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INTRODUCTION

Massacre in the old and new worlds, c.1780–1820

PHILIP G. DWYER and LYNDALL RYAN

The scholarship surrounding massacre as a phenomenon in history often falls into the shadow of genocide, or the word ‘genocide’ is often used to denote mass killings that would better be described as massacre.¹ Recent attempts to explain massacre by genocide scholars see them using the term ‘genocidal massacre’ to denote ‘partial genocide’.² The scholars in this special issue want to make a point and have chosen to do so in a journal dedicated to genocide studies: a growing body of literature on the dynamics as well as the mechanics of massacre makes it clear that a distinction has to be drawn between genocidal killing on the one hand, where the intent is to exterminate ‘in whole or in part’ an entire people and their culture, and massacres on the other, a phenomenon involving the selective killing of unarmed people over limited periods of time during periods of bitter conflict.³ As the editors of this special issue have asserted elsewhere, genocide and massacre are two distinct phenomena, even if genocide cannot occur without the perpetration of mass killings and massacres, but massacres can occur without genocidal intent.⁴ The overall impact, however, can lead to the extermination of a people. In one of the few attempts to look at massacre from an indigenous perspective, Barbara Mann calls this phenomenon in North America ‘fractal massacre’, part of a larger pattern of killing that, taken as a whole, can lead to genocide.⁵

A study of massacre necessitates a definition, a conceptualization in order to categorize and characterize the phenomenon. Unlike genocide, there is no commonly accepted, working definition of massacre, and certainly no legal definition that can be used, say, in the International Criminal Court. The French sociologist, Jacques Semelin, who has provided the most interesting conceptual framework to date, calls massacre a ‘mass crime’, the deliberate and brutal destruction of a large number of non-combatants, often accompanied by atrocities that at first appear quite pointless.⁶ The definition is nonetheless vague, and does not take into account either civilians killing other civilians or combatants, or indigenous

peoples killing settlers and combatants. In their seminal work on the subject, Levene and Roberts proposed a broad definition that encompassed the killing of people, and animals, lacking in self-defence.⁷ In Australia, on the other hand, historians generally agree that six or more deaths must be involved to constitute a massacre.⁸ The word 'massacre' is nonetheless still often used in a literary sense to describe the killing of one man by a group of people,⁹ just as it is used to describe the indiscriminate slaughter of thousands.

Regardless of the definition, the question that lay at the centre of this special issue on massacre in the new and old worlds is the changing nature of massacre in a global context. It is a question of determining whether this is a watershed moment in modern history, and whether the extreme violence that characterized war, colonialism, and state-centred repression was significantly different from the period that preceded it, or whether it simply falls within a long history of state-centred repression.¹⁰ The subjects treated in the articles that follow, across five continents, all take place within the larger context of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that brought about geo-strategic rivalries on a scale not seen since the Seven Years' War. Those rivalries were mercantilist as well as ideological. Is the extreme violence characteristic of this period linked to the globalization of the world's markets, the race to colonize new spaces, and the bellicose nature of great power politics on the European scene, or are there peculiar local factors that account for the practice of extreme violence in different parts of the world? No massacre resembles another and has to be studied as a unique event in a particular set of circumstances, and yet the intensification of the phenomenon across the world appears to be linked. The articles that follow juxtapose acts of extreme violence committed by the state (as in Europe and Ireland), with acts of violence committed by individuals working outside of the control of the state (as in Australia and South Africa), but often with the state's implicit approval.

It is a little incongruous that massacres were repeated on such a large scale over many parts of the world in an era better known for the Enlightenment. If, as David Bell has argued, the horror of 'total war' is a modern invention born of the French Enlightenment, and if the massacres carried out in the *Vendée* at the height of the Terror during the French Revolution were 'the matrix against which *future* colonial wars were set', then it is worth pointing to the similarities and differences in massacres taking place in distinct parts of the world during the same period.¹¹ For too long, military historians of this period have been preoccupied by the changes taking place in warfare so that their focus has been on major campaigns, battles and theorists such as Carl von Clausewitz and Gerhard Scharnhorst.¹² As a result, there has been an almost complete lack of reflection on non-conventional warfare, and in particular warfare waged against resisting or recalcitrant civilian populations. The articles presented privilege the practice of extreme violence, study the mechanisms of resistance and repression, underscore the patterns of fear and revenge unleashed by violence,¹³ and explore the varieties of mass killings across the world at a particular moment of history, overlapping the end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, a period on the cusp of the modern era, and do so in a number of ways.

First is the debate about colonial deaths from massacre. Massacres are not only about men in uniform killing non-combatants, as is the case for the more traditional war fought in Europe during this period. The following articles, revealing as they are about colonization and massacre practices during the era under consideration, foreshadow the need for more research on this important issue. Second, we are only starting to understand the process of violence and colonization in different parts of the world at this time, and just how interconnected the colonial world really was. We know that some of the English involved in the conquest of Ireland in the early 1600s subsequently moved to new conquests in Virginia, and a new litany of killing. This exchange of personnel was a feature common to most European colonial enterprises across time so that, for example, some of the senior British officers who served in Ireland in 1798, and who were therefore either witness to or took part in massacres, later served in Spain, India and Australia,¹⁴ while some of the most important figures in the South American wars of independence fought in Europe during the Napoleonic wars (see Karen Racine in this issue), and French officers from those wars who fought in Egypt, Saint-Domingue and Spain were later found committing excesses when the French conquered Algeria in the 1830s.¹⁵ These men transferred experiences and attitudes from one setting onto another. This was not the case, however, for the most notorious killers, men like Donatien de Rochambeau (a key figure in the article by Philippe Girard) in the Caribbean or José Tomás Boves in Venezuela, whose personalities were peculiarly attuned to cruelty and who seemed to delight in inventing macabre ways of killing rebels.

Personalities cannot explain the extent of the phenomenon. For that, other explanations have to be sought. The interconnectedness between the European military elites and the colonial empires of which they were a part requires further research, but, and this is the third point worth making, it is obvious that at the heart of the colonizing enterprise, whether English, French, Spanish or American, the use of force to either subjugate or eliminate recalcitrant peoples was the norm. Ben Kiernan has argued that genocide was a common feature of the push of agricultural societies on the colonial frontier, and that the 'unproductiveness' of indigenous communities was often a justification used for taking lands.¹⁶ One can see this pattern in the massacres that took place in North America, South Africa and Australia where indigenous inhabitants were killed and forced off farming or grazing lands. As Lyndall Ryan points out in her article, the search for grazing (rather than agricultural) lands explains the clash between settlers and Aborigines in Australia.

However, colonization, massacre and the question of arable lands do not always go hand in hand. In Europe during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, in South America, Ireland and the Caribbean, it was a question of control over territories and their populations. In these instances, politics and ideology came into play. In contrast to massacres carried out in earlier periods, religion is notably lacking as either motive or justification. This was even the case in Ireland during the 1798 Rebellion. What we find instead is that the nature of massacre has changed and will continue to evolve throughout the nineteenth century. Despite the extent and number of massacres covered in this volume, generally

speaking, the colonial enterprise continues to be presented as a benefit to humanity, at least in conservative political and historical circles. However, the legacy of the Enlightenment and the Revolution leave us with a particularly difficult question, how on the one hand to reconcile enlightenment and reform, emerging from the European centre, and on the other the mass killing of indigenous populations over long periods of time? One cannot, except to say that massacres, mass killing and violence were the means used to forge new states, new political ideologies, and new empires.

Massacres in Europe and the colonial world at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries were not new, nor were they on the rise, but what we clearly see is a new kind of war involving mass armies and mass conscription, built upon systems of rhetoric that stigmatized the enemy to the point of having to entirely eliminate the Other, and a desire by the state to control and channel that violence. True, this was a difficult enough goal for the state on the colonial frontier—in Australia, North America and South Africa—but when it comes to revolutionary upheaval—in Europe, Ireland and South America—the state was often responsible for the atrocities committed, where massacres were often meant to serve as examples. Massacres were, therefore, subordinated to military but especially to political necessity. In that process, there appears to have been an ideological subtext. There is an evident desire not to annihilate whole peoples in the name of an idea—a possible distinction with settler societies—despite some of the excessive rhetoric displayed by some revolutionaries, but to oblige people to comply with new norms through violence.¹⁷

More comparative studies need to be undertaken, but from the evidence presented in the articles by Dwyer, Malcolm and Racine, a systematic policy appears to have been adopted toward all rebel villages and towns. The French political and military elite, for example, ordered rebel villages to be burnt to the ground (and often all those who lived in them killed), but one can find the same situation in Ireland and Venezuela. Massacres and atrocities, in other words, were carried out for political-ideological reasons. The military commanders and the political elite who either ordered or were complicit in the massacres that took place often justified their actions by arguing for a higher good: they were bringing enlightenment and civilization to a superstitious and barbarous people.

Massacre was an acceptable form of military behaviour in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but its meaning and motivation changed over time. It also begs the question about the extent to which extreme violence and massacre were racialized during this period. It is one that is difficult to determine, but elements of race were present, from the French regarding all European Others to be culturally inferior, to the fear of blacks in Venezuela and Haiti, and the disdain for the indigenous inhabitants of Ireland and North America. Race may not have been the motive for the massacres that took place, but it probably made the act of killing all that easier.

There are many more questions that cannot be raised here for lack of space, but we hope that this special issue will inspire others to reflect on the interconnectedness of extreme violence and massacre in Europe and the colonial worlds.

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Notes and References

- 1 See the discussion in Paul Boghossian, 'The concept of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2010, pp. 69–80.
- 2 The term was first used by Leo Kuper, *Genocide: its political use in the twentieth century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), and reprised by Ben Kiernan, *Blood and soil: a world history of genocide and extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 3 For a similar approach, see the special issue entitled 'Les massacres aux temps des Révolutions', in *La Révolution française: Cahiers de l'Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution française*, 3 (2011).
- 4 Philip Dwyer and Lyndall Ryan, 'The massacre and history', in Philip Dwyer and Lyndall Ryan (eds.), *Theatres of violence: massacre, mass killing and atrocity throughout history* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. xiii.
- 5 Most indigenous perspectives are either North or South American. See, for example, Karl Jacoby, "'The broad platform of extermination': nature and violence in the nineteenth-century American Borderlands", *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, pp. 249–267.
- 6 Jacques Semelin, *Purify and destroy: the political uses of massacre and genocide*, trans. Cynthia Schoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Semelin, 'Du crime de masse', in Thomas Ferenczi (ed.), *Faut-il s'accommoder de la violence?* (Paris: Complexe, 2000), pp. 375–391.
- 7 Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (eds), *The massacre in history* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), pp. 1, 4, 5.
- 8 See Keith Windschuttle, 'The myth of frontier massacres in Australian history, Part II: the fabrication of the Aboriginal death toll', *Quadrant*, November 2000, p. 18; and Ben Kiernan, 'Australia's Aboriginal genocide', *Yale Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (2000), p. 52.
- 9 See, for example, Alain Corbin, *The village of cannibals: rage and murder in France, 1870*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 10 As would argue Howard G. Brown, 'Domestic state violence: repression from the croquants to the commune', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1999, pp. 597–622.
- 11 David A. Bell, *The first total war: Napoleon's Europe and the birth of modern warfare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 168. The association between the 'genocide' in the *Vendée* and later twentieth-century totalitarian genocides reached its climax during the Bicentenary of the Revolution with the publication of Reynald Secher's *Le génocide franco-français: la Vendée-Vengé* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988). For a discussion of this debate see, Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la Révolution. Accepter la mémoire pour écrire l'histoire* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), pp. 61–85.
- 12 Roger Chickering, 'A tale of two tales: grand narratives of war in the age of revolution', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds.), *War in an age of revolution, 1775–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–17.
- 13 Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: violence and terror in the French and Russian revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 14 On the Australian connection see Christine Wright, *Wellington's men in Australia: Peninsular War veterans and the making of empire c.1820–40* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 15 See, for example, Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser, Exterminer: Sur la guerre et l'Etat colonial* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).
- 16 Kiernan, *Blood and soil*.
- 17 A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, colony, genocide: conquest, occupation, and subaltern resistance in world history* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).