SPECIAL REPORT

The Future of Mass Atrocities and Atrocity Prevention

Report from the 2020 Sudikoff Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention

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Editor’s Note

An Even More Hellish “Problem from Hell”? Exploring Global Trends and the Future of Mass Atrocities

“Change is the only constant”—an aphorism attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, seems particularly fitting to the world of 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic was a major shock to a global system that was already undergoing significant change. Geopolitics, technology, climate, demographics, and ideology have all been shifting in profound ways. These changes—individually and together—are shaping global mass atrocity risks and the ability of governments and civil society to prevent them.

The 2020 Sudikoff Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention explored the implications of these global trends and the COVID-19 pandemic on mass atrocities and efforts to prevent them over the next decade. We sought to stimulate ideas for new policy-relevant research on global trends, mass atrocities, and atrocity prevention, and to begin building a network of scholars and practitioners focused on these topics.

This investment in better understanding genocide and its prevention in the future reflects the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s status as a “living memorial” that learns and adapts over time. It also reflects the commitment of the Museum’s Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide to equip decision makers with the knowledge, tools, and support required to prevent and halt genocide and related crimes against humanity.

Adapting to COVID-19 restrictions, the 2020 Sudikoff seminar took the form of five webinars, each focused on a particular global theme or trend: COVID-19, the shifting global distribution of power, new technologies, demographic and climate change, and atrocity-justifying ideologies and anti-atrocity norms. In each session, we discussed the relationship between the trend and mass atrocities, what changes are anticipated in the trend over the next decade, and how those changes may in turn affect mass atrocities and atrocity prevention efforts.

Experts reflect on a wide range of issues

This report compiles essays from several leading experts who participated in the seminar series. We asked them to reflect on one or more key themes and offer recommendations for research and/or policy initiatives that could help current and future leaders address mass atrocities.

The collection of essays reflects the breadth and diversity of issues that are likely to affect mass atrocities and their prevention over the next decade. Reflecting on changes in the distribution of political power and weakening anti-atrocity norms, Scott Straus identifies four significant challenges for the atrocity prevention agenda. Dara Kay Cohen highlights an often-neglected factor--sex and gender inequalities--and argues that it is likely to worsen over the next decade in ways that will exacerbate risks of mass atrocities. Roudabeh Kishi discusses how monitoring and early warning initiatives must adapt to changes in the information environment and the changing nature of atrocities. Dismas Nkunda focuses on how COVID-19 has affected civil society efforts to address mass atrocities. Finally, Jennifer Welsh discusses war crimes, "extreme atrocity," and political barriers to effective prevention—three key issues for the prevention of mass atrocities over the coming decade.

Challenging questions, sobering answers

Any attempt to summarize what we learned from the seminar series should start with an acknowledgement of the inherent difficulty of the questions that we posed. We sought not only to forecast changes in several different domains and assess their first- and second-order effects, but also to consider how the various changes "add up." As difficult as it is to estimate the impact on mass atrocities of China's growing power, for instance, it is all the more difficult to assess the net impact of several concurrent sets of changes. Furthermore, given the unprecedented aspects of phenomena like climate change and the revolution in information and communications technology, there are serious limits on what we can learn from the past. In sum, we cannot offer confident predictions, but informed speculation.

Overall, the picture that emerged from the seminar discussions was pessimistic. For each broad topic, we identified multiple ways in which anticipated global shifts would probably make mass atrocities more likely, more severe, and/or more difficult to prevent or respond to effectively. Moreover, we discussed ways in which these separate trends are likely to interact with each other, making for a considerably more complex and challenging context in which to prevent mass atrocities.

These findings should lead to a redoubling of commitment, not fatalism. The global trends may not be reversible, but opportunities still exist to shape their consequences. Nonetheless, the likelihood that the "problem from hell"—a label made famous by Samantha Power—will get even more devilish over the next decade demands healthy doses of humility and realism along with steadfast commitment.

Ideas for research and policy initiatives

We conclude with recommendations for how researchers and policymakers can help prepare for future challenges.

For researchers:

- *Investigate how multiple phenomena interact with each other*. Too often, the academic tendency to zero in on a single, narrowly defined factor leads to research that is of little use to policymakers who cannot "hold other things equal." The most consequential future trends can emanate from the interaction between different factors. For example, we discussed how atrocity-justifying ideologies are spread via new technologies, how global distribution of power affects the evolution of anti-atrocity norms, and how COVID-19 could lead to increases in support for xenophobic ideologies. On these and other questions, research that seeks to elucidate the interactions among multiple phenomena will prove more useful for policy audiences.

- *Use more diverse methods*. Most research on mass atrocities and atrocity prevention has relied on a very limited set of methods—case studies and regression modeling. As valuable as these approaches are, other methods are especially valuable when we suspect that historical cases differ in important ways from current or near future cases. For example, with appropriate data, machine learning and artificial intelligence could help not only with early warning, but with understanding how people respond to hate speech and efforts to incite violence. In addition, simulation methods such as agent-based modeling are uniquely suited to help address complex, emergent phenomena, which lack historical precedent, such as climate change and its second order effects. Finally, survey experiments have potential to yield new insights on questions such as how alternative framings affect public support for action to prevent atrocities.

- *Invest in "policy-relevant theory."* Although theory is normally assumed to be less relevant to policy choices than empirical research, our survey of future trends suggests otherwise. When the global context changes significantly, it is appropriate to put less stock in empirical patterns drawn from historical cases. Good theory can "travel" across time more easily, helping policymakers think systematically about why mass atrocities occur and what strategies might help prevent them. For instance, take the idea that elites choose to commit mass atrocities when they perceive severe threats to their core interests. This idea can be a useful tool for assessing risks in particular situations, in part because it can be adapted to differences in how elites perceive interests and threats, which might well change over time. If future leaders come to perceive non-violent resistance movements to be severe threats to their power, as research suggests they ought to, the emergence of these movements could be riskier in the future than history would indicate.

For policymakers:

- *Focus on developing adaptable atrocity prevention strategies*. A great deal of energy over the last two decades has been invested in developing structures and processes for mass atrocity prevention within governments and international organizations. These include the United States government's creation of an Atrocities Prevention Board, the development of regional genocide prevention networks, the standing up of an office on genocide prevention and the responsibility to protect at the United Nations, and the designation of "focal points" on the responsibility to protect in dozens of governments. Anticipating an increasingly challenging global context over the next decade, "institutionalizing" atrocity prevention must be matched with emphasis on developing effective *strategies*—not just a set of policy tools and structures, but clear articulations of how a collection of actions can exert immediate effects, and how these effects contribute to the prevention of atrocities. In its most ambitious form, investing in strategy development could be modeled on President Eisenhower's Project Solarium, which challenged United States national security leaders to develop a strategy for dealing with the Soviet threat.

- *Measure actions by how much they contribute to the prevention of mass atrocities, regardless of the label*. The Genocide Prevention Task Force made a point in 2008 that is all the more pertinent today: "The temptation when addressing specific concerns is to create a specific set of responses, such as a special coordinator with a single, stand-alone office," the Task Force wrote, warning that "the end result is typically bureaucratic marginalization if not outright irrelevance." In a period when resources are harder to come by and a complex mix of global challenges is affecting the risks of mass atrocities, the chance is even greater that a narrowly defined atrocity prevention initiative would be mainly of symbolic value. Policymakers should focus on impact more than input, embracing synergies between atrocity prevention and other policy agendas, such as countering violent extremism, addressing state fragility, and climate change adaptation.

- *Allocate resources to atrocity risk situations where they will have the greatest impact*. In a more difficult environment, it will be more important to optimize the allocation of resources—policy attention as well as funds. This will take a level of pragmatism not often associated with atrocity prevention and discipline to avoid getting drawn from one crisis to the next. There is no contradiction between remaining committed to preventing mass atrocities wherever they are threatened and devoting resources based on a pragmatic assessment of influence and likely impact. In practice, allocating scarce resources efficiently requires pairing risk assessments, such as those produced by the Early Warning Project, with analysis of where a particular government or other actor is likely to have the greatest influence.

Lawrence Woocher, February 2021

Global Headwinds against Atrocity Prevention: A Research Agenda to Help Further Progress

Scott Straus

I found each topic discussed in the Sudikoff seminar—pandemics, changing global polarity, new technology, climate change, and norms/ideologies—important and relevant. That said, in this memo, I focus on anti-atrocity norms, coupled with the impact of changing polarity, but I endorse future research and attention to the other topics. I also conclude with a potential avenue for future research not explicitly discussed in the seminar series.

We are arguably at the tail end of an arc of reinvigorated domestic and global interest and attention to genocide and mass atrocities. The development of an atrocity prevention regime unfolded at the end of World War II, went dormant during the Cold War, and ramped up in the 1990s. That decade witnessed ad-hoc policymaking and decision-making, but clearly greater visibility and attention to genocide and mass atrocities. That was evident in particular cases and the debates around them: the botched intervention in Somalia, the nadirs in Rwanda and Bosnia, and concerted atrocity prevention actions in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and East Timor. The 2000s and early 2010s were a period of policy development, institutionalization, norm crystallization, and expansion of the prevention and response "toolbox." That period also saw landmark action and attention in a number of atrocity situations, including Kenya, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, and Libya, among others.

Four significant challenges

The big question is what happens now and into the next decades. It is reasonable to assume that the saliency of genocide and atrocity prevention will decline and that big gains in policymaking will not occur. I see four major headwinds.

First, the political drift in many of the states that were active supporters of anti-atrocity policy and innovation has turned inward, to domestic politics and issues, due to some combination of nationalist foreign policies and internal crises. I would place the United States, Australia, some European Union countries, and the United Kingdom in this category. In general, we might think of this development as *increasing disinterest* in atrocity prevention within the Global North.

Second, the increasing prominence and assertiveness of China and Russia on the global stage, and regionally, increases the active resistance to anti-atrocity actions in multilateral settings. In general, we might think of this as *increased opposition* to a proactive anti-atrocity agenda.

Third, one of the most prominent anti-atrocity interventions, in Libya, led to negative outcomes and "buyer's remorse": a United Nations Security Council Resolution that was predicated on civilian protection evolved into military action that supported regime change. In general, this undermined consensus at the international level in anti-atrocity policies. In general, we might label this *declining confidence* in multilateral settings in coercive, anti-atrocity policies.

Lastly, I think there is growing prominence and attention within civil society and the public, at least within the United States, to other issues. I would place climate change and racial justice at the top of those agendas. These are welcome developments but likely make the emergence of an atrocity-focused social movement unlikely. Therefore, at least some of the from-below pressure and energy that spurred policy attention and development in the 1990s and 2000s will likely be directed at other issues. I would not expect a "Save Darfur"-like movement in the near future; we might call this *low probability for an anti-atrocity social movement* to emerge.

In short, if there is increasing disinterest, active opposition, declining confidence, and a preoccupied civil society, we should expect genocide and mass atrocity prevention to be less politically salient than in the previous three decades. Will there be a steady-state? Will there be a retrenchment, in other words, will the next decades look something like the Cold War—all with regards to atrocity prevention policy?

Protecting gains

For those who work in the atrocity prevention community (presumably the readers of this memo), the import lies (to my mind) in protecting the gains made since the nadirs of the 1990s.[1] That progress includes but is not limited to: conceptual innovation that expanded the policy-making space beyond "genocide"; clearer doctrines and frameworks (notably the Responsibility to Protect [R2P], civilian protection mandates in peacekeeping operations, Presidential Study Directive 10); greater institutional coherence (through special advisers at the United Nations and the Atrocities Prevention Board); and a widening of atrocity prevention tools from the early "humanitarian intervention" framework (no longer is the question just intervene or not, but there are a range of non-military options such as naming and shaming, documentation and fact-finding, enhanced diplomacy, international criminal and other legal mechanisms, and a variety of sanctions, as well as greater sophistication and training on the military side).

Will that progress be lost? How might it be protected? The research agenda I recommend seeks to establish some baselines from which to work. In particular, I suggest the following:

1. A research project that documents the status of *norm maintenance/erosion*. What are the points of consensus, what are the points of divergence, in particular within multilateral settings? I presume that while individual states may take a leading role on particular cases, multilateral institutions, both international and regional, are likely to be the main vehicle through which atrocity prevention will take place, given the inward turn of many states. While I argue there are headwinds to future atrocity prevention, it remains to be documented whether some baseline consensus exists on the non-acceptance of genocide and mass atrocity, in particular the crimes that are typically listed under R2P (crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing, in addition to genocide).

   Prior efforts to document norms suggest to me that the foundational norm of (a) non-acceptance of genocide and mass atrocities and (b) the idea that the international community has a responsibility to engage and prevent such crimes exists.[2] A research effort to determine whether this foundational norm persists would be worthwhile. If affirmative, I think that finding would be a baseline from which to work in coming decades and a point to publicize or insist on. The second part of the inquiry would be to determine the points of consensus and disagreement on how to implement the norm.

My expectation would be significant reticence on the use of force, in particular without the consent of the target state, at least among some key members of the international community. But what about the other measures—sanctions, preventive diplomacy, commissions of inquiry, criminal prosecution, coercive diplomacy, or other measures short of military intervention? It seems to me that documenting whether there is agreement on some tools would help determine the space of policy maneuver for those states that wish to take a leadership role on these issues.

Norm measurement could occur, perhaps, via United Nations Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights statements, United Nations Department of Peace Operations peacekeeping mandates, United States Secretary of State/Under Secretary of State statements or interviews, and statements from permanent five (P-5) member states or UN Security Council states in recent years. If budget allowed, I would think that selective interviews with P-5 foreign policy officials, as well as those from leading emerging countries (Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, Turkey, etc.), and interviews with key regional organizations, such as The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, European Union, Economic Community of West African States, and others would be instructive.

2. Following point 1, I would expect that the policy space for anti-atrocity measures has shrunk, notably with regard to coercive military action. That being the case, to help shore up whatever consensus remains around the norm of non-acceptance and willingness for non-military international engagement, it might be worth assessing, retroactively, the *effectiveness of non-military measures*. While the prevention "toolbox" has expanded, there is not a robust academic literature on the relative effectiveness of non-military measures. It might be worth assessing how well certain measures worked in relatively low-atrocity or no-atrocity situations that had the risk of escalation: Nagorno-Karabakh, Kenya, Mali, Guinea, even Cameroon.

   Part of the analysis could be an understanding of how international measures intersect with domestic dynamics and forces. I can see case studies and developing narratives about how different measures worked or did not as being useful to future policy debates. In the way that Rwanda has become a legend around the failures to intervene, are there stories to tell about the positive effects of non-military intervention, cases to which advocates can point as evidence of a space for action?

3. Lastly, while not discussed explicitly in the seminar series: is there a way to improve forecasting and prediction, or at least is there *a better way to assess risks*? One drag on prevention policy may be an inability to understand where cases present "risk factors," which can be theory-derived but static, and cases where there appears to be some escalation to mass violence. A busy policymaker might want to know when to engage and build international momentum around a particular case, and pertinent to points 1 and 2, what options could be pushed with likely success.

There has been much progress since the 1990s in the area of forecasting. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has pioneered forecasting through the Early Warning Project, as well as the studies of particular cases. I wonder if the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide might assess its own assessments. How well is the model doing? What are its advantages and disadvantages? What added value are the in-depth country studies, such as those on Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Bangladesh? In retrospect what did they get right or not? And have there been any false negatives, cases that came out of nowhere so to speak?

I wonder if there are improvements to be made in: (a) forecasting; (b) how to tell stories about risk; (c) developing more holistic assessments; or (d) somehow doing a better job of using risk lists and models when anticipating these episodes. To me, the key is to focus on those situations that were "on the brink" and to really press how and why some escalated and others deescalated or stayed at equilibrium. I understand this is the focus of some of my work but nonetheless I think this is a key place to invest resources in terms of understanding the likelihood of genocide and mass atrocity occurring.

The Future of Violence Monitoring: Improving Data-Driven Early Warning and Atrocity Prevention Efforts

Roudabeh Kishi

Monitoring and identification are the first steps in the prevention of mass atrocities–and access to reliable, timely data is paramount. To be effective, policymakers and practitioners need real-time data collection initiatives that are wide in scope–capturing a broad array of disorder, including small-scale violence, targeted low-casualty violence, and non-violent strategic developments that can impact future trends in violence. Data collection must also account for the unique characteristics of each context, and ought to incorporate a network of the many cutting-edge technologies and projects that already exist. Only with such systems in place can appropriate security policies be tailored to effectively monitor trends for early warning signs of future mass atrocities, before they happen.

A widening set of atrocity risk indicators

Precursors to mass violence can include non-violent trends, like the steady mobilization of armed groups. In the United States, right-wing militias have increased their activities in response to social justice activism and the general election: engaging in more recruitment drives, training exercises, and acts of intimidation through armed participation in protests. American militia groups may be described as "latent" in that they threaten more violence than they commit, but the capacity for such heavily armed actors to commit mass atrocities–even in a democracy like the United States–is high. Globally, militias are responsible for more political violence than any other group, including governments, rebels, and insurgents.

Democratic backsliding and state repression, including severe media restrictions, also lay the groundwork for future mass violence. Examples have proliferated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as governments take advantage of the crisis to consolidate power, from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's push to rule by decree, to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's sweeping new emergency authorities. While the immediate impact of such steps may be minimal, their effects are long-lasting.

Small-scale violence and targeted killings can also build to mass atrocities. In India, violent mob attacks on health workers can have outsized repercussions in the midst of a devastating pandemic, and the impunity such mobs enjoy can increase the risk of violence that civilians face. Likewise, a narrow look at targeted "Drug War" violence in the Philippines can obscure deadly trends: taken individually, most attacks are low-casualty events limited to one or two fatalities, but, taken together, the violence has transformed the Philippines into one of the most dangerous countries for civilians in the world.

As these examples demonstrate, the scope of monitoring must be widened to include non-violent actions of armed groups, political repression, and small-scale attacks. If monitoring efforts are limited by minimum fatality thresholds or only triggered by the outbreak of open conflict, early warning signs will be missed–signs that are crucial to the prevention of mass atrocities.

New technologies and diverse information sources

Technological advancements have also contributed to the widening risk of atrocities. New surveillance technologies have facilitated atrocities like those seen in China's Xinjiang province, where Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims face mass detention and enforced sterilization. The far-reaching penetration of information communication technologies (ICTs) has also allowed for the rapid spread of misinformation, with lethal consequences–such as rumors of child kidnappers circulating over WhatsApp in India fueling mob violence. The rise of social media too, such as Facebook, has contributed to deadly violence–from fueling attacks targeting Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, to attacks on Black Lives Matter protesters following a 'call to arms' in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Yet some of the same technological advancements have simultaneously created new avenues for violence monitoring. They have made information aggregation easier, and have helped to build wider civil society networks and to better connect people to information–which can in turn improve atrocity monitoring and prevention.

Aggregation of information in English has become increasingly accessible given advancements in machine learning and natural language processing, enabling those tracking the risk of violence to access more information faster than ever before. However, effective atrocity monitoring cannot be restricted to English sourcing. The picture that English-language sources may paint can vary vastly from the reality on the ground, especially in areas where English is not the primary language. Overreliance on English sources to the exclusion of local sources can lead to a distorted view that risks undermining initiatives to track and prevent violence. As such, the field must complement gains made through new technology with curated sourcing of information by researchers.

Wider internet availability and ICT access has enabled remote training of local citizen journalists around the world, improving awareness of violent activity and early warning signs in spaces that might be inaccessible to traditional media. Niger Delta Watch 2019, for example, did just this in the lead-up to the February 2019 Nigerian elections, increasing visibility of violent trends in the Niger Delta region. Groups like Videre equip networks of local activists and community leaders with the technology and training to safely capture visual evidence of political violence and human rights violations. Local sources, including stringers or freelance journalists, often have access to crucial information that may not otherwise be reported. For example, Cabo Ligado–or 'connected cape'–is a conflict observatory monitoring political violence in Mozambique by drawing on information from local sources to help shed light on the intensifying insurgency in the Cabo Delgado region.

In spaces that are difficult to access by any media, training local citizen journalists to enter and relay information may not be feasible. Instead, building localized networks composed of those who already have access to these spaces, such as humanitarians or local NGOs, is critical. MENASTREAM, for example, fosters and maintains such networks across North Africa and the Sahel. Community-based early warning systems allow not only for security monitoring for local populations, but external information sharing for wider tracking and early warning projects. Crisis Tracker draws upon such a system, connecting numerous communities across eastern Central African Republic and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, to help monitor violence and armed group activity.

While social media can play a role in fueling violence (as outlined in cases at the start of this section), it can also play a role in reporting and preventing mass atrocities as well. These platforms can allow activists or anonymous reporters to disseminate vital information and flag early warning signs, particularly in spaces with closed media environments, like in parts of Central Asia. Twitter reporting can prove especially timely relative to traditional media during contentious periods like elections, which are often prone to an increased risk of violence, facilitating crisis tracking and rapid response efforts. Twitter can also feed into open-source intelligence gathering more widely, allowing researchers to readily “fact-check” information in real time. Activity on such platforms can yield valuable information about the activities of violent groups. MilitiaWatch, for example, monitors platforms used by American right-wing militias and movements to report on their activities.

Atrocities rarely occur at random. There are often clear, measurable trends that lead up to mass violence. Accurate monitoring of these trends is the first step toward an effective system of early warning and atrocity prevention, and advances in technology are critical to improving the accuracy and reliability of this monitoring. Many crucial indicators are easily overlooked, and some are missed by outdated monitoring frameworks that suffer from an overreliance on English-language information, insufficient technology, or a lack of local sourcing networks. Monitoring efforts that are better able to detect these warning signs will be best positioned to help prevent atrocities, now and in the future.

Sex and Gender Inequalities and Mass Atrocities

Dara Kay Cohen

One theme that was not explicitly addressed in the 2020 Sudikoff seminar is how global dynamics, such as democratic backsliding and the myriad impacts of COVID-19, will affect sex and gender inequalities over the next decade. This topic is important because a growing body of evidence links sex and gender inequalities with political violence, including atrocities against civilian populations.

This essay explores several questions: What is known about the connections between sex and gender inequalities with genocide, mass atrocities and other forms of large-scale violence against civilians? Through what mechanisms are sex and gender inequalities most likely to affect mass atrocities? How are sex and gender inequalities likely to change over the next decade? What effects are these changes likely to have, in turn, on mass atrocities?

Definitions

A person's sex refers to the biological or physiological features that make an individual a man or a woman. Gender is "the socially constructed expectation that persons perceived to be members of a biological sex category will have certain characteristics."[3] Sex inequality is measured by comparing men to women (e.g., the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women vs. those held by men) while gender inequality captures differences in a society's valuations of femininity and masculinity (e.g., regardless of sex, whether "feminine" traits are valued as highly as "masculine" traits).

Sex and gender inequalities as a cause of political violence

Scholars have long argued that sex and gender are deeply consequential for explaining and predicting political violence.[4] Starting about two decades ago, quantitative research on how sex and gender inequalities shape political violence demonstrated there is a statistical correlation between sex and gender inequalities and an increased probability of political violence, even controlling for many other factors known to be associated with the onset of conflict.[5] This basic relationship is robust to numerous ways of measuring sex and gender inequalities, and to a variety of forms of political violence, including interstate war, civil conflict and terrorism. Scholars have replicated this core result across a variety of conflict datasets and gender/sex inequality proxy measures,[6] and at both the cross-national[7] and sub-national[8] levels. As Valerie Hudson recently argued, this work suggests that "what you do to your women, you do to your nation."

Scholars debate the exact mechanism through which sex and gender inequalities may increase political violence. Arguments have often included essentialist views; for example, women are inherently more peaceful and are generally less supportive of violence and the use of force, so when women have political rights they serve as a constraint on states' use of violence.[9] More recent work has moved away from essentialism, emphasizing instead the gendered impacts of norms and structural constraints on equality. For example, Forsberg and Olsson suggest three alternative (non-essentialist) causal pathways: (1) *gender inequality norms*, in which household violence instills norms of men controlling women and violent means of conflict resolution; (2) *societal capacity*, in which women's exclusion from leadership roles weakens the pool of competent leaders and prevents a diversity of opinions and experiences from being incorporated into policy decisions; and (3) *gendered socioeconomic development*, in which "excess" men may make them more readily available for recruitment into armed groups.[10]

More generally, in unpublished work, Karim and Hill advocate for greater theoretical connections between the form of inequality and the type of political violence, including different causal pathways that link women's inclusion, women's rights, women's vulnerabilities, and attitudes about women's roles to specific forms of political violence.[11]

Are sex and gender inequalities likely to improve or backslide over the next decade?

Drawing on this recent literature, the most critical question is whether inequality norms, societal capacity and gendered socioeconomic development are likely to improve—or not—over the next decade. There are some signs of optimism on these metrics. Recent decades have seen positive developments, such as increases in primary education for girls, and reductions in maternal mortality. In the sphere of international politics, there is an increased appreciation (in some circles) for more traditionally feminine qualities—like compromise and empathy—in leadership roles. And the official foreign policies of several states, including Sweden, France, Canada, and Mexico, are now "feminist."

But these gains are tempered by concerns about the sexed and gendered effects of the lasting economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economic recession, and the trend of democratic backsliding around the world. While public opinion polling reveals optimism around the world for the future of sex and gender equalities, this must be weighed against the current reality of sex and gender hierarchies and the norms that undergird them: many still believe that men should have preference for jobs when they are scarce, for example.

These public opinion polls are indicative of a far larger trend of growing opposition to gender equality as a characteristic of democratic backsliding, sparked in part by increasing economic insecurity and the rise of populist political parties. Strongman politics are associated with hostility to policies that support women's rights; examples include Russia decriminalizing domestic violence, and Poland restricting the sale of emergency contraceptives.

In politics, women have made strides in political representation, but they are still in the minority; women now hold only 25 percent of parliamentary seats in legislatures around the world. With this increased political representation has come increased backlash to women's political power, and the targeting of women in politics for violence.[12] More generally, a new project by ACLED has traced violent attacks against women around the world, finding that not only are such attacks increasing over the last two years, but that the largest proportion of such attacks are perpetrated by unidentified armed groups, followed by political militias. ACLED describes the trajectory as a “rising threat,” suggesting that more such violence can be expected over the next ten years.

And finally, COVID-19 has been a major step backward for women in many places around the world. The direct impacts include the fact that women comprise 70 percent of healthcare workers globally, and as a result may suffer disproportionately from the disease. Poverty is expected to increase around the world, especially among those living in extreme poverty, and the COVID-related job loss rates for women are nearly double the rate for men; women’s additional caretaking responsibilities will have long-term consequences for women’s equality. The predictions regarding women are dire, including pronouncements that COVID-19 will “scar a generation of working mothers,” and will set women “ten years back”; in the developing world, experts expect a widening gender poverty gap.

Are these trends in sex and gender inequalities likely to affect mass atrocities?

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*,[13] Pinker cites “feminization,” defined as more respect for women and less valorization of violent masculinity, as one of the central reasons violence has declined over time. Are the dual (and connected) crises of COVID-19 and democratic backsliding likely to reverse respect for women’s rights and political support for sex and gender equality, and to increase the valorization of violent masculinity? Are strongman politics and hostility to women’s rights and progressive policies likely to persist over the next decade? It is hard to say, but all signs point to yes.

If sex and gender inequalities are likely to get measurably worse over the next decade, then we can expect both direct and indirect effects on political violence, including mass atrocities. The direct effects are likely to include an increase in violence against women and girls, both within families and by political actors. In either case, the research on sex and gender inequalities as a cause of political violence shows that these are factors that are linked to a greater likelihood for political violence, including unrest, terrorism and war. This is true both on the level of individual terrorists who hold misogynistic views and values, and at other levels of analysis, including sub-nationally and cross-nationally. And previous research suggests that wartime increases the risk of mass atrocities, such as genocide and episodes of targeted killing.

In sum, recent and ongoing global dynamics, including democratic backsliding and the myriad impacts of COVID-19, will likely exacerbate sex and gender inequalities over the next decade, increasing the likelihood of political violence, and, indirectly, the probability of atrocities.

Future research

Future research could examine the wealth of new data on sex and gender inequalities and on mass atrocities to evaluate more directly whether and under what conditions sex and gender inequalities are related to the onset of mass atrocities. In addition, this research could follow in the vein of cutting-edge work seeking to specify whether specific *forms* of sex and gender inequality (e.g., lack of political representation or violence against women in politics) are correlated with particular *types* of mass atrocity, such as genocide, targeted mass killing,[14] episodes of mass rape, and one-sided violence.

COVID-19’s Impact on Civil Society Efforts to Prevent Mass Atrocities

Dismas Nkunda

On June 10, 2020 the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum convened scholars and practitioners to discuss the effects of COVID-19 on the global risk of mass atrocities and efficacy of mass atrocity prevention. Among the subjects discussed were the consequences of COVID-19 on civil society during the pandemic and the framing of future civil society operations in fighting the commission of atrocities. This essay reflects further on this.

Since early 2020, the world has focused on the devastating effects of COVID-19 on health, and through lockdowns and other control measures, on the economy. This piece explores an underappreciated yet important consequence of the pandemic: negative impacts on civil society actors and the work they do to prevent atrocity crimes.

What is civil society’s role in atrocity prevention?

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are non-state actors and other grassroots formations, which are not-for-profit and which aim to advance a more humane world. CSOs are well-recognized actors in world affairs, and play an important role in holding governments accountable. They range in size, budget, reach and influence, ranging from grassroots community organizers to think tanks and international humanitarian organizations.

CSOs have played an active role in preventing and intervening to respond to mass atrocity. They have done this in a myriad of ways, from running mediation and community outreach, to monitoring human rights violations and carrying out early warning activities to research conflict dynamics, to advocating for governmental and intergovernmental responses. CSOs on the ground in the areas most at risk of atrocity are often the first to raise the alarm about impending atrocities and also the first to provide assistance to victims.

What changed in 2020?

Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 beginning in early 2020, the World Health Organization issued guidelines for the containment of the disease, including social distancing and limiting most forms of travel. Most governments imposed some form of lockdown. These lockdowns have affected families, reduced contact, and enforced separation. Many businesses and livelihoods were disrupted.

All countries have struggled to provide appropriate support to those affected, but in much of the developing world, there are minimal or no social programs to benefit those that have lost their livelihoods. The impact of COVID-19 is anticipated to drive as many as 150 million people into extreme poverty by 2021.

Neither impacts nor aid have been equally distributed. Salaried office workers have largely been able to work from home whereas informal workers find their work more disrupted and fewer resources to assist them. In some cases, these lines are drawn along identities. For example, indigenous women in Guatemala have been particularly negatively impacted by COVID-19 restrictions as they tend to live in remote areas and have been blocked from moving to sell what they produce. Research among street vendors in Lagos, Nigeria found that minority groups were more likely to have suffered negative effects of lockdowns than the majority group and were less likely to have received assistance. These differential impacts can increase tension between groups. Indeed, the research in Lagos showed that members of the majority group were more likely to take up anti-minority stances post-COVID-19, especially if they had suffered adverse consequences.

What impact do these developments have on the risk of mass atrocity?

In some cases, the impact of COVID-19 has increased the risk of mass atrocity. Economic instability has been recognized as a risk factor in mass atrocities–particularly where it is accompanied by acute poverty, mass unemployment, and deep inequality. The economic disruptions caused by COVID-19, accompanied as they are by massive losses of jobs and livelihoods, and borne unequally, increase the risk. This is not to say that such economic instability is a root cause, only that it increases risk.

In addition, a number of governments have used the crisis as a pretext for undemocratic action. A report released by Freedom House showed in about 80 countries COVID-19-related regulations have negatively impacted human rights and democracy. It also showed a marked increase in the silencing of critics of those governments, including CSOs.

It is hardly surprising that debates about the appropriate policy responses to COVID-19 have proven to be politically polarizing. For example, the conflict over whether the COVID-19 crisis made postponement of elections in Ethiopia necessary led to elections being held in the Tigray region and fed directly into the tensions that have since tumbled over into violence, including serious allegations of atrocity crimes. In Uganda, leading opposition politician Bobi Wine has been arrested for allegedly violating COVID-19-related restrictions by campaigning, sparking protests and violence that is estimated to have claimed the lives of at least 45 people. In Cameroon, the pandemic appears to have exacerbated dynamics of violence, by decreasing scrutiny of the human rights situation, thereby encouraging new violations and, because opposing parties have taken different views on appropriate responses to the virus, polarizing the political climate further.

It is tempting for governments to make exceptional measures permanent because they serve as "shortcuts," as United Nations Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ní Aoláin puts it, allowing governments to act without the normal procedural safeguards. If governments are allowed to use these shortcuts to impede the work of those seeking to prevent atrocity, then it is likely to be the most vulnerable groups who pay the price.

How does COVID impact CSOs working on mass atrocities?

In addition to its more direct effects on politics, conflict, and human rights, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work of civil society. Restrictions on travel and interactions undermined the ability of those who provided technical, social and other support to end the commission of mass atrocities to carry out their work. This was due in part to:

- Lack of access to crisis zones due to lockdown or travel restrictions related to COVID-19;
- Reduced resources for civil society work generally as a result of the economic damage caused by COVID-19;
- Redirecting assistance that has been allocated to civil society to address the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.

The role of CSOs as first responders has been heavily curtailed by restrictions on movement and contact that limit access to victims. It has limited CSOs' ability to conduct research to monitor and understand the risk and patterns of atrocity crimes and the conflict dynamics that might feed into them. It has limited the ability of CSOs to work to increase social dialogue (often conducted through public discussions and meetings) and to offer support to victims. Although in most countries some form of emergency authorization has allowed some CSO operations to continue, their scope has varied. In some cases, not even humanitarian access has been allowed; in other cases, material assistance has been allowed but research and dialogue activities have been restricted.

In some cases, governments have used COVID to explicitly restrict monitoring and oversight. For example, the government of Burundi refused to allow observers from the East African Community to observe elections, citing a 14-day quarantine on international travelers. Human Rights Watch documented at least six cases in Tanzania in which journalists or news publications were restricted due to "controversial" reporting (including diverging from the government line on COVID-19). In the recently concluded elections in Uganda, COVID-19 restrictions were used as a political tool to deny the opposition freedom to campaign in areas deemed hostile to the ruling party; enforcement included arrests and, in extreme cases, shooting those deemed not to adhere to the prohibition. Yet, the ruling party did not totally comply with the COVID-19 restrictions.

Although these restrictions do not directly cause atrocities, they can obstruct early warning and quick response where such crimes occur. It has long been a strategy of repressive governments to restrict access to prevent public knowledge of their crimes, but COVID-19 restrictions provide new justifications for doing so and may exacerbate the isolation of areas like Tigray in Ethiopia and the Anglophone regions in Cameroon.

Even where CSOs can still monitor and report, they may be restricted in accessing and advocating to policymakers. Travel restrictions may keep CSOs from meeting policymakers in-person, attending press conferences, and engaging in collective action. Even where the messages get through, COVID-19 response may be prioritized.

In addition, many organizations working on both human rights generally and atrocity prevention specifically have reported that the COVID-19 crisis has negatively impacted their funding. Many organizations have been forced to renegotiate existing grant contracts because COVID-19 restrictions prevent them from carrying out program activities as planned. Events have been postponed, but there is no certainty about the ability to pay staff over the period of the delay. New funding calls have focused on response to COVID-19, sometimes at the expense of other critical streams of work, such as atrocity prevention.

In this context, as the risks of atrocity are increasing, the capacity of civil society to respond is eroding. While COVID-19 constitutes a serious threat to populations around the world, neglecting the hard work of atrocity prevention is likely to create new threats ahead. Action must be taken to ensure that the vital work of atrocity prevention can continue in accordance with reasonable public health precautions. In order to ensure that this is done:

- Donors should commit to continued funding and support to atrocity prevention.
- With a greater portion of interactions moving online due to movement restrictions, increasing attention must be paid to managing online messaging, both monitoring extremist and bigoted messaging that can contribute to violence and engaging in fact-checking and counter-messaging that can be critical in curtailing the impact of such messaging.
- Civil society must adapt research and monitoring mechanisms to reasonable public health restrictions. Such adaptations could include utilizing open source data, forensic evidence and remote data collection.
- Rights restrictions based on public health justifications must be monitored to ensure that their impact is understood and that a rigorous cost-benefit analysis is carried out to ensure their appropriateness and proportionality. Civil society should support appropriate actions and encourage public compliance, while at the same time challenging overreach and ensuring that restrictions do not increase vulnerability to atrocity crimes.

COVID-19 represents a serious challenge, but it can also inspire adaptation and novel thinking that, in the long run, can be leveraged to increase resilience against atrocity crimes.

War Crimes, Extreme Atrocities, and Political Barriers to Prevention: Key Issues for an Unsettling Time

Jennifer Welsh

The Sudikoff seminar presented a highly useful and timely opportunity to review the global context that is shaping, and will continue to shape, efforts to both understand and respond to situations featuring atrocity crimes. All five themes for the Seminar Series were enlightening and generated creative discussion about the implications – both short and long-term – for the atrocity crime agenda.

Nevertheless, given my own specific areas of expertise, this memo will focus on three issues that require more research and debate as we move through this particularly unsettling period in global politics. The first is how we think about and analyse the place of *war crimes* within the broader atrocity prevention agenda. The second is how we understand and respond to the difference between atrocity crimes that are committed for a combination of ideological and instrumental motives, and those "*extreme atrocity crimes"* that are public and explicitly designed to shock particular audiences. The third is how we better understand the *political barriers* to successful atrocity prevention in a new geopolitical environment.

Understanding war crimes as atrocity crimes

It is well-known to scholars working on mass atrocities that armed conflict is an enabling factor, but not a necessary condition, for the commission of atrocity crimes. Hence the distinction commonly made between conflict prevention and atrocity prevention.[15] However, research and policy thinking on how certain instances of war crimes constitute atrocity crimes, and how we should analyze the origins and evolution of conflict so as to better prevent such acts, is much less well developed in the literature.[16] This is somewhat surprising, given that war crimes are one of the four acts included with the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), and some of the statements of the Joint Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect have specifically related to alleged instances of war crimes.[17] One particular question that remains underexplored is whether the dynamics that propel the commission of genocide or ethnic cleansing–which are often fuelled by identity-based conflicts–are similar or different in situations where populations are subject to large scale and systematic war crimes.

In addition to further clarifying the particular risk factors for war crimes, and the need for conflict analyses to build in more dynamic approaches to understanding how conflicts evolve in ways that make atrocity crimes more or less likely at given junctures, research needs to examine how the *particular trends* we discussed during the Sudikoff seminar–most notably geopolitical shifts and the declining strength of normative frameworks–are affecting the ways in which belligerents, as well as their external backers, are waging armed conflict.[18] For example:

- In a context where “proxy wars” are more prevalent, how do external parties either enable or constrain local belligerents with respect to the commission of acts that constitute war crimes? How can the atrocity prevention agenda seek to influence the behaviour of great power “backers”?
- How does the trend towards greater urbanization of armed conflict affect the influence of norms of restraint on the practices of belligerent parties? Both Syria and Yemen have witnessed sieges upon cities and the use of starvation as a tactic of war. Can and should the atrocity prevention agenda include efforts to better understand the drivers of these war-time strategies and potential third-party actions that could either deter perpetrators or better protect victims?
- How does growing geopolitical competition among major powers affect the general decline in respect for international humanitarian law (noted by former United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon during the first World Humanitarian Summit[19]) and the prevalence of acts that constitute war crimes?

Understanding and preventing “extreme atrocity”

Although much of the early research on the micro-foundations of civil conflict downplayed the role of ideology in motivating violence against civilians or civilian infrastructure, in favor of economic or other instrumental motives for violence, more recent work by political scientists has reasserted the significance of ideology. While one of our seminars discussed the role of ideology as a driver or enabler of mass atrocities, it is clear that further and more granular analysis of both the *types* of ideology that matter, and the *mechanisms* through which ideology matters, remains critical.

For violent extremists, such as those that have operated in Syria, Iraq, the Sahel, and Afghanistan, “atrocity-justifying ideologies”[20] can provide a powerful resource for those in leadership positions within armed groups or state security forces, as well as for those who carry out their orders. These exclusionary ideologies justify the targeting or even extermination of members of particular groups—along with key symbols of the culture of these populations. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that we can *only* account for the variation in belligerents’ proclivity to engage in mass killing and other atrocities – and particularly gratuitous acts of violence - by analyzing these pre-existing negative attitudes and beliefs towards a targeted group[21].

In short, more research is required on both the drivers of non-instrumental acts of mass violence, and how such violence in turn contributes to the further radicalization of perpetrators. But we also know that while some perpetrators of mass killing or displacement seek to deny responsibility, or even “cover up” their tracks (for example, the Myanmar military in their targeting of the Rohingya population), others plan and execute their designs “out in the open” (for example, the mass killing of the Yazidi population by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Of particular interest is a subcategory of mass atrocities which are not only deliberate but also *public*–or what some scholars call instances of “extra-lethal” violence or “extreme atrocity”.[22] These extreme forms of violence (which sometimes also involve the destruction of prominent cultural heritage sites) present a puzzle for many analysts of civil conflict, as they frequently entail costs for perpetrators–in terms of lost credibility or retaliation–or provoke moral outrage that fuels resistance.

In explaining why some belligerents nonetheless engage in these time-consuming and costly displays of violence, scholars have argued that certain wartime behaviours are “performative”: they are designed to produce particular effects for both local and international audiences, such as enhancing the power and prestige of perpetrators or proving loyalty to their group. In the specific case of Islamic State’s “global spectacle," Friis contends that its public displays of extreme violence–such as beheadings or crucifixions–are neither instances of random brutality nor exceptional evil, but rather a strategic practice aimed at unsettling audiences (through their transgression of prevailing norms) and forcing them to confront the reality of a new political order.[23]

A number of questions for future research and policymaking therefore follow:

- Under what conditions are incidences of mass killing also likely to involve cases of "extreme atrocity"? Is the latter a feature of particular kinds of armed actors (for example, those with weak discipline or particular recruitment practices), or does it correlate with particular kinds of armed struggle or "atrocity-justifying" ideologies?
- What are the primary goals of "extreme atrocity", and what tools–if any–can either dissuade perpetrators or better protect victims?
- What is the effect of "extreme atrocity" on the further radicalization of perpetrators?
- How do new information and communication technologies affect the incentives for and dynamics of "extreme atrocity"?

Understanding the political barriers to effective atrocity prevention

Despite progress over the past two decades, we continue to confront cases in which situations of high risk are well-known to policymakers, yet effective preventive action remains elusive. Perhaps the best example is the case of Myanmar. The perilous situation of the Rohingya, and the potential risk of atrocity crimes, was on the agenda of a variety of inter-governmental bodies from 2014 onward, yet mass killing and displacement unfolded on a large scale. Although there are particular explanatory factors within Myanmar that are a crucial aspect of this story, part of the explanation for the failure of prevention also lies at the feet of intergovernmental organizations, whose actions and strategies ultimately reflect the priorities and preferences of their member states. While there is a limit to the degree to which outside actors can affect the trajectory of mass violence–and this will also be context dependent–there are a number of "pressure points" available to particular third-party actors, whether that means withholding material support that might enable perpetrators inside a country or more intangible forms of political pressure.

Turning to the United Nations Security Council in particular, researchers have found that one of the barriers to timely and effective response to the risk or commission of atrocity crimes is a government's obstruction of United Nations-authorized actions and/or active perpetration of atrocity crimes through the actions of its military forces or proxies. This was a recurring theme in both Sudan and South Sudan, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[24] It is plausible that a counterfactual analysis would reveal that in all three of these situations, one or more P5 members could have invested political capital to pressure national authorities to modify their behavior, and that a unified, strong and consistent message from the Council as a whole, backed up by clear consequences for infringements of promises, could have made a tangible difference. Instead, permanent members, as well as other pivotal member states, have often been reluctant to acknowledge or challenge the behavior of a government which is deemed to have embarked on a "positive" path of political and economic development. In the case of South Sudan, key Western states on the Council were heavily invested in the success of a newly recognized member state of the United Nations, while in Myanmar they were committed to backing the promise of democratization under Aung San Suu Kyi. As veteran United Nations diplomat Charles Petrie has astutely observed, the tendency of governments in the West to “hold onto the fairy tale,” even when on-the-ground realities indicate that the trajectory toward peaceful and inclusive societies is uncertain, has led to missed opportunities to exercise political influence in ways that might have forestalled the descent into systematic and widespread violence.[25]

As we move into a period in which the power of human rights norms are being questioned, and in which a reassertion of national sovereignty is a common refrain among states of many political “stripes” (democratic and non-democratic), the nature of the political barriers to effective atrocity prevention is in need of further analysis. Important questions include:

- How will geopolitical rivalry, and the relative decline of the West vis-à-vis countries such as China and India, affect the potential for diplomatic efforts at prevention? Are there opportunities for new kinds of diplomatic coalitions? For example, will advanced democratic states–under a new administration in the United States–be willing to invest energy and political capital in addressing risks of atrocity crimes in countries that are democratizing or have recently democratized? (The example of Ethiopia comes to mind here.) Alternatively, are there opportunities to forge explicit cross-regional coalitions dedicated to more effective efforts at addressing signs of risk, that can be insulated from the competition among states such as China, Russia and the United States?
- How is China’s particular agenda within the United Nations system – which emphasizes economic development, social stability, and ‘national ownership’[26]–affecting the organization’s willingness and ability to engage preventively in situations featuring atrocity crime risk? How embedded is the atrocity prevention agenda within key parts of the United Nations Secretariat?
- How are institutional mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review process of the United Nations Human Rights Council, being affected by more traditional assertions of sovereignty?

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Notes

[1] Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016).

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[6] For example, Dahlum and Wig (2020) use women’s political empowerment measures from the V-Dem data and historical intrastate conflict data from UCDP/PRIO and Correlates of War; Caprioli (2000) and Regan and Paskeviciute (2003) both use the Militarized Interstate Dispute dataset and a set of standard gender proxies (e.g., percentage of women in parliament, female labor force participation, fertility). Sirianne Dahlum and Tore Wig, “Peace Above the Glass Ceiling: The Historical Relationship Between Female Political Empowerment and Civil Conflict,” International Studies Quarterly (2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa066; Caprioli; Regan and Paskeviciute.

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[16] Jennifer M. Welsh, “The responsibility to prevent: Assessing the gap between rhetoric and reality,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2016): 216-232.

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[24] See the discussion in Jared Genser, “The United Nations Security Council’s Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect: A Review of Past Interventions and Recommendations for Improvement,” *Chicago Journal of International Law*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter 2018): 420-501.

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The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this report are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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