Perpetrator studies sits as a niche area within the small but growing interdisciplinary subfield of genocide studies. The output of perpetrator studies is compelling in its engagement with the most challenging, often provocative research in social science: understanding the actors who seek to destroy others. Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee’s edited compilation of reflections from this field push these discussions beyond the how and why of mass violence to questions around the ethics, practicalities, and epistemologies of actually doing this work. While an interested reader can find associations and journals in the areas of genocide and perpetrator studies, less seldom addressed are these stickier issues of how this research is done, let alone from ethical, analytical, and practical perspectives.

*Researching Perpetrators of Genocide* introduces scholarly readers across disciplinary fields to the challenges and rewards of research concerning perpetrators of atrocity crimes. This book captures the current “moment” of perpetrator studies, where the complexity of the perpetrator is no longer strictly a taboo subject. For too long the multifaceted nature of perpetration has been neatly folded into the unthinking evil of genocide. The purpose of this edited collection is to start a conversation in an area of study that has developed as a result of increased interest and available data through a growing body of transitional justice case law and critical approaches to genocide. It is aimed at the core audience of similarly engaged researchers of mass violence. The interdisciplinary appeal of this collection is one of its strongest points, carrying a huge potential for continued conversations within a subfield (genocide studies) predominantly occupied by historians.

The collection is bookended by the editors’ introduction to the collection and a concluding chapter offering an array of guidance for researchers. All chapters involve detailing the process or analysis of perpetrator interviews. The editors’ own contributing chapters focus on the theoretical aspects of how perpetrators are imagined (Kjell Anderson) and perpetrators in the post-genocide context of Rwanda (Erin Jessee). Timothy Williams’s chapter is a transparent assessment of fieldwork in Cambodia, detailing the success and failures of recruitment methods in respondent-driven sampling. Ivana Maček examines the complexities of perpetration in the former Yugoslavia through in-depth analysis of the narratives and subjectivities of labeling in the case of two actors in this conflict. Eva Van Roekel shares research on soldiers from the Argentinian military dictatorship, offering insight into researcher positionality when dealing with actors who remain silent and unrepentant of their alleged actions. Üğur Ümit
Üngör’s chapter reveals a slice of his recent work on paramilitaries aligned with the Syrian army, focused on the Aleppo area through online interviews. Andrea Pető revisits past work on perpetrators in Hungary around and after the Holocaust, focusing on familial dynamics and memory. Marie-Sophie Devresse and Damien Scalia discuss a respondent approach in the context of perpetrators at international criminal tribunals, imbuing their participants with agency and precarity in the judicial process. The concluding chapter, by Jessee and Anderson, is a summary of critical questions on the topics of research design, fieldwork, and analysis and dissemination. This last chapter is most helpful for graduate students looking to engage in perpetration-aligned research. Speaking for myself, this set of reflective tools would have been immensely helpful several years ago when undertaking related PhD research in Congo.

This edited work builds on the pioneering literature within wider Holocaust and genocide studies on the complexities of mass violence perpetration, tracing back to foundational texts like that of Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* (1992). Many subsequent studies on internationally recognized genocides, such as Max Bergholz’s work on Bosnia and Alex Hinton’s on Cambodia, have developed this research. Indeed, as the editors’ acknowledgement states, researchers like Lee Ann Fuji were instrumental and demonstrative of this new area of critical, subjective perpetrator-focused atrocity work. Furthermore, several of the authors are now usual suspects in the growing niche of perpetrator studies, producing various edited books and regularly participating in conference and research networks. Anderson and Jessee’s edited collection further cements the transition from Browning’s work on perpetrators as a set of often determinative violent actors, to perpetration as an agency-structure sensitive analysis. Actors, or respondents in the case of Devresse and Scalia, see themselves subjectively, highlighting the intellectual limits of the evil-killer framing popular in past perpetration literature.

Notwithstanding the valuable contributions of this book, more attention to the practicalities of this kind of politically risky, dangerous, and ethically fraught research is needed. In many ways, this book must be the start of a conversation, and particularly, training for graduates going out into the field to engage in the study of perpetration. For researchers investigating this field in the context of Africa, there is much to be indirectly gleaned from the methods and field experiences shared. Yet, simultaneously, given that Africa is represented solely by the already thoroughly examined case of Rwandan genocidaires, there is less engagement directly here for those interested in additional African cases, of which there are many, both in current conflicts and past ones.

Further questions also remain unaddressed, such as the positionality of pre-judicial, or pre-transitional justice, identification of and research on perpetrators. This is challenging enough in a heavily transitional justice environment like Cambodia, as noted in Williams’s chapter, but what about in, say, Congo, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, or Sudan? What then of doing in research in situations of ongoing mass violence, where victim and hero narratives often blend with that of perpetration? Nonetheless, the raising of these questions by this reader is evident that Anderson and Jessee have started an important conversation in terms of practice and ethics that must be continued.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa


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