Violence
an international journal

Editorial

Ukraine and the politics of political violence

Violence: An International Journal
2022, Vol. 3(1) 3–10

DOI: 10.1177/26330024221105767
journals.sagepub.com/home/vio
SAGE

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The need for contemporary reflections on violence

The war in Ukraine is incredibly disturbing to witness. As editors of a journal dedicated to the study of violence, we feel a special responsibility to reflect on an inter-state war in which military forces deliberately target civilians and which, at the time of this writing, has forced more than 10 million civilians to flee their home. The war is, furthermore, a brazen violation of the rules of the post-war world; a war that carries a non-negligible risk of deployment of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons; and a war that has seen widespread military mobilization. The war has focused global attention on the major issues at the heart of the study of violence: why do wars occur; why does violence escalate and how might it deescalate and end; what are the patterns of civilian victimization; how and why do civilians respond to conditions of threat and uncertainty; what are policy responses to the onset of war and are they effective; how might international law and norms mitigate violence; and how should non-direct participants respond to the humanitarian stakes? These are certainly not the only questions to ask, but they are ones in focus, and they are questions that many scholars of violence have asked in different ways. This is a time for scholars of violence to engage world events, both to analyze them and, where appropriate, to shape public debate through our expertise.

We recognize that Ukraine is not the only contemporary war in which millions of civilians suffer. The devastating violence in Syria during the last 11 years, the mass violence against the Rohingya and post-coup repression in Myanmar, the ongoing civil war and related targeted violence against civilians in Ethiopia, and ongoing crises in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, and Cameroon, among other places, all deserve much greater attention and concern than they receive. It is not lost on us, as editors, that the victims of the Ukraine war are white and European, whereas the victims in these other wars are not. At the same time, that our capacity for empathy and attention should be wider does not diminish the suffering and the issues at stake in Ukraine.

In twin editorials, Michel Wieviorka and I address different dimensions of the war. Michel, as a scholar of post-Communist Russia, on the one hand, and political violence and terrorism, on the other hand, situates the war in a global historical context, insightfully outlining the stakes of the war. In the remainder of this essay, as a scholar who has studied genocide, I analyze a more internal question: what are the implications for scholars of

violence when their vocabulary becomes weaponized in a nasty, horrific war? There are many other questions to address; these are the ones that moved us now and where we felt we could make useful contributions to international discussions on the implications of the war in Ukraine for the study of violence. We anticipate that these will be the first of multiple articles on Ukraine and other contemporary wars in the journal.

Weaponizing the vocabulary of violence

The war in Ukraine reminds us that the vocabulary of violence is not simply a scholarly affair. In Ukraine, the language of violence has become a wartime weapon. Elites in Ukraine and Russia both wield accusations of atrocity, in particular genocide, against each other. Vladimir Putin has justified Russia's "special military operation" as an effort to prevent "genocide" against Russian speakers in the Donestsk and Luhansk oblasts (regions). He routinely has referred to the government in Kyiv as "Nazis" and a prominent Russian goal in the operation as "de-Nazification."

For his part, from the very start of the war, Volodymyr Zelensky and other top Ukrainian officials charged Russia with committing "genocide" during its invasion and military assault against civilians. In the first few weeks of the war, the Ukrainian government pleaded a case before the International Court of Justice, both disputing the Russian claims of genocide and arguing that Russia intended to commit "acts of genocide" against the Ukrainian population. As the war entered its second month, and as evidence of deliberate violence against civilians mounted, Ukrainian claims that Russia committed genocide grew even louder and more consistent.

Many commentators have denounced Putin's accusations as a gross misuse of the term "genocide" and a blatant manipulation of World War II memories to justify a war of aggression. His claims, many argued, cheapen "genocide" and inflict an injustice on the actual victims and survivors of Nazi-era violence. The abuse is even more egregious in Ukraine, a site of major massacres during the Holocaust, notably at Babyn Yar. Noteworthy too is the missing history: Putin makes no mention of the Holodomor and Stalin-induced mass starvation that claimed more than three million lives in Ukraine in the 1930s.

Zelensky's claims have received greater support. In a provisional ruling in March 2022, one that did not rule directly on the genocide questions, the International Court of Justice nonetheless ordered Russia to suspend its military operations in Ukraine and ensure that any military or militia actors under its control cease any further military actions in Ukraine. The arguments have resonated in global intellectual circles. For example, journalist Philip Gourevitch (2022), who brought the genocide in Rwanda to worldwide attention in the 1990s, published an article in *The New Yorker* in the early days of the war, asking "Is it time to call Putin's war in Ukraine genocide?" and suggesting the answer is yes. As the violence in places like Bucha was documented—with at least several hundred civilians deliberately massacred—some scholars echoed the claims of genocide.[1]

Putin's claims are, of course, outrageous. Ukrainians have not committed genocide against Russian speakers, even if Russian speakers may experience discrimination and remain fearful of persecution. There is no evidence of systematic group-selective violence

against Russian speakers or of an organized effort to destroy that population. Putin is not only manipulating traumatic memory, but he is also redeploying the West's rhetoric against itself. If NATO leaders justified an air campaign against Serbia as genocide prevention in the late 1990s, then Putin probably figures that he will employ the same tactic. If the West cannot see how its rhetoric and actions sowed chaos in Libya, then maybe they will now, reasons Putin, and perhaps they will understand why Russia intervened to support Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Putin may be invoking genocide to stimulate the fears and sympathy of Russians. Either way, the rhetoric is a bald-faced manipulation.

Zelensky's claims have more merit. For starters, Ukraine is the target and victim, Russia the aggressor. More significantly, Russia shows every sign of having targeted civilians deliberately to impose heavy costs on Ukraine, presumably to compel its leaders to negotiate or capitulate. As of this writing, Russia has bombed consistently health centers, civilian neighborhoods, theaters, and many other locations where civilians congregated or were living. After Russia troops retreated from Bucha, there was overwhelming evidence of civilian executions on a systematic basis. The total casualties from all these acts of violence are unknown, but their numbers already are significant. And the war is ongoing. There will be more violence and more that will be revealed.

That Russia committed war crimes, the crime of aggression, and crimes against humanity is a reasonable conclusion, based on the available evidence. In the end, genocide may be an appropriate term to describe the violence. But Zelensky's initial claims of genocide were nonetheless exaggerated, intended to paint Russia's invasion in the worst possible light and to garner attention and sympathy in world opinion. Both sides weaponized the language of atrocity to demean their wartime enemies and generate support.

These language wars are not unusual. War is fought in many registers. Ukrainian leaders have made a point of trying to win the information war, and the most strategic modern warmakers all know that information management matters massively. The vocabulary of violence is a key part of those wars because embedded in that vocabulary are norms and legitimacy. Violence is about harm and violation, genocide especially so, and hence accusing one's enemies of atrocity in conflict is a mechanism of simultaneous denunciation (of the other) and sympathy (of one's own). The concept of violence and its derivatives, like genocide, always carry in them this opportunity for political manipulation. They are normative terms, and in the case of genocide (and crimes against humanity and war crimes), they have international law behind them. The language of violence has and will continue to be integral to the waging of war.

Two paths

What should scholars of violence do when their technical language is weaponized? I see two typical approaches. The first is to insist on accuracy, on the specialized language and precision that comes with scientific study. Where relevant, scholars also reference international law and the codified language in treaties to adjudicate what things are and what they are not. The move is essentially to recapture the language of violence and apply it

correctly. The second is to seek out a different, also specialized language. The claim is that the current vocabulary is so embedded in politics and law that an alternative vocabulary is needed. While sensible, both moves have limitations.

The problem with the first move is that core concepts in the field remain contested and sometimes ambiguous. Finding consensus is not easy. The terms do not have a single, precise meaning. What is violence? What is the scope of scholarship on violence? What is genocide? Ask two (or more) scholars these questions and the answers are likely to be quite different, especially as one moves between academic disciplines. Disagreement is not necessarily a problem. Debate is healthy for scholarship, but the implications are that there is no simple reversion to a "true" or "correct" meaning. Our core concepts are contested.

For many empirically-oriented social scientists, violence is, as Stathis Kalyvas (2020) noted in these pages, the deliberate infliction of bodily harm. That is a tractable and measurable definition, one that has the possibility to encapsulate many different forms of violence, including homicide, rape, torture, street fighting, riots, terrorism, and genocide. What about war? In Kalyvas' conceptualization, war falls within the gambit of violence, but for others war is defined by violence between armed combatants while violence is harm against non-combatants.

What about related acts and policies; are they also "violence"? What about starvation? The imposition of hunger is a form of deliberate bodily harm, but starvation may arise indirectly from policy failure and the unwillingness to correct course. What about threat? Violence is often demonstrative, an effort to communicate the costs of non-compliance. The threat of violence is the message that violent actors wish to impart. But threat is not physical bodily harm; it is implicit coercion. What about structural violence, such as poverty, systematic discrimination, and racism? What about the use of fossil fuels that contribute to climate change that will lead to mass extinction and displacement? What about offensive words that deliberately hurt another person? What about state power and domination? At the end of the day, states rely on violence in order to compel action. Violence is a form of power, and power is, even if not always, a form of violence.[2] Different scholars will reasonably frame each of these concepts as a kind of violence.

I share Kalyvas' concern that once the lens is opened too widely then social scientific study of a specific phenomenon becomes difficult, if not impossible. I also am persuaded that the deliberate infliction of bodily harm (in particular against civilians) is a tractable, measurable conceptual standard for defining violence, a standard that I use in my own work. But I am also ready to accept that other scholars will have a different view. I see the argument that violence is also a useful concept to describe the various actions described in the previous paragraph, such as starvation, domination, discrimination, poverty, environmental wreckage, and coercion. There are many forms of deliberate and even non-deliberate inflictions of harm, whether bodily or not. My political science version of violence need not be someone else's version of violence—a position we have taken in the journal—and I accept that choices to codify what is and what is not violence inherently reflect bias and, usually, ideology.

Genocide is even more notoriously a subject of disagreement. To ground their choice of definition, scholars often return to Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term, or to the

United Nations Genocide Convention, which codified the term in international law. But neither move is satisfying. Lemkin was inconsistent. He had various ways to conceptualize the term, some narrow and some broader. He also was an advocate who pushed hard to gain political support for an international law against genocide. He modified his positions in order to gain that support. I do not begrudge Lemkin those decisions, but the implication is that different scholars can cite different Lemkins, so to speak, to justify their conceptualization of genocide. Is genocide physical destruction? Or is genocide defined by the destruction of a group's culture (not as alongside forms of physical destruction but only as cultural destruction)? What is the threshold for conceptualizing group destruction? What counts as a group; which groups are the victims of genocide? A close reading of Lemkin's collected works can lead scholars to reach different conclusions to these questions.

The Genocide Convention is a conceptual dead end for other reasons. The Convention defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a racial, ethnical, religious, or national group, as such," and the treaty lists five such types of acts. Absent from the definition are political groups, economic groups, gender groups, sexuality groups, education groups, age groups, or other kinds of groups. Perpetrators define groups, and who is in them and who is out, and they pursue policies of destruction on that basis. That has been a refrain of many scholars of genocide who found the Convention definition wanting. The Convention also imagines genocides that do not include death. Genocide may be indicated by physical and mental harm, the forcible transfer of children, and the prevention of births, provisions that underlie the decision of many to label the mass detention and forcible implant of contraception among Uighurs in China "genocide." Moreover, how much "in part" group destruction amounts to the intent to destroy a group "as such."

I am not of the burn it down variety. I am very glad the Genocide Convention exists. It establishes the legal foundation for criminal prosecutions against those who orchestrate genocide as well as a legal foundation for collective action to prevent and mitigate genocide. I accept that through time courts may refine and clarify some ambiguities in the Convention. But, still, the Convention's definition is limited and ambiguous. To claim that the Convention provides the last word on what constitutes genocide is an illusion. The Convention establishes a legal standard on which key United Nations member states could agree in the late 1940s, and the definition that entered international law at that time has many shortcomings. It is, in short, chimerical to turn to the Convention to settle what is and what is not genocide, at least outside the law.

The other approach is to reject these terms and seek new ones or to embed these terms within a broader, more inclusive conceptual umbrella. Two critiques mark this approach. The first is to claim that terms such as violence, but especially genocide, are too embedded in politics and law to be useful to scholarship. They are, at the end of the day, political and legal concepts, not scientific ones. The concern then is that the concepts *cannot* be disarticulated from their political normative and legal meanings. Scholars should therefore move beyond these concepts in search of less fraught and already defined terms.

In addition, from this perspective, violence and genocide are inherently normative terms. They imply "bad," in the case of violence (violation), and evil in the case of

genocide, which is strongly associated with a particular case (the Holocaust). None of these elements favor a value-neutral definition of a phenomenon in the world that would facilitate scientific study. Scholars should therefore seek more technical, more scientific concepts. The recent weaponization of the vocabulary of violence brings this concern home; scholars need a different linguistic field.

The second critique is that the concepts establish normative hierarchies. The concern here is that violence is normatively worse, in the minds of many, than parallel phenomena. Thus, by calling one thing violence and another thing something else, one implicitly suggests that the former is worse than the latter. The concern is particularly acute for genocide. Genocide is often called the "crime of crimes," suggesting it is the worst that humans can do to other humans. Not to call something genocide is to imply that the non-genocide phenomenon is less bad than the genocide phenomenon. This hierarchy in turn leads to invisibility of non-genocidal phenomena. If not genocide, then the violence does not receive the attention it deserves, in particular in the absence of parallel Conventions—for example, on Crimes against Humanity, on Ethnic Cleansing, or on Mass Extinction.

In light of these concerns, one solution is to develop a replacement vocabulary. This is the central argument in Dirk Moses'(2021) broadside against the concept of genocide; he argues for analyzing phenomena of transgression as part of a search for "permanent security." Another solution is to find a broader standard that can encompass a variety of phenomena, including genocide. David Scheffer (2006) has proposed the concept of "atrocity crimes," of which one type is genocide. His arguments have been persuasive in international policy circles where the idea of genocide prevention is often framed as "genocide and mass atrocity" prevention. In the social sciences, Ben Valentino (2004) has argued for the concept of "mass killing," and I have suggested "mass categorical violence" (Straus, 2015).

These are reasonable solutions, but they are open to two further critiques. One is that these terms, or at least some of them, are not airtight concepts that lend themselves to technical discussions and precise measurement. What, after all, is an "atrocity crime," "permanent security," or "mass categorical violence"? Authors have answers to these questions, but there still remains conceptual ambiguity. In other words, by solving one conceptual problem, new ones are created. More significantly, there are empirical phenomena in the world to which the original problematic apply. Genocide—as organized attempts at group destruction—occurs. Violence—as the intentional infliction of bodily harm—is also real. It seems silly to abandon these concepts because they are inherently normative and frequently subject to politicization and legalization.

Conceptual transparency

What to do? The dilemma will not disappear. Resonant, evocative concepts, like violence and genocide, will continue to be politicized. These are implicitly normative concepts that political actors will use to call attention to the viciousness of their opponents and the victimization of their own. Genocide will always to some be how the Convention defines it. A future when the language of violence is depoliticized and delegalized is a fiction.

At the same time, discarding these concepts because they are ripe for politicization or because they have inherent ambiguities strikes me as problematic. Violence and genocide are valid terms to describe phenomena in the world. As scholars who study these phenomena, we have to be ready to live with these dimensions of ambiguity and politicization of core concepts to the field.

My modest plea is for conceptual transparency. As scholars when we write about violence, genocide, or related phenomena, we should be as clear as possible as to what we mean. We may disagree with one another. There are not likely to be universal definitions, and that is fine. Debate is healthy and democratic; conceptual transparency allows us to position ourselves and for others to take different positions. Debate can show how certain concepts occlude and marginalize phenomena about which we should care. But disagreement should not translate into conceptual abandonment.

Conceptual transparency also foregrounds the ability to call out blatant politicization of terms. One can challenge Putin's claims of "genocide" not by reverting to a true, singular definition of genocide, which does not exist, but rather through reference to a specific, articulated conceptual standard. As scholars, we should engage public debates, with care, using our expertise when asked to characterize and analyze events. We can say that we understand violence and genocide to be X and Y, and that understanding allows us to call out the manipulation of these terms. Attention to conceptualization will, in short, make our field stronger and provide the grounding for counterarguments when politicization occurs.

In sum, the weaponization of the conceptual tools in our scholarship should not lead us to walk away from the concepts or to insist on a singular meaning, but rather should lead us to take time to define what we mean when we use the terms.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Jane Mango Angar, Judith Butler, Anna Closas i Casasampera, Thomas Coppey, Kasia Nalewajko, and Michel Wieviorka for comments on earlier drafts.

Notes

1. Notably: Eugene Finkel, "What's happening in Ukraine is genocide. Period." https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/05/russia-is-committing-genocide-in-ukraine/
2. The sentence is indebted to the excellent analysis of Arendt in Judith Butler, "Can Arendt's *On Violence* speak to us now?" on file with author.

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