Guest Editorial: Environmental Degradation and Genocide

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Introduction

In January 2021, IAGS and GSP hosted three panels on Environmental Degradation, Climate Change, and Mass Violence.[1] Each one showcased a specific intersection within this nexus: Indigenous issues, gender, and ecocide. This special issue emerges from this series of panels as a means for many of those speakers to explore their cases and arguments in greater depth, and for a broader audience. The focus of these panels was to not only highlight the emerging research on these pressing issues, but gauge interest for this particular nexus.

These panels each drew dozens of participants from across the world, signaling to us that we had tapped a vein of unexplored interest. Indeed, for as many scholars and practitioners identify as part of the genocide studies field, and for as well established as the field of environmental studies is, there are surprisingly few who have so far integrated the two. While this is changing, as evidenced by this special issue, it is still safe to say that this is still an emerging topic. As the effects of anthropogenic climate change become more accepted, evident, and widespread, many fields of conflict research and practice, including our own, must shift to include this new reality.

This special issue offers an opportunity to invite additional scholars into the discussion which began through the three panels, and to disseminate research or a yet wider set of issues. The diversity of topics and approaches in the following pages, as well as the insightfulness and relevance of each article, provide a broad foundation and set of models for subsequent scholarship in this overarching area. The pressing need for sustained focus and discourse on the challenge of climate change for human rights and peace make the ideas and cases presented here of immediate concern to all scholars of genocide and, indeed, all human beings.

The Conflict-Climate Nexus

The study of environmental conflict emerged as the Cold War came to a close as the next big security issue. Environmental conflict studies have spawned three decades of continuously branching studies. Thomas Homer-Dixon helped introduce and institutionalize the narrative of the environment as a security threat, arguing that degradation and resulting scarcity of resources would lead to a two-fold response: elites hoarding resources and mass migration from ecologically depleted zones, and that the resulting pressures would culminate in "simple-scarcity conflicts," "group-identity conflicts," or "insurgency against the state." His arguments have been chiefly received as neo-Malthusian, where overpopulation is the main cause of environmental degradation. As such, he has garnered major criticism about over universalization of his theory, as well as his narrow focus on countries with high birthrates.

The climate change securitization field emerged from these studies and, for a variety of reasons, remains the dominant narrative on climate change and conflict. Military and defense institutions were some of the first to raise the alarm on the effects of what was then called global warming, albeit in classified documents. The anticipated effects of climate change, they realized, had implications for hundreds of seaside and island military bases, global distribution of troops, and the future of strategic aid. Following this line of analysis, many scholars (often funded by military institutions) focused on the national security aspects of climate change and conflict, with a specific focus on migration and border security. This research advocates for mitigating climate change and preventing conflict to ensure people can stay in their current homes and communities, though not necessarily for humanitarian

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[1] Panels are accessible online at https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyIgA4_0g_IJd2aYmxvBLdWxQ63MqwrO2.

purposes. Many argue that this narrative frames climate change mitigation as valuable only inasmuch as it protects the interests of the so-called Global North.

The majority of climate change-conflict research has continued in this trajectory by studying resource scarcity as a driver of conflict. The role of climate change is now being investigated in both past and current conflict case studies across the globe. Environmental security research spans from the traditional research on agricultural and subsistence societies to climate change's role in myriad intersecting issues, including migration, water security, and land distribution.

Due to the long-term nature of climate change, most studies focus on patterns of one or more of the climate change indicators, like rainfall, temperature, or agricultural yield, while others focus on the effects of natural disasters, or "climate shocks." Despite numerous quantitative studies, analysis has not consistently shown a direct correlation between these indicators and conflict. Joshua Busby asserted that "variability…rather than scarcity per se, was more likely to be damaging to citizens because it would upend planning and agriculture, making it harder for people to sustain livelihoods in the event of unexpected negative surprises."[2] As such, studies have sought to home in on the environment as a "threat multiplier" by exploring environmental conflict within the context of state infrastructure, social inequality, poverty, food insecurity, or a history of environmental conflict.

It is valuable to note that the majority of studies on climate change and conflict focus on countries and regions in Africa, followed by Asia, despite the majority of climate change-inducing gasses and pollution coming from the United States, Europe, and, more recently, India and China. This is due in part to the "streetlight effect,"[3] and has significant ethical implications for how conflict analysts should understand the wealth of studies devoted to specific countries and regions. Cullen Hendrix[4] and Courtland Adams et al.[5] argued that former British colonies, specifically in Africa, are currently over-represented in the climate change-conflict nexus research due to more open policies towards foreign researchers, broader English-language fluency, and availability of large-N conflict data.

There is a growing movement for scholarship that does not examine climate change and conflict as a security threat to Western countries. This branch of the field dovetails with the climate justice field, which highlights the need for Indigenous leadership, equal participation of women, and, most importantly, for the perpetrators of climate violence to be brought to international and domestic justice. In this vein, Jürgen Zimmerer called for "sustainable prevention as the route to changing the fundamental conditions under which violence blossoms and to lasting effect."[6]

As evidenced by the key presentations of the panel on "Environmental Degradation, Climate Change, and Genocide: Intersections with Indigenous Issues," *within* many of the states that are major contributors to global climate change, governmental polices at the national, regional, and local levels, as well as corporate and majority group non-governmental activities still allowed or sanctioned by governmental authorities, often result in significant impacts of environmental degradation on Indigenous communities and territories, and represent intentional or negligent continuations of the genocidal destruction against these Indigenous groups perpetrated in earlier periods through other means,

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[2] Joshua Busby, "The Field of Climate and Security: A Scan of the Literature," *Social Science Research Council*, April 2019, 6.

[3] The streetlight effect is the tendency for researchers to focus on particular questions, cases, and variables for reasons of convenience or data availability rather than broader relevance, policy import, or construct validity. See Cullen S. Hendrix, "The Streetlight Effect in Climate Change Research on Africa," *Global Environmental Change* 43 (March 2017), 137, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2017.01.009.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Courtland Adams et al., "Sampling Bias in Climate–Conflict Research," *Nature Climate Change* 8, no. 3 (March 2018), 200–203, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0068-2.

[6] Jürgen Zimmerer, "Beyond Gaddafi: Sustainable Prevention in the Face of Environmental Injustice," *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 1–2 (June 2011), vii, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2011.580556.

including direct murder, forced starvation, exterminatory deportation, cultural suppression and destruction, and societal and familial fragmentation. Attention to the genocidal role of environmental degradation in past exo-colonialism and settler colonialism, and present oppression of and violence against Indigenous peoples across the world, must be central to the burgeoning study of environmental degradation and genocide.

The Relationship between Climate Change and Genocide
In many ways, the identity-based conflict lens on environmental conflict is a logical extension of the field. Despite this, between the three major journals in Genocide Studies, there are surprisingly few articles published on this topic. Jürgen Zimmerer edited a special issue of the *International Journal of Human Rights* on climate change, environmental violence, and genocide in 2014 and, more recently in 2021, the *Journal of Genocide Research* published a special issue as well, highlighting the Genocide-Ecocide Nexus.

One of the reasons for this dearth of research is due in part to the inherent complexity and politicking of climate change. In order to acknowledge the need to prevent climate change-induced conflict, one must (1) acknowledge that climate change is happening, (2) recognize the full seriousness of the fact that it will get worse, and (3) go beyond performative reiterations that something can be done about it. Assuming this, there are different ways through which to understand the relationship between the effects of climate change and genocide.

The first intersection is as a casual factor. After a climate shock, such as a flood, drought, fire, or other major weather event, there may be competition or hoarding of limited key resources, such as food, water, or energy. In this circumstance, one group may commit genocide against another to reduce resource needs by "weeding out" the targeted population. Argued in depth by Alex Alvarez, climate change "will certainly create conditions and mind-sets conducive to the development of intergroup hostility, tension, and violent conflict."[7] As people are placed in settings of insecurity and unpredictable access to the food, water, and energy resources necessary for their lives and the lives of their families, they may be more susceptible or open to a "first strike" action out of weaponized fear of their own starvation.

The second intersection between climate change and genocide is as method of commission of genocide. Historical examples of the use of environmental degradation abound, including the destruction of food and water sources. Whereas, in the past, a typical technique was to force targeted populations into harsh environments such as deserts as means of causing their deaths, in today's world environments ill-suited for human existence are spreading to areas that previously comfortably supported human life. Governmental policies and corporate practices have a significant and often determining role in (1) whether such environmental degradation will occur at all and (2) where it will occur. As has been clear over the past quarter century, these environmental impacts are intentionally focused on areas of Indigenous and other racially, ethnically, etc., vulnerable groups, and have thus become means of their destruction. Whether grand "development" projects by their own governments and the effects of widespread environmental exploitation and harm practiced deliberately by transnational corporations, or more localized, the differential impact on vulnerable populations is central to how environmental destruction, including climate change is practiced today.

The third intersection reverses this relationship, recognizing the harm and change caused to the environment and climate due to genocidal actions. In addition to the localized harm mass, untreated human remains can cause damage to an area's agricultural and water sanitation, there can be massive increases in greenhouse gas emissions due to bombings and resulting fires, as well as the intentional destruction of energy supply lines during a genocidal attack.

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7 Alex Alvarez, *Unstable Ground: Climate Change, Conflict, and Genocide* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017).

Overview of the Edition

Mark Levene is one of the first scholars to place anthropogenic climate change within the context of genocide prevention. Over a decade later, his article continues this conversation through an analysis of Holocaust narratives and iconography in the messaging to prevent climate change. Climate activists have used the Holocaust, and the emotional response its mention elicits, to spur public action on environmental issues. At the convergence of "never again" and "before it's too late," Levene posits that invoking the world's empathetic response (or lack thereof) to the Holocaust does not best serve the needs of those desperately trying to get the attention of the leadership of the Global North. Instead, there are other key aspects of Holocaust history and process that could be used as a guide and warning for the inevitable rise in environmental migrants and refugees. Digging below the surface of the obvious parallels, Levene argues that the value of utilizing the Holocaust in environmental rhetoric is in demanding responsibility from those in power to act instead of react: "speaking through the people, and for the people, demands 'never again' will we allow ourselves to be bystanders as the hubris of the economically and politically powerful take us hurtling towards planetary nemesis."[8] Levene's thought-provoking exposition critiques the public understanding of the Holocaust paradigm and how it should—or should not—be used in grassroots environmental organizing.

Emily Sample argues a similar tack with her analysis of resource scarcity within the genocide continuum. Her article builds the case that the Holocaust, from Hitler's obsession with *Lebensraum* to mass killings on the Eastern front, is intimately intertwined with the fear of and protection against food insecurity, and that policy and military decisions were made with this in mind. Acknowledging the Holocaust case as the archetype against which genocide early warning and prevention policy is crafted, this article adds food, water, and energy resource scarcity—or the credible threat thereof—to the list of mass atrocity early warning signs. As such, Sample argues for the inclusion of the effects of climate change in future genocide prevention policy and analysis, due to the myriad of ways in which climate change can create, multiply, and intensify both resource scarcity and resource insecurity.

Marisa Ensor applies a "gendered lens" to the environmental aspects of mass violence in South Sudan. While the gendered nature of mass violence in Sudan has been well-discussed, as sexualized violence against women and girls especially has been an area of great attention in considerations of this case, the gendered nature of the impacts of environmental dimensions has not. It is this gap Ensor strives to fill.

Ensor calls attention to the "gender-differentiated" impact of various mechanisms of mass violence. For example, displacements from areas of environmental degradation increase the vulnerability of women and girls to sexualized violence, while food shortages disproportionately affect this population.

Ensor calls for support to victims to follow gender demographics in order to provide a counterbalance to the differential targeting of women and girls. A key element of Ensor's work is focused on the agency of South Sudanese women, who have persisted in making their voices heard in discussions of how to address mass violence in South Sudan.

Rachel Killean and Lauren Dempster respond to a notable lack of attention in the field of transitional justice to environmental concerns, specifically the use of environmental destruction in perpetration of mass violence and environmental degradation as a product of mass violence, as well as the desirability of "green" reparative schemes. Were they only to expand the notion "transitional justice" to recognize as essential to it the environmental dimension of mass violence, the article would represent a major step forward for the field. But the authors intentionally invert the typical framework, as they highlight the ways in which a truly inclusive understanding of "the environment" and its relationship to mass destruction of

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[8] Mark Levene, "The Holocaust Paradigm as Paradoxical Imperative in the Century of Anthropogenic Omnicide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 16, no. 1, 94, https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.16.1.1886.

human beings and other elements of the world require rethinking some of the fundamental assumptions of transitional justice itself as a liberal, anthropocentric concept.

Along with this productive theoretical disruption, the authors offer a comprehensive overview of specific manifestations of the full set of environmental dimensions of mass violence and its aftermath, from the role of resource competition and exploitation in fomenting conflict, and the use of environmental destruction as a tool of genocide, to the devastating environmental effects of mass violence (itself ranging from the destruction of animal and vegetable life, to extensive land mining) and the ways it can hinder post-conflict recovery. The novelty of the authors' attention to the direct and indirect devastating effects of mass violence that correspond to core concerns of the environmental movement, such as biodiversity and poaching, reveal just how neglected these aspects of environmental harm are in discussions of mass violence.

Killean and Dempster locate a central challenge to mainstream Northern/Western transitional justice and legal frameworks more generally in the denial of status to non-human entities in various Indigenous traditions that take a more holistic view of the human position in the world and recognize non-human biological and non-biological components of the world as being vulnerable to harm and having a status akin to human beings. While this viewpoint has been present in ethical discourse for decades, the foundations of European-based legal theory exclude such a possibility. As the authors point out, in the latter framework, harm to "the environment" is generally considered of concern only insofar as damaging it harms human beings.

Killean and Dempster offer a compact yet far-reaching and highly insightful rehearsal of various "limitations and blind spots" of transitional justice theory and practice that alone offers much to any reader interested in this area of study and activity. They explain the implications of these gaps for the environmental aspects of mass violence. Given the embedded liberal, capitalist, and North/West-centric views characteristic of transitional justice models and practices, the authors call for a move to "transformative justice," by which socio-economic, legal, and political structures are transformed toward less oppressive, liberatory forms driven by Indigenous concepts appropriate to a given case and context. It is through this centering of Indigenous thought and values, and decentering of the liberal state, that alternative approaches to the environment emerge. As the authors point out, a transitional process that reinforces liberal capitalism leaves intact powerful mechanisms of environmental degradation. When the non-human environment is accorded ethical status, indeed, transformative processes can go beyond shifting from one set of human beings controlling areas of the world to another, to become reparative processes for the non-human natural world itself.

Regina Paulose's contribution to the special issue is a major intervention in genocide studies, Indigenous studies, and environmental studies. The view that environmentalist agendas and practices are favorable to and even consistent with Indigenous environment stewardship and values is uncritically accepted pervasively in environmentalist circles. Paulose shows that, on the contrary, much of "green technology," which attempts to generate "clean" energy, that is, energy that produces zero carbon emissions (through, for example, hydropower, wind power, and solar power) not only violates but eliminates Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Indigenous and ethnic minority peoples around the world and thereby functions genocidally against these groups. Paulose uses the case of the Sami People, Indigenous nomads in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia, as an illustration of the genocidal impact of "green technology," while also raising awareness of an Indigenous group that is not well-represented in the genocide and human rights studies literatures.

An important point made in the paper is that, while the environmental degradation caused by "green technology" projects, including making large amounts of their traditional territories uninhabitable for the Sami and unfit for the reindeer herding that is not simply their main means of subsistence but a foundational element of their cultural and social existence, has a genocidal impact, the pressures and policies adopted to gain control of land and coerce Sami acquiescence to projects are themselves extensions of genocidal campaigns of forced

assimilation. Far from being a rehearsal of the passive victimization of the Sami, Paulose cites a key alternative presented by the Sami themselves based on their Traditional Ecological Knowledge, calling for an alternative to "green energy" in the form of creation of "zero carbon societies in harmony with nature,"[9] not established through the destruction of key components of the natural world and the human societies that have existed symbiotically with them for centuries and millennia.

The discussion of the exterminatory impact of mineral extraction in Northern Russia (which is resulting in among other things extremely poor health conditions, including a death rate for Sami in this region 2.4 times higher than for non-Sami people in the region) for production of electronic cars has important resonances with similar processes elsewhere in the world that are driving mass violence and destruction, most notably the Democratic Republic of Congo. Reflecting a common function of colonialism, here is a case in which the environmental benefit of non-Indigenous peoples comes through the direct environmental harm and destruction of an Indigenous people.

The article makes a final key intervention in genocide studies. Instead of taking Northern/Western understandings of genocide as the foundation of analysis of the impact of "green technologies" on Indigenous peoples, the authors call for a rethinking of the legal concept of genocide in order to better accommodate the kind of destruction discussed in the article. This sets an important agenda for the United Nations and world community as a whole if the rhetorical concern expressed for protection of Indigenous and other minority populations is not to be exposed as empty.

The focus on Indigenous understandings of climate change is echoed in Rosoff's important contribution on the *Climate in Crisis: Environmental Change in the Indigenous Americas* exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum. This exhibit places today's changing climate into the longer timeline of environmental violence and colonialism in the Americas. The objects displayed in this exhibit form a narrative not only of the deep bond between humans and nature, but seek to illustrate how violence against the plants, animals, and ecosystems necessary to sustain human life, is violence against the people themselves. Art has the ability to approach these hard, political questions with broad audiences. By blending this conversation into modern art spheres, we are reminded that Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing are not to be discussed only in the past tense. This curated exhibit stands in conversation with the arguments laid out by Killean and Dempster, both explaining in their own ways the complex relationship between humans, culture, nature, and violence.

Intersecting Denials as the Next Focal Issue
Genocide denial has long been recognized as a persistent problem. Well-known cases include Turkey's denial of the Armenian Genocide, Japan's denial of the Nanjing Massacre and other Pacific War atrocities, omissive and refutational denial of and genocide of Indigenous peoples in Australia and the Americas, and the Holocaust by various groups and governments, but it is not overstretching to say that every case of past and present genocide is subject to significant denial by perpetrators and/or other parties. For instance, at every stage of the Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, and the Rohingya cases, denial has been rampant.

Denial is famously misrepresented as being the "final stage of genocide," but in fact denial typically occurs throughout the genocidal process, after it, and, indeed, as Fatma Müge Göçek has argued, *before* a genocide, during the steps that lead to it.[10] It is precisely denial during and before genocide that parallel typical denial of environmental degradation and climate change. While, in legal, political, and public spaces, individual perpetrators of environmental damage often deny the occurrence of the acts that resulted in the damage, deny

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9 Regina Menachery Paulose, "Death by a Thousand Cuts? Green Tech, Traditional Knowledge, and Genocide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 16, no. 1, 50, https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.16.1.1886.

10 Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

responsibility for those acts, and/or deny the link between the acts and the damage, even more devastating is the denial of the fact of environmental degradation and climate change itself. Deniers attack evidence that climate change is occurring at all, that it is human caused, that it already is having and will have devastating effects, and more. Deniers also reject claims that this or that proposed activity—fracking, building a dam, reducing pollution regulation thresholds, etc.—will result in environmental harm.

For less than a decade, genocide scholars and others been publicly discussing the parallels between denial of environmental harm and climate change and of genocide. What is becoming more and more clear is not simply that the same argument tactics and forms are used to deny genocide and climate change, that often the same public relations firms and other players are active in both types of denial, and other parallels, but that, as environmental destruction and genocide become intertwined, their denials become merged in an overarching denial process. Study of the concrete and theoretical intertwining of different genocide and climate change denial campaigns, and the attacks on critical thinking and the scientific method that underlie them, have become crucial if this new Environmental-Genocidal Denial Complex is to be challenged successfully. The editors hope the current volume will provide an important step in this engagement.

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