Problems and Challenges in Genocidal Research

‘God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world.’

– Francis Bacon (1628: 15)

Introduction

All social scientists face challenges to discovering the answers to the questions they ask. As a genocide scholar, some of my challenges are unique to my field, but many are problems faced and overcome by scholars in various disciplines, showing once again that, though we deal with evil and hatred, we too are mere scholars. Thus, this first chapter simply reviews the challenges of my work – aside from the emotional and moral challenges – and looks at the theoretical and practical methods I have used to overcome them as best I can. Specifically, questions of ideological radicalisation in states moving towards genocide present two overarching problems. The first challenge is simply how to appropriately study ideology; the second challenge is how to appropriately compare cases across space and time.

Though many types of research would have allowed me to study genocidal ideology, this macro-level approach is best suited to a comparative historical analysis. Thus, I decided to structure this chapter around the challenges arising from this type of research project. To achieve this aim, this chapter is broken down into four main sections. The first section addresses the rationale behind my choice of cases, discussing the benefits and complexities of comparison and the relationship between the three case studies. The following two sections seek to explain how my methodological approach fulfils the demands of a complex comparative research model in historical sociology (HS). Since much of my
topic deals with causation and with structure and agency, I look at the ties HS has with historical institutionalism (HI) and, through HI, path dependency. I then move on to my final section, outlining my research strategy as structured by ideology.

Case Selection

This book deals with three connected questions, all of which derive from the question of whether or not radicalising ideology evolves in a similar way in cases of modern genocide. From this question, two intriguing secondary questions arise: firstly, ‘What are the thematic similarities and differences in this evolution?’ and secondly, ‘What happens to further the radicalisation process?’

Every genocide scholar understands that a project of this magnitude demands significant emotional reserves. However, macro-level research projects in comparative genocide studies, particularly a project with this type of scope and objective, inherently host substantial challenges, not the least of which involve case study selection. My primary research question deals directly with modern genocide; it is also inherently a question necessitating some sort of comparison of cases in order to properly assess the past century of modernity. To make matters worse, an ideal research project on my topic would incorporate every instance of genocide occurring in the 20th and 21st centuries; however, to maximise the depth of analysis and at the same time moderate the length of the manuscript, limiting myself to a manageable number of cases was critical – three cases being the most appropriate to get the maximum amount of comparison with the maximum amount of depth.

This lack of systematic control made me realise that in order to make my research outputs acceptable and applicable to other cases outside of the three cases selected for this project, I would need to ensure that these cases covered a wide variety of critical elements, including sociological, geographical, technological, historical and political factors. Associations between these elements are found within the European theatre: a linked geography, similar technological advances, an interlinked historical timeline and, frequently, shared political goals. Thus, instead of stretching my analysis geographically, linguistically or historically to include Rwanda, Cambodia, Darfur, Indonesia, Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic or any one of the sadly many other options, I decided to look towards Turkey and the Armenian genocide during the First World War, Germany and the Holocaust during the Second World War and Serbian aggression against Bosniaks as my three case studies.