

Introduction – Confronting Mass Atrocities in Oral Historical Practice

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Genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes. These stark words encompass in their simplicity some of the greatest harms that humans can do to one another. They encapsulate the destruction of human lives and communities on a scale that confounds us. As Geoffrey Robertson has concluded, these are crimes “with a peculiar horror deriving from the fact that fellow human beings are capable of conceiving and committing [them], thereby diminishing us all.”¹

In addition to the large numbers of unnatural and violent deaths, mass atrocities cause untold suffering to individuals, families, communities, and nations. They result in the mass murder of civilians and combatants based solely on their perception as members of an unwanted political, ethnic, racial, religious, or national group. They rip apart the innumerable social ties that bind human groups by obliterating language, family, and culture. Mass atrocities destroy or devastate the social and creative functions of human communities by targeting members of the unwanted community with higher learning or skills, as well as those members of a society, who due to poverty, for example, are disproportionately vulnerable to the negative effects of political and social instability. Mass atrocities also frequently involve the destruction of physical and economic infrastructure; for example, scorched earth policies and extremely brutal forms of torture, murder, and mutilation are often designed by perpetrators to drive their victims from a territory and ensure that they have no desire to return in the future. In the decades and generations that follow, survivors carry out the immense task of rebuilding communities, social bonds, and infrastructure, and pursuing political stability and justice.

Many legal theorists and social scientists have dedicated themselves to the study of mass atrocities and their aftermath. Oral historians and related practitioners, however, are rarely part of this cohort, despite having a vital role to play in documenting, memorialising and otherwise confronting mass atrocities around the world. There are notable exceptions, particularly in the vast bodies of literature that document and memorialise the Holocaust and Armenian genocide. Works by Henry (Hank) Greenspan, Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, among others, on oral history practice surrounding the Holocaust and related mass atrocities in Nazi-occupied Europe, and by Donald E. and Lorna Touryan Miller, and Leyla Neyzi on the Armenian genocide in

¹ Geoffrey Robertson, *Crimes Against Humanity*, 3rd Edition (London: Penguin, 2006), p. xxv.

Turkey have done much to illuminate the ethical and methodological complexities of carrying out oral history among individuals and communities who bear witness to genocide. Though primarily focused on survivors' life histories and testimonies of violence, these works similarly highlight the sobering realities of dilemmas presented when exploring the narratives of the many actors involved in these horrifying acts, including survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders who witnessed and played a role in the violence.²

However, oral histories that engage with issues of more recent episodes of mass violence are rare. Again, the few notable exceptions include the promising forthcoming volume, *Oral History Off the Record*, edited by Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, and select articles in *The Oral History Review*, which occasionally feature oral historical engagements with survivors, perpetrators and bystanders to mass atrocities. This journal, the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, has also made a number of noteworthy contributions to this field, particularly with regard to political violence in Latin America.³ These contributions have made important forays into conceptualizing and theorizing oral historical practice surrounding more recent episodes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and other mass atrocities, to which this special issue is intended to contribute.⁴

Likewise, these important issues were explored as part of discussions surrounding the "Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence" conference, held on 22-25 March 2012 in Montréal, Canada. This conference was organised by Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, and the Montreal Life Stories Project,

² See on Holocaust oral history, for example, Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, 2nd Edition (St Paul: Paragon House, 2010); Luisa Passerini (ed.), *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, Vol. I: Memory and Totalitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Alessandro Portelli, *The Order has been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). On oral history and the Armenian genocide, see Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Leyli Neyzi and Hranush Kharatyan-Araqelyan, *Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey* (Bonn: DvV International, 2010).

³ See the contributions to the special issue on 'Oral History in Latin America', for example, Maria Paula Araújo, "Oral History, Memory, and Relief: Reflections on the Importance of Testimonies in Overcoming Contexts of Political Violence," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 32 (2012): 1-17.

⁴ Recent contributions of interest from the Palgrave MacMillan "Studies in Oral History" series include Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Jehanne M. Gheith and Katharine R. Jolluck (eds), *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). *Oral History off the Record* includes chapters by Alexander Freund, Luis Van Isschot and Anna Sheftel that examine oral historical practices among individuals whose lives have been intimately affected by mass atrocities.

and in many ways provided the impetus for this special issue.⁵ While the guest editors come from different countries (Erin is based in Canada, Annie in Australia), and our work focuses on different geographical regions (Erin works on Rwanda and Uganda, Annie on Indonesia), our approaches to the study of mass atrocities connect in unexpected but illuminating ways. We had both come from different disciplinary backgrounds (Erin previously specialized in Cultural Anthropology and Forensic Archaeology, Annie in Indonesian Studies) to the study of mass atrocities through oral history, and in the process, became convinced of its potential to illuminate the vast social, political and historical contexts that influenced the emergence and progression of mass atrocities in the world, as well as their interpretation over time. We had both grappled with the many ethical and methodological issues involved with doing oral history research on mass atrocities, among them: negotiating government surveillance and interference and the everyday fear and self-censorship this inevitably produces among participants and researchers; asking those who had experienced horrific forms of violence to recall and give testimony about that violence; learning, as much as possible, to listen deeply to difficult narratives of excessive violence and reprehensible political agendas; finding ways, both in the field and in subsequent publications and presentations, to represent the narratives we collected without placing informants in danger of government persecution or social stigmatization; and so on.⁶ And we both regretted the absence of a formal network of oral historians and related practitioners, and a related body of literature, that was committed to applying oral historical methods and theory in conflicted and transitional communities to better comprehend mass atrocities as perceived by the individuals whose lives were intimately affected by them, including survivors, ex-combatants, perpetrators, and bystanders.

This special issue of *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* thus aims to incite dialogue on these subjects by examining the conceptual, physical and mental challenges of carrying out oral history work on grievous abuses of human rights, and the attendant ethical and methodological dilemmas of documenting individuals' and communities' experiences of mass atrocities and their aftermath. The contributors explore the roles that oral historians and oral history practitioners can play during and after mass atrocities and evaluate

⁵ We would like to take this opportunity to thank Alexander Freund for his invitation to work with *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* to create a special issue specifically dedicated to "Confronting Mass Atrocities." Furthermore, we wish to thank John Roosa, Annie Pohlman, Yolande Bouka and Emily Lynch for contributing insightful articles on their work, and Catherine Baker and Sarah Watkins for their excellent book reviews. We are also appreciative of Hank Greenspan's willingness to contribute the afterword of this special issue. Lastly, we thank Alexander Freund and his team at the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* for providing invaluable direction and support in the organization and production of this special issue. Lastly, we thank the talented Marc Ellison for allowing the use of his photograph from Rwanda for the cover of this special issue.

⁶ See for example, Erin Jessee, "The limits of oral history: Ethics and methodology amid highly politicized research settings," *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 287-307.

their efforts to adapt oral history methodologies and practices in culturally appropriate and ethical ways.

The articles in this special issue have a geographical focus on two regions of the world: Indonesia and the Great Lakes region of Africa. First, the contributions by John Roosa and Annie Pohlman address the eradication of Leftists in Indonesia following a military coup in October 1965. In the six months that followed, it is estimated that 500,000 “suspected Communists” were massacred by the Indonesian military and its civilian militia groups, while a further million victims were rounded up and detained in concentration camps. The military regime that came to power during these mass killings based their legitimacy on having wiped out the “Communist threat.” Over the next thirty years, those with any Leftist connections were stigmatised, and public discussion about the massacres was suppressed. When the regime finally ended in 1998, new spaces began to open up for personal and community remembering of these events. Roosa assesses the contributions made by oral historians over the past two decades to our understanding of the massacres, while Pohlman discusses the risks involved in carrying out oral history research on these events in present-day Indonesia.

Next, Yolande Bouka and Emily Lynch analyze the challenges associated with conducting oral historical research on mass atrocities in the Great Lakes region of Africa. This region is unfortunately best known for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent wars and associated political instability and human rights violations in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The 1994 genocide in Rwanda was triggered by a four-year civil war that culminated in the assassination of then-President Juvenal Habyarimana by parties unknown, and the subsequent massacre of an estimated 800,000 civilians, most of whom were members of the nation’s minority Tutsi population. Approximately two million Rwandan refugees fled to the DRC, some of whom had been responsible for perpetrating atrocities in Rwanda and formed militia groups that then fostered instability and conflict in the DRC’s eastern Kivus region and sent additional waves of Congolese refugees fleeing into Rwanda. To this end, Bouka’s article examines the conflicting narratives of released prisoners of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda for their relevance for understanding the current political climate in post-genocide Rwanda. Lynch’s contribution contrasts personal Congolese accounts of a massacre at a refugee camp in Rwanda with the official accounts required by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in order to confer refugee status and arrange resettlement for residents.

Following these articles, Michael Kilburn initiates a multidisciplinary roundtable discussion on the subject of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as experienced by former combatants. He asks his collaborators, cognitive neuroscientist Samata Sharma, narrative therapists Nathalie Saltikoff and Dana Modell, independent behavioural health consultant Scott Rothermel, and oral historian Sandra Gasana, to reflect on the role of narrative in the study and treatment of PTSD. Taken together, these reflections offer insights

regarding the nature of PTSD and its physical, psychological, and social impacts, and initiate important dialogue regarding the ability of oral historians to contribute to establishing a narrative form through which former combatants suffering from PTSD can make sense of and ultimately heal from their experiences of trauma. To ensure ongoing discussion of this important subject, we are inviting brief written responses from select oral history practitioners and scholars involved in the study and investigation of PTSD, which will be added to the roundtable in the coming months.

Finally, we have included two book reviews of direct relevance to oral historical study of mass atrocities. Catherine Baker evaluates Jenny Edkin's *Missing*, which brings together oral historical and archived narratives related to the impact of missing persons' disappeared in the course of war and mass atrocities, as well as everyday events, on surviving family members and friends. Sarah Watkins then reviews Jennie Burnet's *Genocide lives in us*, a rare and timely ethnographic study of women, memory and silence in post-genocide Rwanda.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue make a number of important interventions regarding the oral history theory and practice as applied to the study of mass atrocities. The articles all wrestle with the interrelated themes of ethics and methodology: What does ethical fieldwork amid mass atrocities look like in different settings? What are some of the potential pitfalls and how can they be negotiated? The subjects of documentation and commemoration are also pervasive throughout the articles. What is to be gained by engaging with narratives of mass atrocities and their aftermath? Whose narratives can be included in our efforts to understand what has happened and how it is shaping the post-conflict political climate in a given country? Is there something to be gained by including the narratives of perpetrators, or is it sufficient to focus solely on the narratives of survivors and bystanders? And in either case, what are some of the implications for commemoration?

This special issue represents an important first step in the creation of an international research network of oral historians specialized in the study of mass atrocities and their aftermath, and a starting point for international dialogue on the various challenges and insights to be gained surrounding the application of oral history methods and theory to the study of mass atrocities and their aftermath. Despite myriad ethical and methodological challenges, this special issue's associated contributions clearly demonstrate the wealth of insights that oral historians bring to the table due to their nuanced approach to human memory, lived experiences and the subjectivity of narratives.

The contributors and guest editors of this special edition of *The Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* share this interest in and commitment to documenting and memorialising mass atrocities through oral history. They have also each played various roles in recording, revealing and helping to remember the experiences of communities riven by atrocity. These roles are essential because the stories that are told by those who have experienced mass

atrocities matter. They matter because they give testimony to the experiences of both the living and the dead. They matter because without understanding the intimate personal and social forces that drive the emergence and escalation of mass atrocities, which more often than not are carried out by average civilians, rather than the high-level government officials and associated elites that incite them, our ability to stop or prevent mass atrocities will remain stunted. And in the aftermath of mass atrocities, they matter because without fully comprehending the legacies of violence and how they are internalized by post-conflict communities, our ability to promote social repair, justice and long-term political stability will be cursory at best.