OUR PROJECT

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"Writing history... aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present,
and at offering them scriptural tombs."

Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History,* New York and Chichester,
Columbia University Press, 1988.

We hereby present the prototype of the first electronic encyclopedia of mass violence. We initiated this project in 2004, based in Sciences Po Paris (Center for International Research and Studies), with additional support from the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS-France), then later on, in partnership with the *Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung* (Hamburg Institute for Social Research) and the Caen Memorial. It has taken us nearly four years to get the Encyclopedia ready to be put on line. Considering the highly sensitive nature of this project and the relative novelty of this field of research, this maturation period has proved valuable. The gradual construction of this web site is the result of genuine teamwork on the part of computer specialists and researchers, who endeavored to coordinate technical, scientific and pedagogical criteria. We gave particular attention to the drafting of methodological recommendations that all potential contributors must take into account. In this sense, this online encyclopedia is not based on the spontaneous participation of Internet users. The knowledge gathered here comes from the best specialists of a historical case or a theoretical issue, most of whom are researchers and academics (and their PhD students). Furthermore, each paper is peer-reviewed before being put on line.

As indicated in the general presentation document for this project, we take great care to avoid instrumentalization of this web site for the sake of any political entity or community. Readers may refer to the general presentation document and consult the list of Steering Committee and International Academic Advisory Board members. Of course, we welcome the participation of other scholars from all over the world.

This web site differs from the existing quantitative databases on wars and conflicts, as well as from N.G.O. web sites which aim to qualify human rights violations throughout the world in legal terms. The researchers facilitating this online encyclopedia mean to make it the international reference site for the spreading of knowledge on mass violence, whether it is qualified as genocide, ethnic cleansing, or massacres, etc. As researchers or lecturers, our foremost responsibility is to build up knowledge and share it. Therefore, our duty – both civic and scientific – was the driving force behind our commitment to this undertaking.

Thus, this electronic encyclopedia may become a pedagogical tool thanks to its rich and reliable documentation, which is a vital resource for university-level teaching on such issues. In accordance with "open access" objectives, we hope to offer every type of audience free and simple access to these research findings. This site is accessible free of charge; it has no commercial objectives, in any case. We now believe this project has been sufficiently finalized for us to present it to the public. However, we are well aware of certain deficiencies of the site, and are open to all constructive suggestions. For instance, many historical cases have not been addressed yet. They are obviously part of our plans for the future development of our online Encyclopedia. Similarly, we intend to have the papers concerning a particular country translated into its vernacular language. All this will require time and resources, and we hope we will have access to the means necessary in order to meet these goals.

However, our choice of not charging for access to this site makes its future uncertain. Consequently, our enterprise depends in part on private donations which will not only allow its objectives to be met, but will also allow it to endure. Universal in scope, this encyclopedia of mass violence must be considered a universal public service.

1. From the concept of genocide to that of mass violence

The perception of the notion of violence, and its very definition, are closely linked to our modern sensitivity. What is considered violent in the 21st century may not necessarily have been four centuries earlier. Similarly, what is perceived as violent today in a particular country may not necessarily be so in another. The perception of violence is subject to significant historical and cultural variations. It was in the mid-20th century that expressions such as "mass murder," "mass crimes," or "mass rape" appeared. Acknowledging this

evolution, as our team organized the project, we gradually adopted the more general expression "mass violence." This deserves some explanation, inasmuch as the concept of genocide is mostly dominant in this field of research.

The term "genocide" was coined by the jurist Raphael Lemkin in 1944, and then was applied to international law, giving rise to the Convention for the Prevention and Repression of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations in Paris, on December 9, 1948. Following World War II, this term crystallized the realization of the horror of Nazi crimes, and especially the crime of extermination of the Jews of Europe. From then on, the word "genocide" gradually spread into colloquial speech, to designate absolute evil, the crime of crimes against non-combatant populations. The term has been applied to all sorts of violent situations, correctly or incorrectly. Journalists, activists, and academics have mentioned "genocide" with reference to almost all the conflicts of the second half of the 20th century in which there were large numbers of civilian victims, from Cambodia to Chechnya, including Burundi, Rwanda, Guatemala, Colombia, Iraq, Bosnia, Darfur, etc. This concept has also been used retroactively with reference to the massacre of the inhabitants of Melos by the Greeks (in the 5th century B.C.), and that of the Vendéens in 1793, during the French revolution, that of the Native Americans in the U.S.A, that of the Armenians in 1915, as well as famine in the Ukraine, various cases of deportation of populations in the former USSR under Stalin, the extermination of Gypsies and homosexuals by the Nazis, or even the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Of course, this is not a comprehensive list…

The application of the notion of "genocide" to these very different historical situations raises many objections and fuels heated debate. This has led to an apparently inextricable taxonomy problem, concerning the diverse and vague meanings attributed to this term. Nonetheless, the incrimination of genocide remains relevant, in view of the 1948 Convention. There is no doubt that in spite of its ambiguity, this document represents a fundamental contribution from international law, which bears witness to the emergence of a universal conscience, which is attempting to oppose the outrageousness of mass crimes. Indeed, the 1948 Convention appears all the more important that social science researchers have been unable to agree on a common definition of genocide. Shedding light on their different approaches is among the main objectives of this web site.

One of the reasons for these disagreements is linked to the fact that since Lemkin's pioneering work, genocide studies have mostly developed at the crossroads between the fields

of law and social sciences. This constitutive overlapping of the normative nature of international law with socio-historical analysis necessarily generates considerable conceptual difficulties. This triggers intense argument, both in the areas of science and of memory. This has led to an unfortunate inflation of the use of the word "genocide" by multiple actors across the world, which is a characteristic of the different kinds of instrumentalization of the term on behalf of politics or identity.

Therefore, we preferred not to call this project a "Genocide Encyclopedia." We also chose to avoid expressions such as "Encyclopedia of Crimes against Humanity," which would have led to emphasis on the legal aspect of the project. Ultimately, the phrase "mass violence" gradually emerged as a matter of consensus, because it is sufficiently neutral and general to cover our object of study. By mass violence, we mean to refer to human phenomena of collective destructiveness which are primarily due to political, social, religious or cultural causes. This category excludes natural disasters and technological accidents from the start. The notion of "mass violence" does not coincide with the armed combat inherent in war, but rather with all violence which directly or indirectly affects civilian populations, either in times of war or of peace. Moreover, this encyclopedia will not cover all systems of political, economic or racial domination and coercion, etc. In other words, it will not suffice for a country to be subjected to a dictatorial regime, to a colonial power, or to a racial segregation system, or to have experienced one of these, in order for the events linked to such policies to be recorded and discussed here. These situations of institutional violence combined with significant forms of symbolic violence do not necessarily give rise to mass murder.

Rather than the study of situations of domination, the Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence is specifically focused on the processes of destruction that may be generated by such situations or by the dynamics of war, and which lead to group killings. On the whole, the substance of this encyclopedia is not the myriad ways of enslaving or imprisoning men, or even of occasionally torturing or killing them in order to remind them who decides their fate. Rather, it is the countless ways of having them killed *en masse*, either directly or indirectly. It is in this sense that the expression of "mass violence" is most relevant.

2. The massacre as a lexical reference unit

The concept of mass violence also has the advantage of implying different modes of operation of human destructiveness. Thus, it most certainly includes the notion of a massacre, defined as a usually collective form of act of destruction of non-combatants (including combatants who have been disarmed). The term "massacre" has established itself as one of the main lexical reference units in this field of study. Regarding this issue, one of the Encyclopedia's goals will be to identify the propagation of massacres affecting a country or a regional zone during a particular historical period and, thus, to retrace the processes of group violence that will be qualified – or not – as genocide. However, the term "massacre" cannot designate every form of group violence, such as ethnic or religious riots, deportation, planned famines, etc. Therefore, once again, the use of the term "mass violence" seems most appropriate to describe the diversity of lethal behavior.

3. Which quantitative threshold should be used?

But what would be the threshold above which one can use the term of mass violence? This is very difficult to evaluate. We spontaneously assume that we can rely on an objective, quantitative criterion. However, the discussion of numbers is always difficult, especially as in many cases, a precise evaluation of the number of victims proves to be impossible. Hence, it is important to use this quantitative variable – which is always approximate – in conjunction with qualitative criteria which are linked to the country context, to the period involved, but also to our own contemporary sensitivity. Please refer to the methodological recommendations mentioned earlier for a more detailed understanding of our approach. The constant difficulty of the evaluation of the number of victims led us to make an important practical decision regarding the web site's layout. Indeed, we have avoided structuring the site according to a hierarchical organization of cases, which would necessarily be arbitrary and might have provoked intense controversy. Consequently, we have opted for as neutral as possible a structure, i.e. access through geography. Thus, the data can be accessed though two main channels:

- either through the continents outlined on the home page (and then through the countries involved)
- or through the nominal list of countries, grouped by continents, through which the desired country can be found.

Nevertheless, in a few rare cases, phenomena of mass violence attain such amplitude that they cross borders and become transnational. Most such cases occurred in the declining Ottoman Empire, in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Europe. Hence, the indexes concerning these three cases, in which mass violence took place across an entire continent, can be found directly from the home page.

Thanks to this unprecedented group effort, not only to gather and organize the best of our knowledge, but also to elicit new research, we hope that this online encyclopedia will become an essential tool for the development of comparative research. To compare does not mean to treat different events in the same way, even though some points of convergence between certain cases may be established. On the contrary, through the chronological indexes contextualized in reference to different countries, each case presented on this site retains its specificity. Conversely, the fact that all the cases are gathered together in the same database and share the same methodological framework, allowing the reader to navigate from one case to another, facilitates the spread of knowledge. In this sense, comparing allows differentiation.

This project has proved innovative in yet another way, through its fundamental openness to a cross-discipline approach. Indeed, the phenomenon of "massacres" appears so intrinsically complex that it necessarily calls for a multi-disciplinary approach, not simply historical, but also psychological, anthropological, political, etc. The composition of the Steering Committee and the variety of the "theoretical papers" presented on this site bear witness to our determination to use multiple analytical approaches in order to analyze and attempt to understand these destructive forms of behavior, which seem so bewildering.