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Germany, China and Cambodia, by James Tyner, Plymouth:  
Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012, 181 pp. US \$49.95 (hbk)**

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**Reviewed by Jeff Stonehouse**  
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*Genocide and the Geographical Imagination: Life and Death in Germany, China and Cambodia* is James Tyner's most recent scholarly contribution to a relatively undeveloped niche of comparative genocide studies. Previously only a smattering of journal articles<sup>1</sup>, the odd book<sup>2</sup>, and a special issue of the journal *Space and Polity*<sup>3</sup> have attempted to merge the concept of genocide with the discipline of geography. Tyner has recognized this conceptual vacuum, seeing it as an opportunity to probe genocides and unravel the "spatial stories" they represent. His first book length attempt looked at a single case of genocide from a geographic perspective in *The Killing of Cambodia: Geography, Genocide and the Unmaking of Space*.<sup>4</sup> Here he first develops the notion of the "geographic imagination."

His stated thesis in *Genocide and the Geographical Imagination* is that, "mass violence results from the imposition of state sanctioned normative geographical imaginations that justify and legitimate unequal access to life and death."<sup>5</sup> In other words, genocide and other exterminatory policies are conducted through a spatially oriented framework, or geographic imagination. Tyner argues that through the various mechanisms of the sovereign state, who is allowed to live and who must die are both determined via a process of valuation.

This process is informed, Tyner emphasises, by geographic considerations. As such, his purpose here is to discern what genocide might say about sovereignty and the spatiality of life and death. He defines spatiality as "the purposefully organized space of social interactions." By introducing the notion of sovereignty to this mix Tyner hopes to draw our attention to how the geographic imaginations of the sovereign state are manifested in the day-to-day lives of the subject populations. In addition, staying true to his thesis, he wants to show how particular valuations of human lives are informed by these geographic imaginations. He describes how the various spatial practices of sovereignty impact a population's continued physical existence, be it by allowing it to live, by outright killing, or by 'letting it die.' With these ends in mind, Tyner looks at three cases of genocide: Germany, China and Cambodia. He wants to focus upon "the practices [...] by which governments rule and regulate, discipline and control, the populations within their territorial domains."<sup>6</sup> Stated differently, Tyner wishes to chart the habits and patterns of a sovereign's valuations that determine life or death.

In the second chapter, Tyner reckons that, "The Holocaust was composed of *state sanctioned* violent practices that stemmed from a basic geographic imagination: to construct a pure living space for one population through the elimination of another population."<sup>7</sup> Racial and geopolitical theories on eugenics and lebensraum undergirded a system of valuation which, through the mindset of a particular geographic imagination, determined who might live and who must die. This leads, Tyner argues, to a, "geopolitically informed eugenics policy [that] demanded the identification of 'inferior' and 'degenerate' bodies, those whose lives threatened the security of race and state."<sup>8</sup>

Tyner uses the early years of the Nazi regime to argue that laws such as the Marital Law and the Sterilization Law were initial attempts to determine who was to be included and excluded from the German *volk*. Gradually the emphasis on sterilization was refocused onto euthanasia, first of defective infants and children, then to adults not considered worthy of living. Tyner affirms that, "This valuation of life, however, was not directed at any given individual, but rather at populations — entire groupings of people: the mentally ill, the physically deformed, homosexuals, criminals, the Sinti and Roma, the Jews." Tyner traces the evolution of Nazi valuations of life and death from sterilization to euthanasia and beyond, whereupon, death camps emerge as "the endpoint of a series of policies, programs, and practices that all revolved around the Nazis' will to *lebensraum*."<sup>9</sup>

Tyner next moves on to the famine in China (1958–1961). He acknowledges that the Famine is both legally and academically a contested example of 'genocide.' He counters that "identifiable policies and practices initiated by the state" created the famine, and resulted in the deaths of tens of millions through starvation. They were not directly slaughtered, as in the Nazi case, but 'allowed' to die. The core of his argument is that the policy of "letting die" is the moral equivalent of direct killing. In China, while the state did not directly

cause the deaths of those who died of starvation, it was still morally culpable because it knowingly allowed people to die.

Mao attempted to build a communal utopia framed by a particular geographic imagination. To implement these plans, Mao introduced a series of structural conditions that substantially contributed to the famine, including the communes and collectivization, the wasteful backyard smelting and ruinous engineering programs. It is through this particular geographic imagination, and the policies through which it was enacted, that day-to-day decisions of life or death were made. In addition, Tyner contends that there was a ‘culture of impunity’ in Chinese social relations. This resulted in the collective blame for the pain and suffering of the peasantry being attributed, not to the state, but back upon the peasantry. The deaths from starvation, say apologists for the state, were the result of “irrational peasant behavior” specifically resulting from hiding food, overeating or lying to authorities on production output. Tyner shows how through this particular geographic imagination millions died due to starvation, or were allowed to “let die,” a theme he continues into the final chapter.

The final case that Tyner focuses upon is Cambodia and this chapter draws substantively on his previous writings and experiences. He reiterates much of his argument from *The Killing of Cambodia* and focuses upon the “erasure” of Cambodia and the “writing” of Democratic Kampuchea. In brief, Tyner argues that the Khmer Rouge aimed to erase all vestiges of society from before Angkor [Angkor refers to the communist state while “Angkor” is the historical kingdom.] and in its place impose, through their own geographic imagination, a new revolutionary space. Next, Tyner identifies the promotion of social conformity through practices of violence that are based upon a system of moral inclusion and exclusion. Those who expressed difference were eliminated outright, just as in the Nazi case. Alternately, as he discussed in reference to the famine in China, those populations were “allowed to die.”

At times it seems as though we can sense Tyner’s enthusiasm from having discovered uninhabited conceptual territory. Tyner’s heavy use of post-modern/post-structuralist theorists may be reflected in this enthusiasm, as in the course of the book he presents an avalanche of intermingling concepts that occasionally emerge as confusing, overlapping or occasionally lacking a clear empirical referent. While poststructuralist language definitely serves to shed light upon previously unrecognized vistas, Tyner brings forth too many imported ideas at once. Conversely, his chapter conclusions are very concise and the use of post-structuralist concepts mostly absent. These concluding paragraphs would have been an ideal location to tie together and make sense of the numerous ideas Tyner discusses in relation to the evidence provided. In addition, conspicuously absent from the chapter conclusions are attempts to tie both theory and the history back to the notion of the geographic imagination. Moreover, there is little effort to systematically compare the various geographic imaginations. While rigorous comparison was not his explicit purpose, it would have served to show the value of the geographic imagination as an analytical tool that could be used to interpret and understand other instances of genocide.

These are, however, small flaws and Tyner ought to be applauded for his enthusiasm and his courage. Very few scholars have given consideration to genocide’s conceptual terra nullius and Tyner has approached this uncharted territory with alacrity and a keen sense of direction.

## End Notes

1. Examples include: W. B. Wood, “Geographic aspects of genocide: a comparison of Bosnia and Rwanda,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 26(1), pp. 57–75. and C. Dahlman, “Geographies of genocide and ethnic cleansing: the lessons of Bosnia–Herzegovina,” *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 174–197.
2. For instance, Allan Cooper, *The Geography of Genocide* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009).
3. See for instance the special issue of *Space and Polity* Volume 13, Issue 1, 2009 focused on the ‘Geographies of Genocide.’ Significantly, Tyner also contributes a thematically related piece.
4. James Tyner, *The Killing of Cambodia: Geography, Genocide and the Unmaking of Space* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).
5. Tyner (2012), 25. Italics in original.
6. Tyner (2012), 18.
7. Tyner (2012), 35. Italics in original.
8. Tyner (2012), 43.
9. Tyner (2012), 70.