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Beyond the Altruistic Personality: Rescue as Genocide Resistance

Genocide studies is shaped by one main question: how can genocides happen? What factors are responsible for the development of mass killings? What causes people to participate in these killings? A question that has been asked less often is: what makes people refuse to participate in a genocide and try to rescue people instead? Few scholars have paid systematic attention to the topic of rescue during genocide, Nechama Tec and Samuel and Pearl Oliner being notable exceptions.[1] However, the theoretical framework that attempts to explain rescue is dominated by one main approach: the psychological perspective of the altruistic personality.

The current volume, *Resisting Genocide: The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, follows a different track. In this volume, edited by Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger, the goal is to approach the analysis of rescue actions from a multitude of perspectives other than the perspective of the altruistic personality.

Whereas most scholarly work on rescue during genocide looks at the Holocaust, this book also includes chapters on the Rwandan and Armenian genocides. It is divided into three parts. Although it is beyond the scope of this review to give a chapter-by-chapter summary of the book, the different parts will be summarized, and some chapters will be referred to in order to illustrate the different lines of argument that are explored in the different parts.

The first part of the book critiques and deconstructs the categories that are used to think about rescue and

tries to delimit the contours of the idea/concept of rescue through different methodologies. One category being deconstructed, for example, is that of the “Righteous among the Nations.” Fatma Müge Göçek explores the religious connotations of this category and its development and argues that because of its Judeo-Christian origins and context, the term cannot easily be used as a commendation for rescuers during genocides other than the Holocaust. Exploring the stories of Muslim rescuers during the Armenian genocide, she proposes to use the term “Just” instead of “Righteous” as it is more congruent with an interpretation of the act of rescue that can also take into account the religious context of Islam.

While Fatma Müge Göçek and Sarah Gensburger discuss the category of the Righteous among the Nations in their respective essays, Marnix Croes tackles a methodological issue in his contribution to this volume. Taking his cue from Helen Fein’s statistical approach to genocide in her book, *Accounting for Genocide*, Croes looks at the survival rates of Dutch Jews to argue that multivariate statistical analysis be used to test hypothetical explanations of differing survival rates in different contexts.[2]

Another notable contribution to the first part of this volume is Nechama Tec’s chapter, entitled “Who Dared to Rescue Jews, and Why?” Although Tec is mainly known for her work on the altruistic personality in relation to rescue, in this chapter she explores cases that do not adhere to this explanation. To this end, she looks at the Polish case and highlights instances of Jews rescuing other Jews—thus dispelling the absolute dichotomy

between victim and rescuer—as well as cases of people who helped Jews for payment, a situation that also contradicts the altruistic personality explanation of rescue.

The second part of the book looks at the process of rescue as “modes of circumventing national public policies aimed towards exterminating a population” (p. 13). Two features stand out in this part, namely the importance of chronology, and of the international context: the role of territoriality and state borders for rescue efforts. The importance of the chronology of genocides is highlighted by, among others, Hasmik Tevosyan, as well as Scott Straus.

In Tevosyan’s chapter, different avenues for rescue during the Armenian genocide are explored. It becomes clear that the possibilities for rescue were context-dependent and dependent on the time frame: before, during or after the death marches. For example, before the deportations, rescue usually fell into one of two categories (that partially overlap): paid rescue and rescue by friends or family (p. 170). During the death marches, when most men had already been killed, the saving of lives of young girls and women by forced marriage cannot really be characterized as rescue, whereas after the death marches, Armenian orphans who were taken in by Turkish families on the condition of conversion to Islam were rescued in this fashion (p. 176).

Scott Straus, in his chapter “From ‘Rescue’ to Violence. Overcoming Local Opposition to Genocide in Rwanda,” argues that “if we employ a broad conception of ‘rescue,’ then rescuing activities in Rwanda during the early stages of the genocide were much more widespread than is often acknowledged” (p. 331). Strauss further defines his broad idea of rescue as “not so much selfless attempts to save lives of those who were targeted for genocide than a risky behavior that was in opposition to genocidal violence and thereby saved lives” (p. 332).

In Ruth Fivaz-Silberman’s chapter on the case of Switzerland, the importance of state policies is highlighted. Here, the impact on rescue of two factors of Swiss government policy—neutrality and adaptation (to the international political environment)—are examined. Additionally, other characteristics of Switzerland at the time, such as xenophobia, are also considered. The Swiss case is an example of the influence of state borders and border policies on the possibilities of rescue. Fivaz-Silberman explains how Switzerland had closed its borders to most groups of Jewish refugees. An exception was made for certain groups: “the authorities only decreed as admissible the elderly, pregnant women, the sick, chil-

dren on their own, families with a child under sixteen years old, and those having close family in Switzerland” (p. 240). While this closure of the border had, on the one hand, the effect of deterring flight to Switzerland, on the other hand, rescue groups made use of these criteria by, for example, falsifying dates of birth. Thus, border policy made rescue both more difficult—because not everyone was admissible—and aided rescue groups by offering opportunities to “cheat the system” (pp. 240-241).

In the third part, as the introduction to this part states, several microhistories “demonstrate the weight and the specific combination of factors that explain how in one place but not in another certain acts of aid and rescue came to be undertaken” (p. 363). This goes beyond looking at the personality of the actors, as the whole volume demonstrates, and necessitates taking into account “the history of the region, its ethnic or religious mix, the attitude of local elites, force of circumstance, without neglecting geography” (p. 364). The chapters in this part all examine at least some of these factors, although religious background seems to be prominent.

For example, in Patrick Cabanel’s essay, the French protestants’ (perceived) common ground with the Jews, based on common reference to scripture, is used to explain the willingness of the French protestants to aid Jews. Religion also plays an important role in Yves Ternon’s analysis of the rescue of the Armenians of Mardin. His analysis of the social fabric of this district in the province of Diyarbekir pays attention to the religious specifics of this area, such as the fact that “the majority of the Muslims were Kurds, and the Christians were not all Armenians” (p. 384). Religion is not the only factor examined, however. Mark Roseman’s chapter on the “Bund,” a German socialist organization, examines the characteristics that helped it in resisting National Socialism and in deciding to rescue Jews.

Jacques Semelin states that one of the goals of the book is to renew interest in rescue studies, as a complement or companion to genocide studies. We know more about what causes people to participate in genocides but we hardly know why people engage in rescue and how the context or other factors influence that engagement. The collection gives a thorough and in-depth discussion of these other factors.

Content-wise, although all the parts are interesting, their contributions to the collection overall vary. The essays in the first part—the deconstruction and discussion of concepts and methods—are a nice collection that might constitute an afterthought in other works, but which

takes center stage here. Putting these essays together sets the terms for the debates in the other parts of the volume. The second part, examining the influence of the state on rescue attempts, offers a new look at the topic of rescue. As an alternative to the dominance of the altruistic personality theory, this systematic examination of the importance of chronology and geography makes a significant contribution to the literature on rescue. Finally, the microhistories contribute by examining cases for other factors that need to be taken into account when analyzing rescue. In this way, they form the context and application of the insights from the other chapters.

In the microhistories in the third part, the focus seems to be on religion. While this in itself could lead to the conclusion that religious background formed the most important factor in why people rescued, the preface to this part is very aware of this potential pitfall and addresses this issue. The editors ask “[I]s there not the risk of essentializing the religious factor, whereas it would be much more appropriate to contextualize it? ... Another hypothesis thus warrants attention: it is perhaps not so much the fact of being Protestant or Muslim in itself that matters, but more the fact of having a past or present minority experience in a given country” (p. 364). This is illustrative of the critical, and self-reflective, attitude that the collection takes.

Although many causes for involvement in rescue networks are examined, there is one factor that remains largely unexamined: gender. For example, it would have added an interesting angle to Hans-Lukas Kieser’s chapter, “Beatrice Rohner’s Work in the Death Camps of Armenians in 1916.” Some differentiation by gender is done in Hasmik Tevosyan’s essay on rescue practices during the Armenian genocide, when he mentions that when the deportations commenced, most men had already been killed (p. 177). Consequently, most deportees were female. As rescue predominantly took place during the deportations, women were most often the ones rescued. However, this difference in gendered patterns of survival is not elaborated upon.

Considering that the title of this collection, *Resisting Genocide: the Multiple Forms of Rescue*, explicitly defines rescue as a form of genocide resistance, this inattention to gender ignores a very important dimension of the question at hand: insofar as rescue involved caring for the rescued, and insofar as caring is seen as a generally feminine activity, how has this influenced the (by now adjusted) idea in postwar politics of memory that rescue

practices cannot count as “real” resistance? Of course, this may have been beyond the scope of the conferences and symposia of which the book is a result, but the virtual lack of any gendered analysis is a bit disappointing.

Although the collection addresses a wide range of cases, including Armenia, Rwanda, Poland, Hungary, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, the majority of the essays focus on the case of France. This is the almost necessary consequence of an originally French collection, but in the end it is not in any way distracting. The translation from French is also solid. However, both chapters that deal with rescue in the Netherlands are riddled with mistakes in book titles and names. For example, the main Dutch transit camp is incorrectly spelled “Wasterbork,” which should be “Westerbork” (p. 453). (The word does appear correctly spelled in the index.) These mistakes could easily have been avoided, and while it most likely would not bother anyone without proficiency in the Dutch language, it is a pity that they have been overlooked. However, it is not indicative of the editing of the collection as a whole, as it is very carefully edited indeed.

In summary, this book offers a new way for rescue studies to consider rescue, by looking at the interactions of the state and civil society as an alternative to the altruistic personality theory. This is an avenue of research that could carry rescue studies forward. Additionally, it contributes a new angle to genocide studies by posing the question, why do people refuse to participate and choose to resist and rescue instead? What influences these choices? The book therefore will be useful both for an introductory class on genocide resistance and for established scholars. Because it is not exclusive in its focus on the Holocaust, but looks at the Armenian and Rwandan genocides as well, it thus shows how its insights, questions and arguments can be applied to different contexts. In all, this is a very valuable collection of essays that has the potential to (re)shape rescue studies.

Notes

[1]. Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

[2]. Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide. National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

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