

Short Note

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Story of a boiler:
A testament to brutality
beyond Nazi atrocities

In the bustling industrial landscape of Khalishpur in Khulna district stands a chilling relic of a dark chapter in history – the boiler from the Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill. This piece of machinery, now displayed at the Genocide-Torture Archive & Museum, tells a harrowing story of brutality during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

Established in 1954, the Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill was once a thriving productivity hub. However, in 1971, it became a site of unimaginable atrocities. The Pakistani army, aided by Bihari collaborators, used the mill's boiler to execute Bengali mill workers in a gruesome act of genocide.

During my frequent visits to the Genocide-Torture Archive & Museum Trust as a resource person, I witnessed first-hand the entire process of retrieving the boiler as it came to be displayed at the Genocide-Torture & Archive Museum in Khulna. But telling the story this way is to cut it short.

It was a hot afternoon in February 2024. I was accompanied by the Chairman of the 1971 Genocide-Torture Archive &

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Museum Trust, historian Dr. Muntassir Mamoon, as we headed towards the Platinum Jubilee Mill. On entering the mill precincts, we made our way to a run-down part of the mill, and we stopped near what appeared to be a plaque enclosed by rails. The tablet bore the heading: 'Genocide at the Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill'.

Below was a graphic description of the way the Bengali jute mill workers were first put into sacks at the very spot where the memorial plaque now stood, and then their bodies dumped into the boiler — leg first. The historians claim that more than sixty mill workers had met with such a tragic fate; of them, only seven of the many killed at the mill could be identified.

Dr. Mamoon remarked that the brutality inflicted using the boiler surpassed even the atrocities committed by Hitler. Not even Hitler and the Nazi forces conceived of such a painfully cruel method of death.

Moving farther, we came within the sight of a building with a large chimney towering above it. The building was decrepit and looked like it had seen no industrial operation for quite some time now. On setting foot inside its premises, we were greeted by a phantasmic universe. We felt like archaeologists entering an old, musty and shadowy tomb. And, against the play of light and darkness, I could see the twins—yes, the twins. There were two furnaces. One stood tall, solitary and rusty. The other has been brought down and was being dismantled to be carried back to the Genocide Museum.



We stood in silence amidst the industrial ruins. The air was heavy, the metals all around attesting to bygone years of productivity. But more than anything else, the sheer scale of human depravation was evident as we stood before the furnaces. What the Pakistani army and their collaborators did with these furnaces was beyond ordinary human comprehension.

My next tryst with the boilers was to happen soon. It was to be on 17 May of the same year, the tenth foundation day of the Genocide-Torture & Archive Museum. One of the twin boilers had been retrieved and positioned near the museum's entrance. It wore the same stolid look, its unshakeable grim past visible through its rusty exterior.

But what now, I pondered? Shall the story be told now? Are we ready as visitors—as listeners—to listen to those muffled voices? Dr. Mamoon was hopeful. In his words, 'The depths of human atrocity make you look at the other end of the human heart where there is compassion. Both exist, but only one can win. And, it is compassion that wins.'

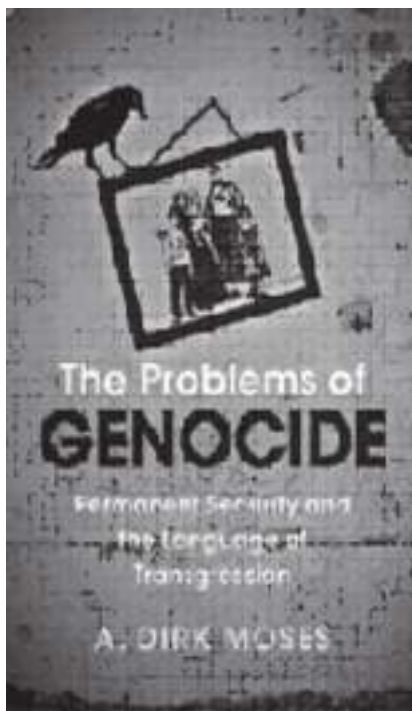
Then, as these words came to me, I felt that the furnaces already came dressed in a narrative that addressed one of the fundamental issues of human existence—that of survival. The furnaces have survived to reveal the truth. While the voices of the oppressors have fallen silent, the muffled voices of the victims will now be heard over and over again until reparation is made in the form of the knowing subject—the knowing visitor. This is the ultimate promise a museum can make to its public based on gratitude and resolution.

Our jobs as historians, narrators and critical observers—as experts— was to make sense of such incomprehension where words seemed insufficient. For the story of the Platinum boilers was a story that cried out loud for justice and reparation, and yet that made language fall utterly short.

Books on Genocide Studies

A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Cambridge University Press, 2021

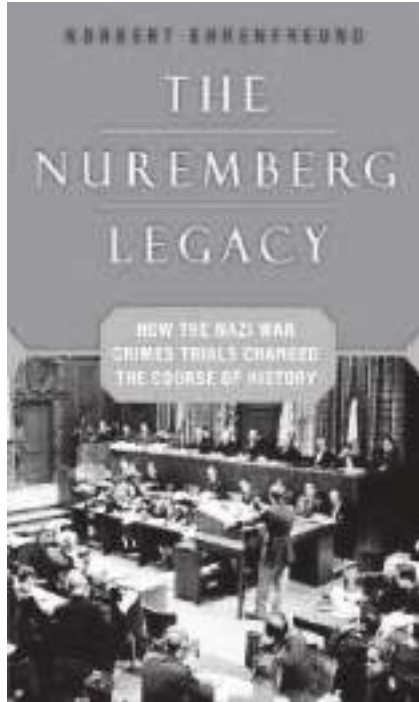
In *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, A. Dirk Moses critiques the concept of genocide for its narrow focus, which he argues obscures other forms of mass violence against civilians, such as the collateral damage from military operations. Moses introduces the idea of "permanent security"—a framework driven by anticipatory and paranoid threat



perceptions—distinguishing between illiberal security (preventative violence against specific groups) and liberal security (global efforts in the name of humanity). He contends that this notion underpins genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, and argues that the Holocaust's central role in genocide studies has led to the depoliticization of mass violence, normalizing types of violence that don't fit the genocide framework.

Norbert Ehrenfreund, The Nuremberg Legacy: How the Nazi War Crimes Trials Changed the Course of History, St. Martin's Press, 2007

Sixty years after the Nuremberg trials of major Nazi war criminals, their impact continues to underpin international justice, as explored in *The Nuremberg Legacy: How the Nazi War Crimes Trials Changed the Course of History*. These trials not only ignited a transformation in international law but also influenced domestic legal systems by establishing the crucial

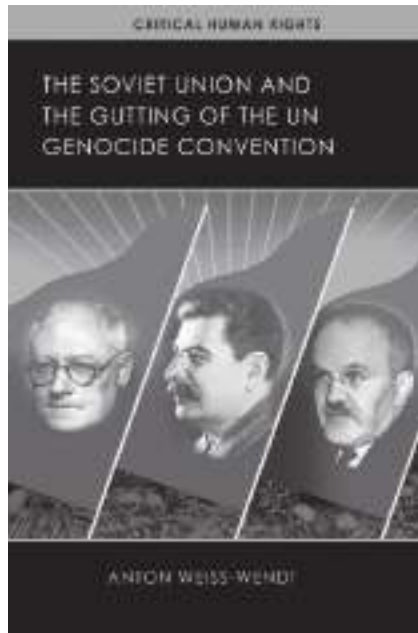


principle that every individual accused of a crime deserves a fair and thorough trial. The book reveals how the precedents set at Nuremberg have shaped various domains, including human rights, race relations, medical ethics, corporate conduct, and Germany's post-war evolution. It also examines how these foundational principles have informed contemporary war crimes tribunals for leaders like Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein.

Anton Weiss-Wendt, The Soviet Union and the Gutting of the UN Genocide Convention, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017

In *The Soviet Union and the Gutting of the UN Genocide Convention*, Anton Weiss-Wendt provides a compelling examination of how Cold War politics undermined the effectiveness of the UN Genocide Convention. Through meticulous archival research, Weiss-Wendt illustrates how the Soviet Union and the United States each pursued their own

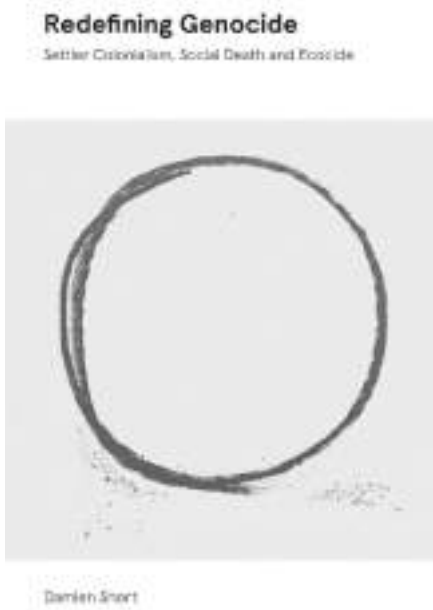
political agendas at the expense of a robust genocide prevention framework. The Soviets sought to avoid scrutiny of their own human rights abuses, particularly the oppression in Eastern Europe and forced labor camps, while American concerns about potential legal implications for racial issues influenced their stance on the treaty's vague provisions. As a result, humanitarian considerations were overshadowed, weakening the Convention's capacity to address and prevent future genocides. Weiss-Wendt's analysis sheds light on how geopolitical interests compromised the promise of the UN Genocide Convention in safeguarding human rights globally.



Damien Short, Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide, Zed Books, 2016

In his groundbreaking book, *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death and Ecocide*, Damien Short challenges the traditional understanding of genocide. Instead of only seeing genocide as the direct mass killing of people, he explores how settler colonialism, capitalism, limited resources, and environmental destruction contribute to widespread harm. By examining lesser-known cases from

places like Palestine, Sri Lanka, Australia, and Alberta, Canada, Short shows that these forces can lead to the slow destruction of communities, a form of genocide that isn't always recognized.



Elizabeth R. Baer, The Genocidal Gaze: From German Southwest Africa to the Third Reich, Wayne State University Press, 2017

The first genocide of the twentieth century, which is not very well-known, was carried out by Germans between 1904 and 1907 in what is now Namibia. During this time,

they killed hundreds of Herero and Nama people, and those who survived were forced into labor. In her book *The Genocidal Gaze: From German Southwest Africa to the Third Reich*, Elizabeth R. Baer explores the idea that Germans viewed Africans as less than human – believing they had no civilization, history, or important religion.

This attitude, which Baer calls the “genocidal gaze,” justified the violence against them and was later adopted by the Nazis. Baer also highlights how the indigenous people and their leaders resisted and fought back against the German imperialists.

