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Book Review: *Are Perpetrators Under-Researched?*

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Researching Perpetrators of Genocide

Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, eds.

Madison, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020

231 Pages; Price: \$79.95 Hardcover

The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies

Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg, eds.

London, New York, Routledge, 2020

393 Pages; Price: £39.99 Paperback

Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence

Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn, and Barbora Holá, eds.

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019

376 Pages; Price: €93.61 Hardcover

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Are Perpetrators Under-Researched?

“Perpetrators remain a comparatively under-researched cohort across the humanities and the social sciences”¹—so wrote Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee in the introduction to their 2020 anthology, *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*. Looking at the rich history of German- and English-language research on such perpetrators of violence alone, this is a daring thesis. Alternatively, it may be a strategic scientific (marketing) argument, or (more tragically), the authors of these sentences do not know any better. New and English-language perpetrator research, as I like to call it, has been pushing onto the market for some years now under this very label in the form of networks (<https://perpetratorstudies.sites.uu.nl/>), journals (Journal of Perpetrator research, (<https://jpr.winchesteruniversitypress.org/>)) and corresponding book publications. So, it is time to take a look at their theoretical and empirical offerings. This will be done here on the basis of three anthologies from the last two years.

Three Fundamental Problems

To begin with, and at the same time to summarize, three fundamental problems must be pointed out that go hand in hand with the focus on perpetrators. Firstly, there is a *definition problem*: perpetrators can ultimately only be identified based on their actions and the context in which these actions take place. This difficulty and the criticism of it has already led to a massive shift in the formulated research interest. For example, Uğur Ümit Üngör, a leading representative of the new English-language publishing group, has recently made an explicit distinction between perpetration and perpetrators, focusing on the former and thus explicitly on the processuality of the production of collective violence and less on ex post facto

¹ Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee, “Introduction,” in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, eds. Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 10.

constructed groups such as perpetrators.² Furthermore, there is a *problem of demarcation*: actually, bodies of knowledge should be excluded that are not directly concerned with perpetrators but are at the same time fundamental to the process under investigation—often, but not exclusively, genocides. And this refers to a third aspect, the *problem of explanation*: the view of the actors designated as perpetrators is not sufficient to understand processes of collective violence.³

Handbook of Perpetrator Studies

The *Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, edited by Susanne Knittel and Zachary Goldberg, illustrates a remarkable diversity of topics. At the same time, it shows a variety of thematic and personal overlaps with genocide research. This applies, for example, to the view of so-called Nazi perpetrators; organizational sociological approaches; discussions of the Milgram Experiment, taking into account its explanatory content for perpetrator research; reflections on updating the studies on *Authoritarian Personality*; or reflections on evil (Nature of Moral Evil). In addition, there are many themes and theoretical approaches that have become popular in the last decade (or decades) which have been brought to bear on perpetrators. Examples are the connection between posthumanism and perpetrators, essays on gender, postcolonialism, animal studies, or climate change. Much of it is interesting, little new, hardly anything specific to perpetrator studies.

In genocide research, there is a tradition of thinking about the consequences and aftermath of such complexes of events. Firstly, various forms of responsibility (e.g., legal and moral) for the economic, social and health consequences of the complex of events are discussed (often under the heading of trauma). Secondly, types of representation in various media are discussed and thirdly, there is a long preoccupation with the didacticization of the topic for memorial sites, museums, schools and studies. The last two areas in particular, are linked to efforts of prevention or the hope of learning from history. And these three thematic complexes are also found in the book.

In the area of consequences, there are philosophical aspects of evil that, to use a pun, surpass evil itself in banality. For example, Paul Formosa writes that perpetrators are not passive entities but “active agents” (sic!) who remain responsible for their actions towards others.⁴ This is followed by articles on restorative justice, perpetrator trauma, intergenerational consequences of mass trauma for producing new perpetrators and finally on the merits of a public health perspective for genocide prevention.

The discussion that has taken place in the field of mass violence research around representation actually begins with scholarly writing about violence, which is subject to a high degree of in part voluntary standardization; especially as far as journal articles are concerned. Nevertheless, there have always been innovative approaches, such as Saul Friedländer's *Nazi Germany and the Jews*.⁵ The examination of those topics continues with various forms of artistic interpretation of genocidal events and here again and again with the actions of the actors involved. This happens in regard to literature, film (fiction and documentary), theatre, graphic novels, gaming, etc. The new perpetrator research narrows this discussion in this handbook and all too often beyond to its eponymous subject.

The same applies to the pedagogical efforts of those working in various educational institutions and those reflecting on how to appropriately and effectively convey the actions of

² Uğur Ümit Üngör, “Assad’s Paramilitaries: Shabbiha Perpetrators in the Syrian Civil War,” in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, eds. Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 139–140.

³ These and other points are discussed in more detail in two roundtables of the *Journal of Perpetrator Studies* in issues 2.1 (2018) and 3.1 (2020).

⁴ Paul Formosa, “Moral Responsibility and Evil,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 251.

⁵ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1. The Years of Persecution 1933–1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997); Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 2. The Years of Extermination 1939–1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

actors in contexts of genocidal violence in educational contexts. Indeed, the focus on perpetrators in recent English-language perpetrator research makes it more difficult to do justice to the complexity of extreme mass violence. What is fundamentally lacking in prevention pedagogy that focuses on perpetrators is the teaching or even the training of concrete strategies for action that enable individuals to become capable of acting, especially at the beginning of processes of exclusion.

This does not require historical knowledge, reflections on empathy⁶ or theatre performances,⁷ but embodied and performatively practiced forms of cooperation or overcoming aggression. All in all, this book does not introduce us to perpetrator research, but rather recycles known material from genocide research in order to market it under the catchword perpetrator research. The fact that an author can claim in such a book that Amon Göth, the commander of the Krakow concentration camp, was a Nazi collaborator because he was Austrian indicates that the texts were not optimally supervised by those responsible for them.⁸

Researching Perpetrators of Genocide

The most important development and probably also the justification for speaking of a separate field is the amount of data generated through interviews with perpetrators of violence. For a long time, knowledge about genocide perpetrators was based almost exclusively on court or investigation files. The individual interview as a source and method is gaining dramatically in importance in the field. Criminologist Kjell Anderson, oral historian Erin Jessee, political scientist Timothy Smith and historian Uğur Ümit Üngör are examples of researchers whose explanatory models are largely based on extensive empirical work. As a result of this development, publications on methods and methodological issues are increasingly appearing, such as the anthology by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*. It contains many insights into empirical work with perpetrators of violence that differ from other fields of research. This is especially true with regard to field access and questions of research ethics. However, it is noticeable during the reading that a number of important points are addressed but not consistently discussed to the end or are left vague. For example, many of the researchers work with translators. Some authors also point out in principle that this can influence the interpretation of the data and the formulation of the results.⁹ However, a decided discussion or disclosure of how to deal with such difficulties is by no means the rule in the respective publications. Nor are there any considerations to systematically and regularly involve the translators in the interpretation or formulation of the results—or even to make them co-authors.

In fact, the discussion about the handling of the collected material, i.e., the evaluation, the documentation, the publication, and the provision of the data to the community is still in its infancy. Standards such as the publication of data material used in articles to make the conclusions comprehensible are also questioned in this book, among others, with reference to the protection of research subjects. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need for a discussion about the possibilities of making data sets available to the professional public in a curated form. This would bring many advantages, especially for research; for example, in terms of

⁶ Michalinos Zembylas, "Teaching for/about Empathy in Peace Education," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 369–373.

⁷ Susanne C. Knittel, "The Ethics of Discomfort: Critical Perpetrator Studies and/as Education after Auschwitz," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London, New York, Routledge, 2020), 379–384.

⁸ Alasdair Richardson, "Playing the Devil's Advocate: Classroom Encounters with Holocaust Perpetrators," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 361.

⁹ For example, Erin Jessee and Kjell Anderson, "Conclusion: Towards a Code of Practice for Qualitative Research among Perpetrators," in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, eds. Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 214.

comparative research or the automated evaluation of large amounts of data. The material is potentially available. Methods could be adapted or developed. Thus, on an adequate empirical basis, it could be possible to gain insights into whether and, if so, how perpetrators, or more precisely, the genesis of certain actions (e.g., one person shoots another) or action contexts (e.g., a massacre) differ in different contexts. Unfortunately, there is surprisingly little concrete information in the book about translations, as well as the documentation, storage, analysis, and publication of (interview) data.

Kjell Anderson's article is representative of an approach that can be found in a number of contributions. He problematizes and reflects on problems without offering solutions or what would be the prerequisite for getting to the bottom of these problems. For example, he points out that the representation of perpetrators varies depending on who represents them. Anderson links this view to what he calls archetypes—he speaks of artists, lawyers, victims, perpetrators and researchers. It immediately becomes obvious that, firstly, these are different categories and, secondly, he narratively establishes commonalities or communities quite uncritically in his text. For example, there is talk of “we, as researchers,”¹⁰ a formulation that assumes unity with regard to epistemological questions, which I consider questionable for the field of those who deal with aspects of collective violence. It would make much more sense, for example, to speak of perspectives on acts of violence and at the same time describe their fluidity. In this way, a distinction could be made between perspectives, interpretations, and representations of those who endure, carry out, participate in, and observe. This is a fundamental problem that goes hand in hand with the focus on actors (perpetrators, for example), who can in fact only be defined through their actions and the evaluations of these by third parties. In other words, much of the conceptual difficulty that Anderson also discusses is due to the very approach of perpetrator research.

Some articles offer insight into the work in the field, especially for those with little field experience. Erin Jessee, for example, refers to her experience in Rwanda to describe the many political and administrative obstacles on the way to interviewing perpetrators. At the same time, it is obvious how little space the author gives to important aspects such as data documentation or the cooperation of third parties, for example with regard to translations. There is only one sentence of several lines on the former, which at least indicates that the interviews could not be recorded.¹¹ The latter are only mentioned en passant in a sentence dealing with the safety of the researchers: “Of similar concern was the realization that while my personal safety could be relatively assured by leaving Rwanda, the same could not be said for the Rwandan research assistants who provided simultaneous translations during these interviews.”¹² Apart from the fact that these assistants were apparently able to translate simultaneously while the author was taking notes, we learn nothing about these persons, their qualifications and experience, their role in the research process, etc. This is not appropriate for an article in a book with a research content. This is too little for contributions in a book with the claim to inform about research in a rather complex field.

At the same time, the volume also offers innovative approaches, such as the work of Uğur Ümit Üngör on actors in the Syrian civil war, which provides a deep insight into the importance of social hierarchies for the decision of groups (clans) to fight for one side or the other.¹³ Such empirically saturated studies certainly hold great potential for research on violence as a whole.

¹⁰ Kjell Anderson, “The Perpetrator Imaginary Representing Perpetrators of Genocide,” in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, eds. Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 38.

¹¹ Erin Jessee, “Seeing Monsters, Hearing Victims: The Politics of Perpetrations in Postgenocide Rwanda,” in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, eds. Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 71

¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹³ Üngör, *Assad's Paramilitaries*, 151.

Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence

The volume on *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, edited by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn, and Barbora Holá leaves a better impression. The book begins with a good, if very narrow, overview by Alette Smeulers of a history of research on perpetrators of violence in genocidal contexts and terrorism. In the next chapter, the editors introduce a number of established models and studies that are intended to help explain (again, primarily genocidal) violence or the involvement of the actors perpetrating this violence. On the one hand, such sections are orienting, especially for students. At the same time, they consolidate a canon of explanatory patterns and narratives, and this despite the fact that the authors discuss quite critically, for example, the scope of experimental studies that are now considered classical. Thus, my criticism is not so much of the texts in this volume as of processes of canonization, especially when this cannot be justified exclusively in the quality of the canonized approaches—as is the case, for example, with the Stanford Prison Experiment, which was most recently debunked by Thibault Le Texier.¹⁴

Even more than the other books, this one goes beyond genocidal violence. Chandra Lekha Sriram, for example, reflects on her many years of experience with violent actors in various civil wars; there is a study by Georg Frerks on female fighters of the so-called Tamil Tigers and a fascinating biographical sketch of Rwandan President Paul Kagame by Maartje Weerdesteijn. Kagame's dictatorial regime, on the one hand successful in terms of education and prosperity, on the other, and perhaps closely related to this, responsible for mass violence as well as targeted assassinations, is explained with reference to Max Weber as a form of purpose rationality. While in this case it is still clear why this actor can be considered a perpetrator, this is less comprehensible in the case of civil war actors. Sriram, for example, selects her interview partners because they are considered "alleged perpetrators."¹⁵

Other contributions such as the one by Pieter Nanninga, who brings some order to the relationship between secular and religious justifications of violence, are also gratifying. He uses case studies of terrorist attacks in Germany and France to show that it is wrong to describe them as religious terrorism or to hold religion responsible for this violence.¹⁶

Jonathan Leader Maynard has been working for some time on the significance of ideologies for the exercise of collective violence. Unfortunately, his definition of ideology is already flawed, as it contains further elements that need to be explained, but which are not clarified further (e.g., "political world" and "political behavior").¹⁷ Furthermore, in my view, the core of what constitutes ideologies remains unaddressed; namely, those parts of such narratives that explain who bears responsibility for the conditions deemed problematic. This is because they—usually a group defined in the respective ideology—become the actual problem. Accordingly, opposition to this group becomes integral to improving what is perceived as a difficult situation.

Recognizing that ideologies do not directly trigger violence or motivate actors to participate in it, he develops a so-called neo-ideological approach. This includes insights such as that ideologies need not be exceptional or "deviant,"¹⁸ that perpetrators are not all ideologized in the same way, and that ideologies play a role in solidifying social norms that make it difficult for individuals not to engage in exclusionary acts. Maynard establishes the connection between

¹⁴ Thibault Le Texier, "Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 7 (2019), 823–839.

¹⁵ Chandra Lekha Sriram, "Perpetrators, Fieldwork, and Ethical Concerns," in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, eds. Alette Smeulers et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 57–71.

¹⁶ Pieter Nanninga, "Religion and International Crimes: The Case of the Islamic State," in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, eds. Alette Smeulers et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 192–207.

¹⁷ Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Studying Perpetrator Ideologies in Atrocity Crimes," in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, eds. Alette Smeulers et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

these initially narratively composed models of explaining the world and actual social action rather thinly in argumentative terms via “social-psychological conformity effects.”¹⁹

Conclusion

This last publication, in particular, certainly offers an introductory overview for students interested in various aspects of collective violence. So, I can definitely recommend its purchase to libraries. This is less true of the other two volumes. Many (not all, of course) of their contributions lack intellectual acuity, knowledge of relevant research that lies beyond a narrow corpus of recurrent concepts and studies. Significant questions, such as the formation, stabilization and decay of social norms, which are central to the understanding of collective violence, remain unaddressed. Theories of action find almost no mention. And, as already noted, the collection, storage, analysis, translation, and accessibility of data on the group in question are very inadequately dealt with.

Two final criticisms probably concern matters of taste. First, it is extremely tedious to work through publications with endnotes. Secondly, I find it regrettable when, especially in English-language publications, diacritical marks, for example in names, are ignored. For me, this has something to do with care.

¹⁹ Ibid., 182.