

December 2008

## **Book Review: Helena Cobban, *Amnesty after Atrocity? Healing Nations after Genocide and War***

Helen Fein

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Fein, Helen (2008) "Book Review: Helena Cobban, *Amnesty after Atrocity? Healing Nations after Genocide and War*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3: Article 10.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol3/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

---

## Book Review

Helena Cobban, *Amnesty after Atrocity? Healing Nations after Genocide and War*. Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007. Pp. 284, paper. \$26.95 US.

Reviewed by Helen Fein, *Institute for the Study of Genocide*

---

Helena Cobban's *Amnesty after Atrocity?* offers an exposition of the different ways in which three African states—Rwanda, South Africa, and Mozambique—have responded to crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide and criticizes the prescriptions previously made by international human-rights groups as to the need for prosecution and judgment. Written in a lively style (Cobban is a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor*), each chapter begins with quotations from people on the scene and often returns to the judgments of local people.

The book forms a chapter in the international debate about judgment and reconciliation. Cobban concludes that the emphasis on prosecution and “meta-tasks” prescribed by Martha Minow<sup>1</sup> are wrong, and offers an alternative list that focuses on reconciliation. Her case is fortified by the relative stability of South Africa and Mozambique and the continuing tension and repression in Rwanda.

*Amnesty after Atrocity?* covers the historical background of atrocities in each country before the exposition and judgment. In brief, after the triumph of the Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front ended the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the new government resorted to mass indictments of alleged perpetrators—more than 100,000 in all—some of whom were also prosecuted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, with which the new Rwandan government did not cooperate. Rwandan efforts to separate and judge proved untenable; they were later revised by sifting the gravity of allegations, and the country began a process called *gacaca*, taking the name of a traditional process for settling grievances.

In South Africa, a long negotiation between the African National Congress and the nationalist government of the apartheid Union of South Africa led to a relatively nonviolent transition, followed by the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that offered an opportunity for amnesty by public confession.

Mozambique is the most distinctive case, in that the conflict between the political parties FRELIMO and RENAMO had no ethnic dimension. The soldiers of both sides greeted each other as brothers, and often they were in fact brothers or cousins. The two sides immediately agreed on an amnesty; the people were sick of war and eager to start a new life. Had there been trials, everyone would have had to be tried; there were no guiltless judges. Religious rituals of precolonial origin were used by local healers to purge the violence they ascribed to war itself.

Because of the distinctiveness of the conflict in Mozambique, it seems dubious to me to suggest its resolution, as Cobban does, as a positive model for other conflicts. However, Cobban makes many good points about the inadequacy of the contemporary model advocated by Minow and others: the cost of trials; the frequent inability to distinguish between victims, accomplices, and perpetrators; and the lack of

relationship between the demands of abstract justice and the needs of people mired in poverty. She especially criticizes the ICTR, which has been noted for incompetence, expense, and corruption.

Cobban's book includes useful tables and a list of acronyms. There are points that could be reconsidered, and sources that were not used, including the extent of early warnings of genocide in Rwanda, which was greater than she implies—the works of Roméo Dallaire and Alison Des Forges, among others, on Rwanda are omitted—and the distinctive problems created by genocide. The structure of post-war relations between *génocidaires* and victims in Rwanda is distinctive, because the numbers who must coexist present a singular problem that cannot be solved by calls for justice or for reconciliation. Cobban does cite local people who prefer to change the course of the future rather than to punish offenders for the past with conviction. Her observations on how the current leadership has created an ideology to justify authoritarianism in Rwanda are well founded.

*Amnesty after Atrocity?* will be an enduring contribution to the literature on coexistence and the punishment of genocide and crimes against humanity.

## **Note**

1. Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).