of the camps in the spring of 1945 proved to be something of an ‘introduction’ to genocidal crimes for many in the Anglo–American world, the second section of Chapter 2 details how the Holocaust – as a distinct entity – came to become increasingly central to Western consciousness in the decades which followed the end of World War II. Indeed, it should be remembered that the Holocaust (as it is now understood) did not become widely recognised, or appreciated, automatically with the discovery of the camps. Instead, a series

of popular representations in the years which followed – a process which arguably reached its zenith in the early 1990s – had a critical influence on how the crimes of the Nazis were to ultimately achieve a level of recognition unlike most other historical events of the twentieth century. Chapter 2, therefore, first engages with the general response to the liberation of Germany's concentration camps, before detailing how the Holocaust came to be increasingly well-recognised over the course of the twentieth century – arguing that this latter process ultimately had an impact on the Western conceptualisation of genocide itself.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide the analytical core of this study, and engage primarily with the Anglo-American press response to the crisis in the Balkans (1992–5) and the Rwandan genocide (1994). Detailing the manner in which eight specific newspapers reported on these two instances of mass violence, these chapters seek to highlight trends which emerged in the reporting of two of the most infamous cases of genocide in the late twentieth century. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, both case-studies utilise a 114-day sample, ensuring that any notable comparisons can be used as evidence in supporting the conclusions within the study as a whole. Though there are several recent studies which have focused on the Western response to these two events, few have looked at them in relation to a wider notion of the apparent importance (or lack of) placed on this crime within the Western world.

The decision to use only British and American newspaper titles was taken primarily on the basis of ease of access, but also because the United Kingdom and the United States – both permanent members of the UN Security Council – are seen to be (at least rhetorical) supporters of human rights. Further, the press in both of these countries exist within a free-market system. Having few constraints on what they can put into print, any trends or patterns which emerge from this research can therefore be attributed to the decisions of the press themselves, rather than as a result, for example, of direct government manipulation. As something of a disclaimer though, it should be noted that these same titles – whilst indeed being generally free of state influence and the like – do exist within this free-market system as economic enterprises, and so are expected to take into consideration the