

# Genocide: Theories of Participation and Opportunities for Intervention

Aliza Luft 

*This essay evaluates the current United Nations approach to preventing and punishing genocide by considering micro-level research on behavioral variation in genocide and proposing two ideas for intervention. The first idea extends the theory that economic inequality explains people's decisions to kill or not kill in genocide and suggests specific economic remedies to intervene in ongoing violence. The second idea extends the theory that local authorities shape civilians' decision making about violence and suggests specific ways to bolster moderate meso-level authorities to mitigate violence. The essay concludes by considering how social science research and theory can practically impact international law concerning genocide.*

## INTRODUCTION

On the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, April 7, 2004, the United Nations established the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG). Its mandate, a corrective to the United Nations' failure to intervene in Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia, is to focus on "prevention and punishment" via the activities of two Special Advisers: one on the Prevention of Genocide and another on the Responsibility to Protect—also commonly known as R2P.<sup>1</sup> The former serves to raise awareness, advocate for action, and mobilize a reaction to genocide; the latter to develop and refine R2P in dialogue with UN Member States. Both positions are important; both goals deserve praise. However, missing from the OSAPG mandate is any focus on genocide *intervention* beyond a call for "diplomatic, humanitarian, and other peaceful means" to stop genocide, including "collective action" if necessary.<sup>2</sup> This is imprecise when precise tools are needed.

The OSAPG's emphasis on prevention and punishment without a specific strategy for intervention is glaring; the United Nations' past inaction is what spurred then-Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan to create the OSAPG in the

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**Aliza Luft** is Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, United States. Email: [aluft@soc.ucla.edu](mailto:aluft@soc.ucla.edu)

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1. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/office-mandate.shtml>.

2. UN General Assembly, Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005, 60/1. 2005 World Summit Outcome, A/RES/60/1, available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/487/60/pdf/N0548760.pdf?OpenElement>. Additionally, within R2P itself, there are three "obligations" and the second calls for "the responsibility to react." However, within this "responsibility to react," proposals are likewise vague. UN General Assembly, The Responsibility to Protect: Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 7 October 2009, A/RES/63/308, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ad6d1fd2.html>.

first place.<sup>3</sup> Hence, this essay, inspired by John Hagan's pathbreaking research linking sociological theory to international law concerning genocide,<sup>4</sup> considers how to theorize behavioral variation in genocide as one strategy to develop mechanisms of intervention that will helpfully extend the OSAPG's mandate. I draw from my own and others' work in Rwanda to make my case and connect this work to findings from research on other genocides where possible.

## MAKING SENSE OF BEHAVIORAL VARIATION

Research on genocide tends to pregroup actors as perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and rescuers and to study each as a cohesive unit identifiable by their social category (Fujii 2009, 2021; Luft 2015, 2020a; Williams 2018, 2020; Jessee 2019; Nyseth Brehm, O'Brien, and Wahutu 2021). In Rwanda, for example, the term "Hutu" is often conflated with the term "perpetrators," even though, as research increasingly shows, many Hutu resisted participation in genocidal violence, helped rescue Tutsi, or were victimized themselves (Des Forges 1999; Fujii 2009; McDoom 2013; Luft 2015; Fox and Brehm 2018; Thomson 2018; Jessee 2019; Luft and Thomson 2021). Some even engaged in all four behaviors at different moments in time (Fujii 2009; Luft 2015; Thomson 2018; Jessee 2019). In the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the Cambodian genocide, and in mass violence against Bosnian Muslims following the breakup of Yugoslavia, research has also found evidence of participants who shifted stances from killing to not killing and vice versa, from killing to rescuing, and from killing to being victimized as well (Hovannisian 1992; Hukanovic 1996; Browning 1998; Gushee 2003; Campbell 2010; Press 2012; Williams 2018, 2020). What explains this behavioral variation in genocide and what are its implications for developing practical opportunities for intervention?

## FOUR EXPLANATIONS; TWO INTERVENTIONS

My research on behavioral variation in the Rwandan genocide identifies four mechanisms—transactional, relational, social psychological (here, vertical-observational), and cognitive—that explain when an individual with no preexisting history of violence is more or less likely to kill (Luft 2015). The transactional and vertical-observational mechanisms speak directly to the question of genocide intervention, while the relational and cognitive mechanisms raise complex questions for future work that seeks to link theories of participation in genocide to legal and political tactics.

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3. United Nations, Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, 15 December 1999, S/1999/1257, available at <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/POC%20S19991257.pdf>.

4. Examples of this research are as broad-ranging as they are plentiful; indeed, over the last two decades alone, Professor Hagan has published on genocide and other atrocity crimes in relation to international law and human rights in the Balkans, Darfur, Iraq, and elsewhere (for example, Hagan 2003; Hagan and Ivković 2006; Hagan, Levi, and Ferrales 2006; Schoenfeld, Levi, and Hagan 2007; Hagan and Wenona-Richmond 2008a, 2008b; Hagan, Brooks, and Haugh 2010; Ivković and Hagan 2011b, 2016; Hagan, Kaiser, and Hanson 2015). For related overviews, see Heitmeyer and Hagan (2003); Hagan, Schoenfeld, and Palloni (2006); Levi and Hagan (2008); Levi, Hagan, and Dezalay (2016).

## Transactions: Economic Capital and Agency

Per capita income is one of the best-known predictors of violent conflict (Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000, 2002; Stewart, Holdstock, and Jarquin 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon 2004; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Justino 2009; Justino et al. 2013). However, existing research offers few accounts of the micro-channels through which high poverty levels affect the likelihood that an individual will *join in* or *desist from* participation in genocide. One assumption is that low per capita income correlates with group-based grievances and low economic opportunity costs to fighting—that is, poorer people have less to lose and more to gain through perpetrating violence. Yet interviews with Hutu who both killed and saved Tutsi in the Rwandan genocide or who observed peers trying to resist participation at some points while killing at others indicate another possibility: sometimes poverty means not having the resources to desist.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the following story recounted by Alison Des Forges (1999) in her masterful Human Rights Watch report on the Rwandan genocide, *Leave None to Tell the Story*: two militiamen came upon a Tutsi girl who had been pushed into a hole by a sergeant who had intended to kill her later. One wanted to kill her; the other knew the girl—Marthe—and told him not to. He gave the other man 5,000 Rwandan francs (about US \$25) and pushed him away. This same soldier killed many other people during the genocide—he was a longtime leader of the extremist MRND political party and an important figure in the Hutu “civilian self-defense program.” But when it came time to save someone he knew, the soldier used monetary resources to bribe his partner, saving a girl marked for death *and* ensuring that he would not be killed in turn (404).

Similarly, a Tutsi woman interviewed by Jean Hatzfeld (2005) for the book *Machete Season* spoke of local “violent entrepreneurs” and how only those with resources could resist them: “The farmers were not rich enough, like the well-to-do city people, to buy themselves relief from the killing. Some doctors and teachers in Kigali paid their servants or their employees so as not to dirty themselves” (74). Validating this woman’s statement, ordinary Rwandans with less economic capital who participated in the genocide explained in a separate series of interviews, “[a]nyone who sneaked off behind his house [to avoid participating] was denounced by a neighbor and punished with a fine” and “[w]hoever got caught shirking was punished with a fine. Ordinarily it cost two thousand francs, but it depended on the seriousness” (72–73). Hence, as in times of peace, those with capital have options and opportunities that others lack. In a genocide, this means rich people can sometimes “buy off” participation in violence while poor people are more likely to kill.

This finding suggests that it is not always poverty per se that causes participation in genocide, but that inequality *between* social groups as well as inequality *within* them shapes who does and does not participate in violence.<sup>6</sup> Thus, one strategy for

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5. Significantly, the overwhelming majority of violent offenders in the Rwandan genocide, single and repeat, were male farmers, with a mean age of 31.5 (Nyseth Nzitatira, Edgerton, and Frizzell 2022). Unfortunately, we know little about the “murderers in the middle”—a minority of participants in the violence but important nonetheless because they zealously followed state orders and mobilized others to kill (Loyle and Davenport 2020).

6. Relatedly, Straus (2012, 350) contends that a strong middle class can function as a preventative force in his article predicting factors that may accelerate or slow the outbreak of genocide.

intervention is to even the playing field: to lower the capital of violent entrepreneurs while increasing that of potential recruits. In this two-pronged approach, one tactic would use targeted financial measures such as economic sanctions and asset freezing, divestment from firms that fund genocidal governments, or the removal or neutralization of third-party economic actors.<sup>7</sup> Second, relief efforts might focus not only on food, medicine, and housing for the displaced, but also on creating economic opportunities that can reduce the potential for exploitation among those whom violent entrepreneurs would recruit as foot soldiers in their wars.<sup>8</sup>

For example, in Democratic Republic of Congo—where more than six million civilians have been killed since 1996 and mass rape has been described as an “epidemic” and “a fact of life”—violent militias control vast amounts of the country’s mineral resources, especially Coltan, and mining companies in the East and West directly and indirectly fund violence by establishing lucrative contracts with local warlords who regularly “employ” child soldiers in their operations. The “Conflict-Free Coltan” US law of 2010 has helped to slow down mining production in DRC and weaken violent militias, but without a policy to structurally integrate the poor otherwise, or to create a regulated resource industry where workers are paid living wages, many impoverished Congolese, especially youth, continue to flee to where the militias still operate with funding from abroad. Still others engage in Coltan smuggling, including over the border to Rwanda, with the support of warlords and winking border police, creating a clandestine market for the metal that reproduces lawlessness and violence in turn.<sup>9</sup> Better tracing practices for corporations that benefit from Coltan is needed, coupled with firmer regulation, redistribution, and integration of civilians into the formal economy to disrupt the link between metals, money, and murder in DRC.<sup>10</sup>

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7. Indeed, the “lessons learned” project recently conducted by the USHMM’s Center for the Prevention of Genocide to provide suggestions for US responses to genocide proposes targeted sanctions, trade and investment incentives, development assistance, and the support of civilian self-protection efforts through advice, funding, and provision of material goods (available at <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/lessons-learned>, though see Taylor and Brehm (2021) for an important critique of the effectiveness of economic sanctions specifically). Additionally, and coupled with these top-down tactics, civilian-led boycotts and social media campaigns can be used to pressure companies over their support for genocidal regimes. As existing research shows (for example, Andrews 2001; King and Soule 2007; King 2011), both economic and reputational concerns can motivate corporations to change their policies. For concrete examples of such an approach, see the recommendations suggested for intervention in genocide in Myanmar in Aliza Luft, “What We, as Citizens, Can Do to Fight Genocide,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2018.

8. Following Jha (2013), who examines the history of Hindu-Muslim riots in South Asia, a related approach would see the construction of commercial institutions that provide economic and other incentives for cooperation.

9. “Why It’s Hard for Congo’s Coltan Miners to Abide by the Law.” *The Economist*, January 21, 2021.

10. It is worth noting that the first part of this two-pronged approach is presently being pursued by the US Biden administration concerning the Uyghur genocide in China. In December 2021, President Biden signed into law a bill banning imports from Xinjiang into the United States unless the affiliated company can prove the goods were not made using forced labor.

## Vertical Observations: The Influence of Local Authorities

Another way to plausibly intervene in ongoing violence is to recruit and support moderate local authorities that oppose the intentions of genocidal governments. The cases of Butare and Giti, in South and North Rwanda respectively, are illustrative. Butare remained peaceful for two weeks after President Habyarimana was assassinated.<sup>11</sup> It was initially seen as a safe haven for Tutsi due to its high levels of integration before the genocide (about 25 percent of the population was Tutsi) and its status as a way station en route to Burundi. However, once extremists took over the commune, violence engulfed Butare.

The swift change came not because people suddenly believed in extremists' ideas and burst into bloody warfare. Rather, moderate local authorities were publicly killed for resisting the violence and this sent a powerful signal to civilians who were behaving similarly. The prefect of Butare was branded an enemy of the state in a ceremony organized by the genocidal government, dismissed from his position, then murdered. Civilian Hutus in Butare became aware of the cost of resistance through such concrete examples, and it increased their likelihood of joining in the violence when asked (Des Forges 1999, 167; Luft 2015, 160–62).

By contrast, in Giti, most Tutsi survived the genocide and there were no Hutu-led organized massacres.<sup>12</sup> The *Interahamwe* never entered the area to instigate the violence Giti's leaders argued against, nor were there public executions or violent targeting of resisters. Giti's burgomaster explained that violence could have occurred as it had in Butare had "neighboring invaders" entered the commune, but because they stayed away and RPF opposition forces conquered Giti so quickly, he was able to prevent organized killings of Tutsi. A former deputy governor recalled, "leaders did not give a go-ahead," and the burgomaster traveled throughout the region to deter attacks (Bangwanubusa 2009, 138). Where moderates remained in power and resisters witnessed no negative consequences for such behaviors, genocide did not take place.

This finding speaks to the ability of moderate local authorities to powerfully influence trajectories of violence. Particularly in high-risk contexts, the decision to support or resist calls for violence emanating from a genocidal government can be incredibly impactful: when local leaders take a stance, their public signals have the potential to shift collective alignments (Ermakoff 2008, 205–09). This is not just the case in Rwanda: during the genocide in East Timor perpetrated by the Indonesian New Order Government, local bishops, priests, and nuns risked their lives to defend East Timorese citizens, while the Catholic Church served as a "moral center of resistance to Indonesian rule" (Robinson 2009, 86). In developing a religious practice rooted in social justice and service, the Church also united East Timorese of different

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11. The Rwandan genocide began on August 6, 1994, when President Habyarimana's plane was attacked by two surface-to-air missiles, killing everyone on board. That same night, Hutu extremists seized control of the capital, Kigali, and began to massacre political opponents and civil society leaders suspected of being open to negotiations with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). They also instigated a genocidal campaign targeting all Tutsi for elimination, regardless of political affiliation or status.

12. Significantly, once the RPF captured Giti, mass violence *did* happen, but it was organized by the RPF and targeted thousands of Hutu civilians there and in neighboring Kibeho (Nduwayo 2002).

social, regional, and political backgrounds, thus strengthening their defense against Jakarta's violent rule (87).<sup>13</sup>

Subsequently, one very important but underexplored way to peacefully but powerfully intervene in mass violence is to recruit local leaders to help signal that killing is unacceptable. In any genocide, we find a state organizing mass violence and civilians struggling to figure out what to do. Identifying moderate local authorities, working with them to call for a halt to violence, and protecting them from the wrath of genocidal extremists is one way in which the OSAPG can help put an end to ongoing violence. Moderate religious authorities may be especially powerful by virtue of their moral authority (Grzymala-Busse 2015, 2016) and unique ability to transcend a state and its leaders by judging a regime's activities as righteous or wrong by a higher deity's standards (Luft 2020b, 74).<sup>14</sup>

As but one example, though still in a postconflict context, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) has been working with a coalition of two hundred Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim faith leaders to help mitigate local conflicts through the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation.<sup>15</sup> In Colombia, USIP helped establish the Ecumenical Women Peacebuilders Network, which likewise connected women religious leaders across the country to advocate locally for the 2016 peace accords and to promote reconciliation among civilians and former combatants.<sup>16</sup> In Nigeria more recently, religious leaders have been found to influence perceptions of norms and attitudes toward the reintegration for former Boko Haram combatants, a crucial aspect of resolving the conflict: their high levels of social trust, ability to legitimately use and interpret religious themes about peace and forgiveness, and unique ability to influence those with strong religious beliefs have all contributed to their positive impact (Blair et al. 2021). Finally, the OSAPG has been exploring similar mechanisms of working with local religious authorities to prevent violence through its forum, in April 2015, on "the role of religious leaders in preventing incitement that could lead to atrocity crimes," its drafting of the Fez Declaration following this forum,<sup>17</sup> and its launching of the plan two years later.<sup>18</sup> The Fez Plan of Action emphasizes the role of religious authorities in preventing genocide, but research on behavioral variation in genocide suggests that similar tools can be used for peaceful intervention and mitigation of ongoing violence as well.

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13. Though not about genocide, in his analysis of the Kulen Vakuf massacre, in which local Croats and Muslims killed Orthodox Christian Serbs, and in his comparison with the lack of violence in demographically similar Bosanska Dubica, both in Bosnia Herzegovina during World War II, Bergholz (2016) also demonstrates how moderate local authorities can prevent violence.

14. Though, of course, it would be remiss not to mention that religious authorities can play and have played the opposite role: legitimizing and even encouraging violence, as was most often the case in Rwanda (Longman 2010).

15. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/religious-engagement-peacebuilding>.

16. *Ibid.*

17. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf>.

18. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2017-07-14/secretary-generals-fez-plan-remarks>.

## LESSONS AND MOVING FORWARD

Scholars and policymakers frequently observe that civilians' responses to violent mobilization vary: some become murderers, others become victims, and many become both. Still, most research on genocide assumes that individuals are organized into perpetrator and victim groups prior to the onset of violence. This error—an artifact of how we group subjects for research purposes—mires our understandings of how people make decisions to participate in violence. In remedying this error, we can better explain processes of decision-making and pinpoint places and moments when these decisions can be reversed. Specifically, this essay argues that reducing inequality both between and within social groups, and harnessing the voices of moderate local authorities while protecting them from genocidal governments, can offer two alternatives to the “extreme” solution of military intervention that is currently the norm.

In turn, the ideas proposed here, and the findings of the analysis, are consequential not only for theory but also for politics and policy. Knowing what prompts a person to kill or not kill as a genocide unfolds has powerful implications for intervention. This is because moments when individuals decide to kill or not kill, or to rescue a victimized neighbor, can reveal influences on decision-making that are missed when only perpetrating behaviors are examined. In breaking apart categories from actions, new questions about genocide become possible, new theories can emerge, and new prescriptions for intervening in ongoing violence can follow.

## CONCLUSION

The study of behavioral variation in genocide can help the United Nations develop a comprehensive plan that links genocide prevention and punishment to intervention. Especially for the OSAPG, social scientific exploration of behavioral variation during genocide might prove not only illuminating, but also lifesaving. Where people make choices, other choices are possible.

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