

Mark Levene. *The Crisis of Genocide*. Volume I: *Devastation. The European Rimlands 1912–1938*. Volume II: *Annihilation. The European Rimlands 1939–1953*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 545 and pp. 535. Each volume £85. ISBN: 9780199683031 and 9780199683048.

There is surely no dearth of studies on genocide, but Mark Levene, a reader in history at the University of Southampton and an expert in genocide research, has demonstrated that it is still possible to add a thorough study to the enormous library already existing on this subject. True, some of Levene's basic assumptions may be contested in academia but this does not detract from the value of his enormous research project's outcome. Already on the first page of his monumental study he clearly states its basic assumption: according to Levene, genocide is not an aberrant phenomenon in modern history but 'integral to a "mainstream" historical trajectory of development towards a single, global, political economy composed of nation states' (vol. I, at 1). He sees the cases of genocide as a consequence of a more general Great Power conflict and the breakdown of the great multinational states, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and the Russian Empire of the Romanovs.

Levene concentrates on geographical areas that he qualifies as 'rimlands', or Europe's semi-periphery, where a new nation-building process took place which was based on radical nationalist ideas that led to widespread ethnic cleansing in a region that was known before for its multicultural richness. The rimlands examined offer a threefold delineation: the Balkans, a Caucasus–Black Sea–eastern Anatolia zone and 'the Land Between', 'a giant sliver of territory running from the Baltic southwards, to include Belorussia and right-bank Ukraine in the east, and as far as the Crimea in its western reaches embracing the lands of historic Poland, with an approximate north-west, south-east line running from Silesia through the Carpathians and sub-Carpathian ranges towards an intersection with the Danube at its deltaic point of entry into the Black Sea' (vol. I, at 7). No doubt, there is a conspicuous territorial overlap with the region considered in Timothy Snyder's famous 'Bloodlands'.¹

The author does not purport to offer a complete story of genocide and he admits that the events occurring in the rimlands do not cover the Holocaust, surely the best known case of genocide, as a whole. However, his study refers to pivotal aspects of this genocide. The intent to create ethnically 'pure' nation states which should be cleansed from populations that were deemed to be alien to the majority on political, ethnic, and/or religious terms was surely an important driving force for the Holocaust. Some may take issue with the author's rejection of the proposition, often adopted in academia, to portray the Holocaust as totally exceptional and to separate it from other cases of genocide (here too parallels with Snyder's 'Bloodlands' exist). Many may also criticize Levene's refusal to take as a point of departure the definition of genocide in the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide. As is well-known, this definition puts emphasis on the 'intent to destroy' and, as a consequence, many cases which are commonly qualified as genocide do not come under this Convention's purview.

But there is surely also virtue in the author's broad approach, concentrating on sustained mass-violence in the course of nation-building processes: he thereby manages to consider an enormous range of cases that display evident patterns of similarity on the factual level. Levene, himself a Jew, devotes much attention to the persecution of Jews in the rimlands under examination. He rightly does so as there can be no doubt that the Jews were the people that suffered most from persecution in the first half of the 20th century. On the other hand, he tries to pay equal attention to the suffering of the many other peoples that were victims of crimes against humanity or outright genocide. Much consideration is given, for example, to the plight of the Germans in Central and Eastern Europe who were driven from their homes towards the end of World War II and after the war. He describes very convincingly how they were now the new

¹ See T. Snyder, *Bloodland, Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010).

victims of the extreme nationalist ideology in the first half of the 20th century that vied for 'ethnically pure' nation states.

These crimes were now committed in a very astute way: for example, Czech President Edvard Benes ably played a double role. On the international stage he was the moderate and liberal statesman while internally he pursued and supported a radical plan of 'ethnic purification' against the once very large German population. It becomes clearly visible in Levene's book that he sides with the victims of persecution from whatever nation they are and that he aims at portraying 'man's inhumanity to man'.² Whether these crimes really originate in the territorial re-arrangements that took place after the crumbling of the great multinational and multicultural empires is, however, open to debate. Why man is capable of acting so cruelly will have to be further investigated and will probably remain a mystery.

This book is also a plea for tolerance, for multiculturalism, and for group cohabitation. For example, Levene describes the League of Nation's minority protection system created in the interwar period in a very favorable way, evidencing that the philosophy standing behind these treaties could have been the best antidote against genocidal nationalism. In fact, they aimed at protecting 'the physical integrity and cultural identity of all the communal aggregates otherwise too small, or too weak, to protect themselves: not from outside powers but from the newly dominant domestic national forces' (vol. II, at 391). Indeed this system would have been a formidable instrument to facilitate multiculturalism in Europe notwithstanding the re-drawing of the borders in Central Europe that widely ignored the right to self-determination. In the end, however, this system became a victim of nationalism in particular in those states that previously had fought hard for their own rights and independence.³

Of course, it has also to be noted that the inter-war minority treaties were never firmly anchored in the legal orders of the minorities' home states. They were considered something like a nuisance, an obligation the respective states wanted to get rid of as soon as possible. The main handicap of these treaties was the lack of a broader human rights culture that could have provided a foundation for these instruments and made them appear as part of the broader legal tradition of the obliged states and not as alien to them. During the long and painstaking rebirth process of minority rights after World War II an effort was made to overcome exactly this problem: now minority rights are firmly grounded in human rights law.⁴ Levene takes a square look at the facts on the ground and thereby manages to unmask the strident inhumanity of arrangements such as that between Greece and Turkey of 1923 to drive their minorities from their homes, a murderous endeavour for which the euphemism 'population exchange' was coined.

There can be no doubt that there are deterrents that may help to avoid a relapse into barbarity, and these are, first and foremost, the uncompromising investigation into all cases of genocide and crimes against humanity as well as the criminal prosecution of those responsible for these crimes. Unfortunately, for the cases of genocide of the first half of the 20th century this has happened only to a very limited extent. Still, with regard to historic analysis, much has been achieved in the last decades and Mark Levene, in a certain sense, is standing 'on the shoulder of giants'.⁵ Nonetheless, his study brings much added value. It can be used as an information

² See also L. Chand Vohrah *et al.* (eds), *Man's Inhumanity to Man* (2003).

³ See Hilpold, 'The League of Nations and the Protection of Minorities – Rediscovering a Great Experiment', 17 *Max Planck Yrbk UNL* (2013) 87, also available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2305920.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Recent publications of ground-breaking importance are, e.g., C. Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century World* (2010) and Snyder, *supra* note 1. Within international law literature of pivotal relevance are, e.g., the following publications: W. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes* (2000); J. Quigley, *The Genocide Convention: An International Law Analysis* (2006) and C. Fournet, *The Crime of Destruction and the Law of Genocide: Their Impact on Collective Memory* (2007).

resource with respect to many of the crimes that have been ignored in the past mainly for political reasons. For most of the crimes described by Levene in his books even in the Western world (not to speak of Eastern Europe) there persist strong reservations about speaking about them.⁶ For those crimes that already in the past have been openly addressed by historians, like the Holocaust, it offers a view on the latest state of the research. With regard to the genocide against the Armenians, the first genocide in the 20th century, Levene presents so much detail and corroborated evidence that a denial of this genocide should no longer be possible.⁷ Unfortunately, it is to be feared, that those who have ignored the facts in the past will continue to do so also in the future even though the motives behind this attitude, the refusal to accept the consequences of the ensuing responsibility, appear to be all too evident. For international lawyers this work can serve as a source for better comprehending the dimensions of the barbarities that occurred in the 20th century and for the need to keep working on instruments to prevent such events in the future. At least indirectly it emphasizes the importance of effective International Criminal Law instruments as a pivotal tool of genocide prevention.

On the whole Mark Levene's impressive study is an extremely readable, informative, and timely book. It should become compulsory reading for Europe's youth in order to make sure that the events that have uprooted Europe in the first half of the 20th century will never happen again.

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⁶ Why are so many cases of genocide neglected these days? Why is it still nearly impossible to speak loudly about these cases? These questions are dealt with in a highly interesting book edited by A. Laban Hinton *et al.* entitled *Hidden Genocides: Power, Knowledge, Memory*, Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick (2013).

⁷ On the Armenian genocide see also the contributions in 70 *Europa Ethnica* (2013) 3–4.