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Review

Genocide and the Europeans

Karen E. Smith. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 290pp.

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Next year the world will commemorate twenty years since the Rwandan genocide and the following year will mark twenty years since the genocide at Srebrenica. As the International Community prepares to honor these grim milestones, somber deliberation of the mistakes of the past must inform the development of a more committed future. Karen Smith's book, *Genocide and the Europeans,* provides just such a reflection for Europe, tracing the continent's policy responses to incidents of genocide since the Holocaust. It is an important text that draws a detailed history of the past sixty years, pairing the careful analysis of an international relations "constructivism" framework with engrossing gobbets that take the reader's understanding beyond the structural political surface.

Despite its title, *Genocide and the Europeans* in fact focusses on the three traditional European powers—Germany, France and Britain—rather than the continent as a whole. And from a policy perspective, this makes sense. The "big three" continue to determine the direction of the European Union and to represent Europe on the world stage as they have since the 1860s. There is a significant degree of shared historical experience, as well as collective contemporary interests between the countries that Smith examines. All three had empires, the legacies of which form some of the case studies of

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the book. What separates them, of course, is the Second World War; Germany's extraordinary experience of the Holocaust left a duel legacy of "Never Again Auschwitz" and "Never Again War" that has come to characterize the German post-war foreign policy but is also now a strong societal norm. As victors, Britain and France were involved in decisions that led to the Nuremberg Trials, the creation of the United Nations, the drawing up of the Genocide Convention, and the establishment of the Human Rights Charter. They are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. As *Genocide and the Europeans* makes clear, it was the long shadows of the Second World War and of empire that informed the societal as well as strategic norms, which continue to affect the national responses to genocide in Germany, France, and Britain.

In the first section of the book, Smith deals with the post-war aftermath skillfully and succinctly. Her clear presentation of the interests and fears that informed the drafting of the Genocide Convention is somewhat sobering. The protracted debate over which principles could or should be set out in the Convention, and which determined its final wording, was so much of its time. The British, for example, rejected Raphael Lemkin's notion of cultural genocide because they felt it too expansive, and left the UK vulnerable to accusations of genocide in the British German zone, throughout the colonies, and against the Welsh. As Smith explains, "[t]he initial draft of the Convention had prohibited destroying the language, religion, and culture of a group." France and the Netherlands shared Britain's concerns about cultural genocide and it was removed from the Convention. Similarly, "political groups" were pointedly excluded, at the behest of Belgium, USSR, and the U.S., though against the wishes of Britain and France. If these provisions had been included, the prevailing understanding of genocide could be very different today. Thus, the Genocide Convention is presented less as a missed opportunity and more as an ill-prepared product of its time.

What Smith makes clear is the emptiness of the motives behind state accession to the Genocide Convention, not just in Britain and France, but around the world. Uniquely, Germany's accession was driven more by genuine commitment to the Convention's mandate. And it is this chapter that provides the contextual setting for how post-war and post-Cold War Europe dealt with the legacy of the Holocaust in its policy responses to genocide.

Smith then takes the reader through a series of unhappy case studies that illustrate the changes and continuity of mainstream European attitudes and policy

responses to genocide. While her core studies are Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–95); Rwanda (1994); Kosovo (1999); and Darfur (2003–4), Smith gives a strong analysis of Cold War discourses, though this chapter does appear to be dominated by British responses.

In tracking the narrative of Europe's responses to each case, Smith reveals that they were not consistent, laying bare the prejudices of the time, and hinting at the influence of socio-cultural pressures on parliamentary debate. It is interesting, for example, to compare Smith's analysis of Germany's reaction to the images of concentration camps in Bosnia in summer 1992, and the vicious images pouring out of Rwanda throughout the hundred days in 1994; the pictures of emaciated men behind barbed wire (described in the British press as *Belsen '92)* stimulated genuine German responsibilities within the parts of the political establishment and caused such social distress that the government asserted a stronger position. In Rwanda, Germans saw no such parallel.[1] A limitation, however, of keeping the case studies separate is that it is unclear how the Bosnian and Rwandan debates overlapped in European parliaments and public discussion, if at all.

From Bosnia onwards, the increasing tendency to emphasize the humanitarian dimension of crises has led to a new norm that continues to grow stronger, whereby European governments are compelled to assist with the intent to mitigate genocidal crises but not to intervene, the notable exception being Kosovo. While providing humanitarian aid should not and cannot be a substitute for an integrated genocide prevention policy, in the post-Iraq-world where intervention is a dirty concept, this norm of international responsibility should be celebrated, especially in the context set by Smith's first chapter of post-war attitudes. Smith's chronology, therefore, demonstrates the large strides that have been made in this regard since the Second World War settlements. The responsibility to protect may yet to be internalized by the majority, but the obligation to care has become entrenched in mainstream European politics and in parts of European society.

As with any analysis of how politicians deal with the issue of genocide, language is a key theme of this book. Smith shows how the language of humanitarian tragedy comes to dominate the public political statements but it is less clear why this shift takes place. Pubic pressure on European governments is discussed but the dramatic changes that took place in the 1990s in war reporting and technology are not. The impact

of 24-hour news on public policymakers was immense, particularly over Bosnia, Rwanda and Kosovo, but less so with Darfur. As publics in the West have become accustomed to images of slaughter (as since Darfur they have become accustomed to the word 'genocide') it would be interesting to consider whether pressures to act have increased or subsided.

Smith scrutinizes the use of the very word 'genocide' by each government in relation to each case. The particularly British hostility towards the language of genocide, where the word was initially described in the House of Commons in October 1949 as "horrible" and "horribly illiterate," persists throughout the cases examined in this volume.[2] Contrasting the reluctance in much of Europe to use the term in relation to Bosnia or Rwanda with the blunt acknowledgement that what was going on in Darfur in 2003–4 *was* genocide, Smith demonstrates a certain redundancy of the definition. The academic disagreements over whether Darfur was or was not genocide mattered in the sense that scholars of the Sudan crisis were engaging with policymakers, but not in the sense that governments became any more willing to act once they accepted that genocide was the *mot juste.*

Smith's conclusion to her useful and engrossing study is unsurprisingly gloomy. *Genocide and the Europeans* confirms that underneath the often tawdry postulating over language in European parliaments, national interests determine national responses to genocides. Poor history, common prejudices and clumsy cultural assumptions have provided foils for governments' policies of non-action throughout the post-Cold War era, but as Smith shows, it is the political and economic stakes that matter. Inevitably too, the role played by America has come to influence Europe's politics. Although Smith does not deal with this dynamic explicitly, the policies and principles of the United States are woven in to the narrative demonstrating how the Iraq invasion in 2003 has had a detrimental effect on the European agenda.

There are noticeable and encouraging forward steps in the European narrative that Smith teases out of obscurity. One such step is the long-term impact the genocide at Srebrenica had on the pacifism of Germany's Green Party, which led to important internal debates about humanitarian intervention. The catastrophic failures over Bosnia and Rwanda improved the culture of self-analysis in Europe; the Dutch, Belgians, and French all carried out investigations into their own national responses and responsibilities. Despite the initial reluctance within the International Criminal Tribunal

for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to convict on genocide charges, the tribunal for Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) set significant precedents that paved the way for the International Criminal Court (ICC). At the time of the book's publication, Mladić had not yet been caught, a fact that Smith recognized as an indicator of European commitment to the justice process in the Balkans, though I believe it will be the outcome of Karadžić's trial rather than that of Mladić that will determine the tribunal's success. The activism sparked by the Darfur crisis may not have secured wholesale military intervention but it stimulated what Smith calls the "genocide movement," which in the wake of Darfur has diversified into a broad genocide prevention sector, across academic institutions and civil society groups.

Smith concludes that there are two possible reasons for the perpetual reluctance among the three European powers to use the word 'genocide'. First, she suggests that the potential for debasing the unique horror of the Holocaust pertains particularly to the European post-war consensus. However, of the three states it is Germany that Smith repeatedly cites as the more willing to use the terminology and draw comparisons with the Shoah. Smith's second and perhaps more pertinent conclusion, at least from the perspective of the future of European policy, is that the European powers have continued to treat genocide—the term *and* the act—as a crime rather than "just" a gross violation of human rights and, therefore, placed the onus on first *proving* its existence and then *punishing* those responsible. Smith argues that following the Cold War, France and Britain focused on developing the legal norms, rather than the norms "against genocide" that required intervention. Today, Europe is the global champion of the International Criminal Court but the creation of the ICTY and ICTR developed in the face of much European criticism. Europe has emerged as the region most explicitly committed to the Rome Statute. And one cannot help noting that the EU has diluted the traditional sovereignty of its member states while the European powers have embraced the ICC's jurisdiction far beyond any other region in the world.

Smith has contributed an invaluable addition to our understanding of how the European powers have responded to genocide since the Holocaust. Reading this book, one is struck simultaneously by how far Europe has come in shouldering those responsibilities towards peoples under grave threat, and by the persistent triumph of cynical political and financial interests over the lives of strangers.

There are few such examinations of European responses to genocide that focus on the policy and rhetoric rather than societal reactions, and thus the book raises a great number of questions to be pondered and answered. *Genocide and the Europeans* should be considered essential reading not only for students of the subject but for all who work within the prevention sector and, most of all, the policymakers upon whose shoulders such immense responsibilities inevitably lie.

NOTES

1. This was in stark contrast to the Czech Ambassador to the UN, Karel Kovanda, who in 1994 drew direct comparisons of what was happening in Rwanda to his own country's experience of the Holocaust.
2. It should be noted that recent foreign policy rhetoric of the current administration has demonstrated a willingness to use the term and to draw comparisons between the Syrian crisis and the Holocaust. See Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Holocaust Educational Trust, David Cameron, 16 September 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/25th-anniversary-of-the-holocaust-educational-trust-prime-ministers-speech