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Mass Violence as Tragedy: Analyzing the Transmission of Discourses

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Abstract: Mass violence—killings and other forms of violence that aim at exterminating large groups of people—is often called a tragedy. The trope can be found in testimonies of victimization, justifications of perpetration, journalistic, political, and academic language as well as in popular parlance. The article examines the divergent usages of the travelling trope of tragedy with particular emphasis on its role in forming justificatory discourse. The issue at stake is that the trope of tragedy does not remain confined to outright justifications such as juridical legitimization, moral vindication, political propaganda etc., but permeates condemnation and critique as well. The rationale of the analysis is that justifications of acts of mass violence that are negotiated in key areas of the cultural canon give a culturally specific, often identificatory, meaning to acts that are, from a critical perspective, mostly either considered senseless or comprehended in economic and sociopolitical terms. Yet it is largely owing to justificatory discourses that acts of mass violence do not remain single, exorbitant events, but have a lasting impact by shaping the linguistic and heuristic framework of their subsequent evaluation. When condemnation and critique adopt these terminologies and frameworks—such as the notion of purity underlying the term 'ethnic cleansing', or the ethnopolitical paradigm informing the concept of genocide—this effects an uneasy mimetic participation in transmitting justifications of mass violence. The trope of tragedy makes it possible to address the issue of mimetic participation by drawing attention to the audience as an indispensable element of the discourse.

Keywords: mass violence, genocide, justification, tragedy, participation

The Trope of Tragedy

In the post-1945 world, tragedy is a seminal trope for portraying mass violence that permeates testimonies of victimization, justifications of perpetration, journalistic, political, and academic language as well as popular parlance. Mass violence, i.e., killings and other forms of violence that aim at exterminating large groups of

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non-combatants,[1] is often called a *tragedy* to mark the gravity and horror of events. A striking case is the 1933 Nazino tragedy (Назинская трагедия), brought to public attention in 2002 by the human rights organisation *Memorial*. The deportation of around 6,700 prisoners to the Western Siberian island of Nazino, carried out by Soviet authorities with extreme neglect, resulted in the death of over 4,000 people within weeks as well as in disease, violence, and cannibalism among survivors.[2] Yet apart from serving the purpose of denouncing acts of mass violence, the trope of tragedy is seminal also to the opposite aim of downplaying and negating them. Such usage can be found among scholars, the public, and politicians alike: Steven Katz acknowledges the effect of settler colonialism on 'Native American depopulation', but considers it 'largely an unintended tragedy'.[3] In Japan, the 1937 Nanjing massacre is 'seen (by nationalists and neonationalists) as part of the tragedy of war'.[4] In 1995, the US Secretary of Defense William Perry stated that 'the ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia is 'abhorrent' yet not a case for a full-scale military intervention, voicing the notion 'that Bosnia is a tragedy, but it is not our tragedy'.[5] While 'the Bosnian tragedy'[6] comprised no US actors, the case seems different to Perry with the 'civil war in Rwanda', where 'we were able to act': 'That conflict and the resulting exodus of the more than 2 million refugees created a human tragedy of biblical proportions'.[7] Here, referring to tragedy serves to avoid mentioning the mass killings of the summer of 1994, which would evoke the legally relevant term genocide, while alluding to the Bible renders the events as something that does affect the US perspective by evoking a

1 Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.

2 1933 год: Назинская трагедия. Из истории земли Томской. Документальное научное издание, [1933: The Nazino tragedy. From the history of the land of Tomsk. A Documented Scholarly Edition] ed. by Sergei Krasilnikov and B.P. Trenina (Tomsk: Memorial Association, 2002).

3 Steven Katz, *The Holocaust and Mass Death before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 20.

4 Gavan McCormack, 'Reflections on Modern Japanese History in the Context of the Concept of Genocide,' in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 265–286 (p. 272).

5 William Perry, 'Remarks as Prepared for Delivery, the Forrestal Lecture, United States Naval Academy Foreign Affairs Conference (April 18),' *Defense Issues*, 10.49 (1995), 1.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 3.

sense of global moral obligation.[8] Absence of any obligation is apparent in the April 2021 speech of the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, on the anniversary of the Armenian genocide: 'Actually nothing happened in terms of humanitarian tragedy [*insani trajedi*] on April 24 [1915]',[9] implying that the term genocide is out of place.

The heterogeneous yet persistent use of the trope of tragedy calls for analysis. The ambition of this article is not to compile an exhaustive list of usages of the trope but to provide the means for interpreting it in divergent contexts by answering the following questions: what does it mean to call mass violence a tragedy? Where does the prominence of the trope originate (when it seems unlikely that many of those who use it know the fifth century BCE literary genre of tragedy)? What is at stake in the inquiry is that, if critical discourse adopts the trope of tragedy that is so conveniently employed for the purpose of downplaying and denial, research (even if unwillingly) mimetically contributes to transmitting and to normalizing discourses which justify, downplay, or negate acts of mass violence.

Given the diversity of actors and purposes, evaluating the usage of the trope of tragedy is no easy task. With regard to international relations, it is certainly right that 'when genocide, famine and environmental disaster are described as "tragic" (as they often are), this label seems either a poor and dangerous excuse for the failure of actors to behave ethically or a concession to apathy'.[10] A wholesale dismissal of the trope of tragedy, however, would ignore its usage in testimonies of victims, where it serves as emphasis rather than euphemism. The starting point of the following inquiry is, therefore, a structural rather than a semantic observation. Namely, that while the trope serves contradictory purposes in different discourses, these usages have one aspect in common: qualifying acts of mass violence as tragedy implies the notion of a plot enfolding violent action between a beginning and an

8 On the Bible's role in US culture and politics, see *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, ed. by Paul Gutjahr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

9 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, '29 Nisan 2021 Perşembe akşamı başlayıp, 17 Mayıs 2021 Pazartesi sabahına kadar sürecek şekilde tam kapanmaya geçiyoruz', 26 April 2021, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/127723/-29-nisan-2021-persembe-aksami-baslayip-17-mayis-2021-pazartesi-sabahina-kadar-surecek-sekilde-tam-kapanmaya-geciyoruz->; translated to English <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/we-will-enforce-a-full-lockdown-from-april-29-until-may-17> [accessed 06 August 2021].

10 Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow, 'Learning from Tragedy and Refocusing International Relations,' in *Tragedy and International Relations*, ed. by idem (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 185–217 (p. 216).

end.[11] In other words, calling historical events a tragedy makes possible their temporal and spatial delimitation. Such delimitation is essential to different argumentative purposes. For human rights organizations, it facilitates the naming of events that might otherwise appear as mere chaos and anomie (such as the Nazino tragedy). For victims, the temporal and spatial delimitation of an act of mass violence may carry the hope of it being a past episode to look back at from the position of survival. For political agents, spatial delimitation can serve the purpose of emphasising non-involvement and geographical distance (as in the case of Perry's 'Bosnian tragedy'). For those interested in downplaying and denial, the spatial and temporal delimitation serves to claim that acts of mass violence belong to a bygone past that should not be stirred up (as in the cases of the 'Native American depopulation' and the Nanjing massacre mentioned above). In academic discourse, however, the trope of tragedy serves to challenge exactly this distancing, for instance when Jacques Sémelin notes: '[t]hose who live in a country that is at peace today have trouble imagining the material reality of such a tragedy'.[12] While past acts of mass violence might indeed seem distant, research has demonstrated that they shape the reality of descendants of victims and perpetrators.

These instances of usage of the trope of tragedy point to one reason for the puzzling fact that it is as pervasive in contexts of downplaying and denial as it is in scholarly discourse interested in analysis. Calling acts of mass violence a tragedy bypasses intent, which is disputed in most of the cases mentioned above. In academic discourse, the trope of tragedy offers a way to mark the gravity of cases where homicidal intent is disputed, and where usage of juridical and historiographical terms that require proof of intent, such as genocide, is hence problematic. However, this establishes an uncomfortable proximity to discourses downplaying or negating acts of mass violence. These favour the trope since, by calling acts of mass violence a tragedy, actors are made to appear less as intentional and hence culpable agents and more—like actors in the staging of a tragedy, i.e., a scripted plot—as subjected to a superior force.

11 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1449b 23f.: 'Tragedy […] is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude.'

12 Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, trans. by Cynthia Schoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 9.

This shift of outlook implied in speaking of tragedy illustrates why the following analysis considers the term a 'trope'. Usually translated as 'figure of speech',[13] the ancient Greek τροπη literally denotes a 'turn, turning'.[14] A trope is a rhetorical device for turning something into something (else), be it chaos into an identifiable historical event, or traumatic experiences into one among many episodes of life, but also crime into fate, and perpetrators into victims of fate. The notion of a turn is also pivotal to a further term often employed to describe mass violence: a catastrophe is literally an 'overturning', or turn downwards to ruin, in the plot of Greek tragedy.[15]

Despite the ambivalence of its implications, the widespread usage of the trope of tragedy cannot simply be dismissed as denial of the reality of mass violence by avoiding terms such as 'massacre' or 'killing'. Tragedy, rather, requires analysis as a key rhetorical and heuristic strategy that allows one to articulate, imagine, and socially negotiate acts that are otherwise prone to overwhelm, and thus escape, comprehension. Such analysis requires the competences of multiple fields, as will be laid out first. In a second step, this article outlines the problematic mimetic participation of critical analysis in discourses that justify mass violence as the issue at stake; this section situates the inquiry into tragedy in the context of recent research on mass violence. Thirdly, four prominent usages of the trope of tragedy are discussed in their specific contexts, taken from a victim's account, the planning of perpetration, its subsequent evaluation, and a call to resistance. Finally, the article expounds why the trope of tragedy is particularly well suited to analyze problematic mimetic participation of critical analysis in discourses that justify mass violence: because tragedy implies an audience.

Challenges and Promises of a Multidisciplinary Approach

This inquiry into the trope of tragedy is part of a multidisciplinary research project on the transmission of discourses which justify mass violence. The overarching rationale of the project is that while material, political, and/or geo-strategic agendas often underlie mass violence,

13 *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [*OED*], 'trope, n. 1.1.a.' <https://www-oed-com> [accessed 23 February 2022].

14 *A Greek-English Lexicon* Online [*LSJ*], τροπη, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> [accessed 31 December 2022].

15 *LSJ*, καταστροφή, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> [accessed 31 December 2022].

these agendas do not explain what motivates large parts of a population to participate in, abet, or tolerate atrocities. And broad societal support is necessary to commit mass violence. It is 'a far-reaching social project' that 'requires ideological justification' to encompass diverse actors and motives.[16] The reasons perpetrators offer for resorting to mass violence are crucial for eliciting societal support. Currently, the justifications of mass violence that perpetrators give are often dismissed as pretexts distracting from facts in politics, media, and research. 'Justification' is an umbrella term, subsuming divergent speech acts and pragmatics which have in common that they seek to make mass violence appear as 'just', as the right thing to do, such as juridical legitimizations, moral vindications, political apologies, assertions of superiority, political propaganda, populist incitements, military orders, downplaying, and screen memory narratives. Dismissing justifications as empty talk entails a major knowledge gap: we know comparatively little about how justifications travel through societies to elicit support. Justifications still circulate after individual culprits are brought to justice, and they are not confined to perpetrating parties but often become widely accepted. A prominent example of a problematic transmission of justificatory terminology is the concept of 'ethnic cleansing' (etničko čišćenje), used to describe and justify mass violence during the 1990s Bosnian War, which circulates globally as a supposed mere descriptor but also maintains the dangerous idea of ethnic purity.[17]

Our hypothesis is that while *acts* of mass violence alter political and socio-economic realities, *justifications* of mass violence establish the linguistic and heuristic parameter for their subsequent juridical, moral, and scholarly evaluation, so as to contribute to perpetuating societal fault lines and set the frame for further conflict.

Developing an understanding of the effectiveness of justifications of mass violence and of the long-term impact they have on the political and socio-economic realities inhabited by surviving victims, perpetrators, accomplices, descendants, and the global community cannot be attained by one discipline alone. There are three reasons for this.

16 Uğur Ümit Üngör and Kjell Anderson, 'From Perpetrators to Perpetration: Definitions, Typologies, and Processes,' in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 7–22 (pp. 8–11).

17 Vladimir Petrović, 'Ethnopolitical Temptations Reach Southeastern Europe: Wartime Policy Papers of Vasa Čubrilović and Sabin Manuilă,' in *Ideological Storms: Intellectuals, Dictators, and the Totalitarian Temptation*, ed. by Vladimir Tismaneanu and Christian Iacob Bogdan (Budapest: CEU Press, 2019), pp. 319–343; cf. Vladimir Petrović, *Etničko čišćenje. Geneza koncepta* (Beograd: Arhipelag, 2019).

First, justifications of mass violence are negotiated in intersecting key areas of the cultural canon: historiography, law, political propaganda, religious texts, literary fiction, and popular media, where they are given a culturally specific, often identificatory meaning. Therefore, the project links the three authors of this article to cover all relevant textual studies fields: contemporary history and transitional justice (Vladimir Petrović), comparative literature (Juliane Prade-Weiss), and religious texts and their political usage (Dominik Markl).

Second, justifications of mass violence evoke deep layers of historical conflict. Modern political rhetoric and historiographical terminology are informed by surrounding cultural concepts such as, for instance, the nineteenth century philosophy of history that hinges on ancient Greek tragedy.[18] Figures of speech representing such notions, such as the trope of tragedy, travel between different epochs, languages, and cultures. Analyzing transmissions of justificatory discourses thus requires a wide range of historical and linguistic expertise, which the three authors bring together.

Third, justifications of mass violence travel between discourses that intersect in historically and culturally specific ways. In the modern world, law, politics, and popular media are interlinked, while the relation between politics and religion is disputed. In past epochs, religion, politics, and the law where closely tied. The modern distinction between (factual) historiography, (fictional) literature, and religious texts (as referring to the transcendental) is inappropriate for many historical sources, such as Greek tragedy. The trope of tragedy links different genres as it travels between factual accounts, fictional texts, and transcendental notions of state and history. The intersection of discourses is ubiquitous. Shoah perpetrator accounts, for instance, are shaped by an exchange of narrative patterns between the genres of juridical investigation, detective story, and religious confession in that all of them aspire to a closure that brings relief,[19] catharsis, the emotional purification granted, according to Aristotle, by Greek tragedy.[20] Justificatory narratives presented in the courtroom frequently evoke ethical, religious, or political arguments without legal merit that are directed to the court

18 See below, pp. 20–23.

19 Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), pp. 8–31.

20 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b.28.

of public opinion.[21] Appropriately evaluating the role of factual, fictional, and religious texts in justificatory discourses requires a combination of the different textual studies fields that have, so far, worked largely disconnected from each other. This is the rationale of our collaboration.

Our multidisciplinary approach faces the complication that assumptions which appear conclusive to one field are regarded as problematic in another. We reflect on these issues here because the reader most likely works in one of the fields involved and might share some concerns. These issues concern a) language and b) understanding.

a) It is fair to wonder whether taking references to tragedy in political rhetoric at face value means stretching the importance of language use too far. Is the wording of popular parlance as important as it is in literature or sacred texts? After all, 'tragedy' and 'tragic' are common metaphors for describing an event as 'causing great suffering, destruction, or distress, and typically involving death' on a collective scale since the sixteenth and seventeenth century in, for instance, English[22] and German.[23] Can analyzing language use contribute to understanding what causes mass violence? It can. For while causation is multi-faceted, '[n]ationalist discourses, myths and rumors' have proven to be 'conducive to violence'.[24] These forms of 'violent language'[25] are unlikely to vanish after acts of mass violence have been committed but can be expected to contribute to their retrospective interpretation and memorialization in discourses constructing a meaning from the perspective of perpetrators, accomplices, and descendants.

Still, one might object that Erdoğan or Perry probably do not care about the poetics of an ancient literary genre when they speak of tragedy, or its distinction from more recent tragedies such as Shakespeare's. Yet writers of political speeches have certainly come across tragedy as one of the most canonical literary forms of Western cultural memory.

21 Richard Wilson and Vladimir Petrović, 'Transitional Justice Histories: Narrating Mass Atrocities' in *The Oxford Handbook on Transitional Justice*, ed. by Alex Hinton, Lawrence Douglas, and Jens Meierhenrich (Oxford: Oxford University Press), forthcoming.

22 *OED*, 'tragedy 4.a–b' <https://www-oed-com> [accessed 31 December 2022].

23 Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Deutsches Wörterbuch (Munich: dtv, 1984), 21:1157, 'Tragödie, 2.' The Russian term remains tied to literature throughout the 18-19th centuries; Национальный корпус русского языка <https://processing.ruscorpora.ru> [accessed 24 February 2022].

24 Jonathan Leader Maynard, 'Preventing Mass Atrocities: Ideological Strategies and Interventions', *Politics and Governance*, 3.3 (2015), 67–84 (p. 71).

25 Stephane Baele, 'Conspirational Narratives in Violent Political Actors' Language,' *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38.5–6 (2019), 706–734.

This form, however, does not guarantee an unambiguous meaning as tropes are ambivalent and, at the same time, inherently political.

Tragedy is a form of 'premediation' in Astrid Erll's sense that 'existent media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for new experience and its representation'. Erll mentions the Bible as a medium originating in 'remote cultural spheres' that has 'premediated historical experience for many centuries'[26] in different contexts and for the sake of divergent interests. The many uses of *tragedy* can be understood along similar lines. Analyzing the premediation of experience granted by texts of the cultural canon, such as tragedy, assumes that while speakers and authors refer to them with a particular (conscious) intent, they import a plurality of implications—such as narrative patterns, performance structures, and moral validations—that remain implicit, and yet active. These (non-conscious) implications are particularly relevant to discourses marked by trauma and sequelae of perpetration, which articulate deferral (such as Perry's distancing from 'the Bosnian tragedy') and denial (such as Erdoğan's, of any 'humanitarian tragedy' in Armenia). References to the authority of canonical tropes might very well be a mere pretext in justifications of mass violence. Nevertheless, even a pretext is a text carrying implications which shape its reception. The plurality of implications, which is never fully explicated in one single reference, is the reason why a single form, such as tragedy, can be referenced in divergent contexts and with contradictory intentions. This is possible because all cultural productions are marked by ambiguities and ambivalences, which are not a lack of clarity but the condition for serving their purpose: accommodating divergent positions in negotiations of conflict. Ancient Greek tragedy was an aesthetic form for negotiating political conflict. References to tragedy in the context of mass violence are, therefore, more rightly called a trope—a figure condensing a multiplicity of meanings—than a metaphor, i.e., a transposition of a term into a context alien to it. The ancient Greek form is anything but alien to the contexts of, and issues raised by, acts of mass violence: war, mass killings, forced migration, rape, juridical versus moral offenses, and conflicts between legal, political, and cultic institutions are at the very core of tragic plot.

b) The notion of understanding can seem troubling with references to justifications of mass violence. It seems to imply aligning one's outlook

26 Astrid Erll, 'Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the "Indian Mutiny"', in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. by eadem and Ann Rigney (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 109–138 (p. 111).

with the point of view of perpetrators, to 'invent excuses for them, and in short pardon their crimes',[27] as Sémelin puts it—because it requires comprehending the perpetrators' framework: 'understand[ing] how they came to commit such acts, and what meaning (justification?) they invest in their involvement'.[28] Although attempts at understanding acts of mass violence rely on moral and juridical frameworks, they cannot but face the meaning given to them by perpetrators, accomplices, and descendants on the one hand—be it outright 'justificationalism',[29] 'neutralization',[30] such as denial,[31] or rationalization[32]—and, on the other hand, by victims and their descendants, if only in lament over a glaring absence of meaning.[33]

While perpetrator discourses must be handled with hermeneutic caution, it would be unwise to declare acts of mass violence to be beyond understanding. The oft-enunciated irrationality of mass violence is no exception from a general quest for meaning, quite the contrary: Christian Gerlach notes that, in the twentieth century, the 'claim that the deed was irrational, so that by tendency it cannot be explained or perhaps even told, existing beyond the limits of representation, or falling out of history', serves the purpose of constructing unique 'national or ethnic identities'.[34] The qualification of acts as 'meaning-' or 'senseless' does, in fact, bestow a meaning onto them. By way of a moral judgement, the qualification refutes a causal explanation in favour of an argumentative purpose. This is unsurprising as historical understanding always serves purposes of its own present. Still, this embeddedness marks a grave complication, namely an uneasy stance of the scholar who tries to understand the recurrence of mass violence. This uneasy stance marks the issue at stake in analyzing the transmission of discourses which justify mass violence.

27 Sémelin, *Purify*, p. 2.

28 Ibid., p. 3.

29 Stefan Ihrig, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler* (Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 12.

30 Alexander Alvarez, 'Adjusting to Genocide: The Techniques of Neutralisation and the Holocaust,' *Social Science History*, 21.2 (1997), 139–178; Kjell Anderson, '"Who Was I to Stop the Killing?" Moral Neutralization among Rwandan Genocide Perpetrators,' *JPR*, 1.1 (2017), 39–63.

31 Sibylle Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony?' *JPR* 1.1 (2017), 85–104.

32 Saira Mohamed, 'Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity', *Columbia Law Review*, 115.5 (2015), 1157–1216.

33 For lament as a genre to negotiate suffering see Juliane Prade-Weiss, *Language of Ruin and Consumption: On Lamenting and Complaining* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 243–260.

34 Gerlach, *Societies*, pp. 258–259.

Justificatory Discourse and Mimetic Participation

The wider issue at stake in analyzing the divergent uses of the trope of tragedy in discourses of mass violence is that the analysis participates in forming the aftermath of mass violence. This assumption is based on contributions to the interdisciplinary field of genocide studies made by social psychology and memory studies. They suggest, first, that the twentieth century is shaped by the transgenerational transmission of trauma in victimized individuals and groups as well as socio-psychological sequelae in perpetrators, accomplices, and their descendants owing to the pervasive dynamics of rationalization, repression, and denial in the wake of mass violence.[35] Second, they have shown that 'memories travel around our global cultural landscape'.[36] Given the temporal transmission and spatial dissemination of the aftermath of mass violence, the analysis of supposedly past events is by no means distanced from them but participates in forming the heritage of mass violence.

A classic instance of mimetic participation in justificatory discourses is Viktor Klemperer's 1947 analysis of National Socialist idiom. He not only points out the unsettling continuity of the notion of 'cleansing' in the concept 'denazification' (*Entnazifizierung*),[37] but also performs the fact—it is hard to tell whether consciously or unwillingly—that the idiom of *Gleichschaltung* leaves no room for an outside voice when he speaks of Nazism as 'a rampant degeneration of German flesh'.[38] A far-reaching example of a problematic transmission of justificatory discourse concerns the very term *genocide*, owing to its ethnopolitical implication. In etymology and definition, the concept of genocide perpetuates the question of whether a victimized group is a *gens*, casting ethnicity as ontological status rather than as result of identificatory discourses, which are often at the core of disputes that incite mass violence. The concept of genocide has, therefore, been criticized as resulting in an 'ethnization of history'[39]: It tends to cast victims as 'representatives of a (perpetrator-defined) group'[40] rather than as individuals

35 Erin McGlothlin, 'Perpetrator Trauma,' in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, ed. by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 100–110.

36 Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 7.

37 Viktor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. by Martin Brady (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 1; idem, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Dietzingen: Reclam, 2010), pp. 9–10.

38 Klemperer, *Language*, p. 57; *LTI*, pp. 68–69: *eine wuchernde Entartung deutschen Fleisches.*

39 Gerlach, *Societies*, p. 255.

40 Stone, 'Memory', p. 113.

of possibly quite different self-conceptions, and thus it adopts rather than analyzes conceptions legitimizing perpetration. Challenging the concept recently, Dirk Moses concludes:

> This presupposition of fixed identities flies in the face of the fact that people have multiple, layered identities. It also ignores the dynamics that, say, religious difference, only becomes a public, political identity in particular circumstances. When politics is imagined in sectarian terms, as ethnic struggle, we are inhabiting the mental world of genocide rather than thinking beyond it. Another problem of genocide, then, is its participation in the discursive construction of identity-based violence against civilians.[41]

This suggests that justifications which define a 'meaning' of acts of mass violence are to be found not solely on the level of pretexts and propaganda but also in the very words and distinctions formed to describe them. This calls for an analysis of the discursive construction of acts of mass violence that remains conscious of the pervasive issue of criticism's mimetic participation in what it is criticizing, and the resultant transmission of justifying terms, narratives, and heuristics. Adopting a descriptive concept, such as mass violence, 'systematic murder of noncombatants',[42] or 'one-sided violence',[43] in lieu of *genocide*, is one necessary step for inquiring into the linguistic dynamics by which the meaning of these acts is constructed, negotiated, and transmitted to different contexts. Yet the adoption of a different terminology alone is not sufficient for 'thinking beyond' the heuristic and linguistic frame established by justifications of acts of mass violence. To the extent that these are, as Moses puts it, 'discursive construction[s]', any attempt to think 'beyond' them must face the difficult structure of discourses, i.e., of the not necessarily coherent systems of terminologies, narratives, and heuristics that serve to construct something as meaningful and, thereby, generate power.

'Where there is power', Michel Foucault writes, 'there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of

41 Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 12.

42 Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killings and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 10.

43 Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman, 'One-Sided Violence against Civilians in War,' *Journal of Peace Research*, 44.2 (2007), 233–246.

exteriority in relation to power'.[44] That the legislation prohibiting genocide incorporates the ethnopolitical logic of the crime it sanctions is a striking case in point. Its inclusion is not inadvertent, however, but a consequence of the political dispute over one issue in which all parties share. The scholarly stance is slightly different, for the participatory logic of discursive constructions forbids a complacent position whereby the scholar remains untouched by the involvements of which others are accused. It does, though, allow for a genealogical critique: for an approach to an issue, such as the ethnopolitical paradigm, interested in understanding its discourse rules,[45] or 'how it came to be acceptable as legitimate', as Susanne Knittel puts it.[46] This is the interest of studying justifications of mass violence in transmission.

To outline how the issue of mimetic participation is raised by the trope of tragedy, four instances of its usage will be discussed next. These instances are chosen from different acts of mass violence, and from different points of view, to face the puzzling fact that justifications and condemnations of acts of mass violence employ the same figure of speech. For the sake of clarity, each usage of the trope will be immediately followed by its discussion.

Four Uses (and Abuses) of Tragedy

1) The first instance of a prominent usage of the trope of tragedy is taken from a victim's testimony, Primo Lévi's 1947 autobiographical account of his eleven months of suffering in the Monowitz (Auschwitz III) concentration camp: *If This Is a Man (Se questo è un uomo)*. The text is well known for its rendering of the question of the 'meaning' of the Shoah: 'There is no why here', Lévi's protagonist is told by a concentration camp guard.[47] This not only suggests that 'why' is, indeed, the fundamental question raised by mass violence. The guard's sentence also suggests a reason why by the performative act of negating the question: it is a display of power. This, however, is not the only passage that negotiates

44 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 95.

45 Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 'Critical Discourse Analysis', in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by idem (London: Sage, 2009), pp. 1–33 (p. 17).

46 Susanne Knittel, 'Memory and Repetition: Reenactment as an Affirmative Critical Practice,' *New German Critique* 137, 46.2 (2019), 171–192 (p. 178).

47 Primo Lévi, *If this is a man*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (New York: Orion, 1959), p. 24.

the 'why'. Lévi's protagonist comes back to the refuted question of why he and others suffer mass violence later in his account by referencing two canonical textual forms, tragedy and biblical narratives:

> He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story; because so are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity [*una tragica sorprendente necessità*]. We tell them to each other in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, [...] Ukraine, and are simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?[48]

Representations of individual and communal distress are crucial in both tragic and biblical texts. Lévi's reference points out that the premediation of suffering in tragic and biblical terms does not settle the question of why violence happens. Rather, it permits one to pose the question, and it allows one to voice a degree and intensity of suffering that threatens to silence its victims, and to erase individuality. The reference to 'tragic […] necessity' voices the experience of being disregarded as an individual in terms other than the National Socialist idiom. The concept of tragic necessity has been paradigmatically outlined in Aristotle, and it is relevant here because it is prominent in most references to tragedy in discourses of mass violence, and because he explains it by juxtaposing the genres of poetry and historiography:

> [...] it is not the poet's function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity. The difference between the historian and the poet [...] is this: that the one relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars. 'Universal' means the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of probability and *necessity* [...][49]

Aristotle's hierarchization of poetry above historiography is premodern, yet the underlying distinction between fictional and factual accounts is still common. As an autobiographical account, however, Lévi's text is

48 Lévi, *Man*, p. 72; *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), p. 111.
49 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a.36–1451b.8; our italics.

both. In Aristotle's diction, Lévi 'relates actual events' and 'particulars' as he testifies to his experience and gestures to the experience of others. At the same time, Lévi invokes the poetic genre by referencing 'tragic […] necessity', which, according to Aristotle, articulates the universal. What appears universal in this passage of Lévi's text is the experience of suffering; it is so universal that the narrator forgot the details of the story told to him. Tragic necessity counteracts particulars. This renders the Aristotelean concept a way to name the experience of being overcome by a violence that aims at erasing individuality—a way to name the experience without adopting the perpetrators' idiom. The reference to 'simple and incomprehensible' biblical stories adds a further layer. As centuries of biblical exegesis demonstrate, incomprehensibility is the beginning, not the end, of the endeavour to understand.

2) The second instance of prominent usages of the trope *tragedy* is taken from the opposing angle, the planning of perpetration, in a 1940 memorandum drafted by Heinrich Himmler, 'the man most directly responsible for Nazi deportation policies'[50]:

> I hope completely to erase the concept of the Jews through the possibility of a great emigration of all Jews to a colony [...] However cruel and tragic [*tragisch*] each individual case may be, this method is still the mildest and best, if one rejects the Bolshevik method of physical extermination of people out of inner conviction as un-German and impossible.[51]

While in Lévi, the reference to tragedy fosters the articulation of suffering, it serves the opposite purpose in Himmler's text, where it sidelines suffering by way of admitting it but casting it as necessary. But what exactly does Himmler refer to when he says 'tragic'? This context grants insight into what renders his reference to tragedy a justification he deems both comprehensible and acceptable to his audience. Himmler refers less to the ancient performance genre but more to its subsequent interpretation, where state power plays an important role.

In Late Antiquity, tragedy fed into Christian hermeneutics to justify suffering in a world made by a good God; as element of the metaphysi-

50 Valentino, *Solutions*, p. 171.

51 Heinrich Himmler, 'Denkschrift über die Behandlung der Fremdvölkischen im Osten' (Some Thoughts on the Treatment of Alien Population in the East), *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 5.2 (1957), 194–198 (p. 197); trans. in Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 16–17.

cal notion of *theatrum mundi*, of the world as theatre wherein everyone is both actor and spectator.[52] But it also served more practical legal and political purposes. From early modernity until the nineteenth century, public punishments on the scaffold are represented as tragic staging, displaying (depending on perspective) 'God's vengeance against […] sinners' or the 'tragic end' of suffering heroes and heroines.[53] With the decline of the divine element from interpretations of history, tragedy has been reinterpreted ontologically in nineteenth to twenty-first century thought. An array of thinkers has read Greek tragedy to expound the relation between individual autonomy and state power, especially the law.[54] Such readings still inform the genocide paradigm focused on state agency in approaching mass violence. Thus, for instance, Mark Wolfgram's 2019 study *Antigone's Ghosts* invokes the seminal reference of nineteenth century German philosophy of history, Sophocles' *Antigone*, to illustrate his ethnopolitical interpretation of mass violence.[55] Of particular relevance to Himmler's reference is the subordination of individuality to state power in Friedrich Schelling and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In a 1802-3 text, Schelling explains:

> The Greeks sought in their tragedies this kind of equilibrium between justice and humanity, necessity and freedom, […] as the highest morality itself is expressed in this balance. […] that this guiltlessly guilty person accepts punishment voluntarily—this is the sublimity of tragedy.[56]

Himmler harps on this notion of being 'guiltlessly guilty' and bends it to imply that he accepts the moral duty of committing atrocities for justice and the greater good of humanity. Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, written upon Prussia's demise at the hands of Napoleon's armies,

52 Claus Langbehn, 'Theater,' in *Wörterbuch Philosophischer Metaphern*, ed. by Ralf Konersmann (Darmstadt: WBG, 2014), pp. 449–463 (pp. 449–454).

53 Julie Stone Peters, 'Politics of City and Nation,' in *Cultural History of Tragedy*, 6 vols (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), IV:125–146 (pp. 125–126).

54 Notably Friedrich Schelling, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Georg Lukácz, Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers, Martha Nussbaum, and Judith Butler; cf. Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

55 Mark Wolfgram, *Antigone's Ghosts: Legacy of War in Five Countries* (Lewisburg: Bucknell, 2019).

56 Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. by Douglas Scott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 255.

models the relation of individual and state after *Antigone*. Hegel renders the equilibrium of 'necessity and freedom' thus:

> The community, however, can only maintain itself by suppressing this spirit of individualism [...] The negative side of the community, suppressing the isolation of individuals within it, but spontaneously acting in an *outward direction*, finds its weapon in individuality. War is the Spirit and the form in which the essential moment of the ethical substance, the absolute freedom of the ethical self from every existential form, is present in its actual and authentic existence.[57]

Individuality succumbs to community to be given 'absolute freedom' in warfare with other communities. As little as it makes sense to declare Hegel responsible for Himmler's crimes, it is hard not to see an affinity between his description of citizenship and Nazi wars of aggression.[58] Hegel's understanding of tragedy is a likely background to Himmler's reference since the philosophy of German idealism had been an element of German secondary school education, which Himmler underwent. The background is relevant since it substantiates that in Himmler's draft the reference to tragedy erases both the individuality of victims and the accountability of perpetrators. Necessity that cannot be helped is the point of his use of the trope of tragedy. It allows him to turn active perpetration into passive subjection to the logic of state power as superior historical force. This justification serves the purpose of avoiding blame—which is put onto others, on 'the Bolshevik method of physical extermination'. It is striking that the others at whom Himmler points the finger invoke tragedy, too, as the third instance of prominent usages of the trope of tragedy demonstrates. It is taken from a subsequent evaluation of perpetration.

3) In his 1956 'secret speech' *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*, Nikita Khrushchev reveals Joseph Stalin's mass violence against members of the communist party throughout the 1930s, known as 'purges'. Khrushchev uses the trope of tragedy to find an equilibrium between condemning the violence and maintaining the legitimacy of communism:

57 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), C.(BB).VI.A.b, pp. 288–289.

58 An analysis of the link, and the "German obsession with the tragic" in National Socialism, Hans-Dieter Gelfert, *Die Tragödie: Theorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vaderhoeck&Rupprecht, 1995), pp. 140–143.

> Stalin was convinced that this was necessary for the defense of the interests of the working classes against the plotting of enemies [...] He saw this from the position of the interest of the working class, of the interest of the laboring people, of the interest of the victory of socialism and communism. We cannot say that these were the deeds of a giddy despot. He considered that this should be done in the interest of the party, of the working masses, in the name of the defense of the revolution's gains. In this lies the whole tragedy [трагедия]![59]

As Hannah Arendt notes, 'Khrushchev's startling admission [...]—for the obvious reason that his audience and he himself were totally involved in the true story—concealed considerably more than they revealed'.[60] While revealing the 'purges' within the communist ranks, he kept silent about the millions of other people killed by the 'Great Terror',[61] and thus managed to conceal, Arendt concludes, 'the criminality of the regime as a whole'.[62] Because of its multiple authors and intended audiences, the speech offers multiple perspectives on the Stalin era.[63] One important purpose of the speech is damage containment, 'to foist upon Stalin ultimate responsibility for the transgressions of the Soviet regime [...], and thereby absolve the very structure of Soviet power and one-party dictatorship'.[64] The trope of tragedy is part of the rhetoric of damage containment, because in tragedy the protagonist, according to Aristotle, is an 'eminent' man 'who falls into adversity not through evil and depravity, but through some kind of error'.[65] Tragic error is born out of moral dilemmas and limited human power. Stalin's error, Khrushchev's reference to tragedy suggests, was that he 'was a believer in communist transformation, but he had fallen from the path of Leninism'.[66] Casting Stalin's reign of terror in terms of a

59 Nikita Khrushchev, О культе личности и его последствиях [On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences] (Moskow: Politizdat, 1959), p. 59; trans. to English in Valentino, *Solutions*, p. 112.

60 Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest, 1973), p. xxix.

61 Jonathan Daly, *Crime and Punishment in Russia* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 129.

62 Arendt, *Origins*, p. xxix.

63 Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union 1933–70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 23.

64 James Ryan and Susan Grant, 'Introduction: Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism,' in *Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism*, ed. by James Ryan and Susan Grant (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1–18 (p. 2).

65 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a.8–12.

66 James Ryan and Susan Grant, 'Introduction: Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism,' in Revisioning Stalin and Stalinism, ed. by James Ryan and Susan Grant (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 1–18 (p. 2).

tragic error makes possible an equilibrium between moral condemnation and maintaining the hierarchy of the system which relies on 'eminent' men, such as Khrushchev, even to denounce its 'eminent' men.

In their focus on the perpetrators' role, both Khrushchev's and Himmler's uses of the trope of tragedy differ profoundly from Lévi's invocation of tragic necessity from the point of view of victims. This flexibility of the trope is granted by the fact that calling a historical situation a tragedy or tragic does not differentiate roles. This is also true in view of a further stark contrast: Khrushchev's use is akin to Himmler's in turning active perpetration into passive subjection to historical necessity, yet Himmler does not at all seek to imply error but certainty. Still, this volatility is no dysfunctional aberration, but the rhetorical potential of tropes, allowing very different situations to be put into one line of thought, into one coherent interpretation of history. For when Khrushchev refers to 'tragedy', he evokes the same context as Himmler's allusion: philosophical reinterpretations of tragedy in terms of history.

Karl Marx had been an avid reader of Hegel, with the result that tragedy became a key element of 'revolutionary romanticism' and, as Michael Smith puts it, of the 'tortured ethic of Socialist Realism that wound its way through literature, history-writing, the popular media and daily life'.[67] In nineteenth-century philosophy, the understanding of tragic plot changes fundamentally: the Greek notion of a 'spiralling downward from possibility and nobility into dejection and defeat' turns from the end of the story into a transitory necessity, 'one moment in the upward, salvation trajectory of a romance'.[68] This background highlights why Khrushchev's reference to tragedy is damage containment: Stalin's error was horrendous but transitory. Yet in relying on the familiar notion of revolutionary history as tragic, Khrushchev's condemnation of the 'purges' employs the same imagery as their earlier justifications. As Katerina Clark notes, 'the increasing emphasis on revolutionary sacrifice in Stalinist hagiography more or less coincides with the […] intensification of the purges'.[69] Soviet mass violence is justified and condemned in terms of the same trope of tragedy, because the condemnation aspires to construct a continuous—rather than broken down—history 'of the

67 Michael Smith, 'Stalin's Martyrs: The Tragic Romance of the Russian Revolution', in *Redefining Stalinism*, ed. by Harold Shukman (London: Cass, 2003), pp. 95–129 (p. 96).

68 Ibid.

69 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 177.

victory of socialism and communism'. The transmission of the trope of tragedy as a frame for understanding history does not end with the demise of one of its actors. Khrushchev aborted Stalinist hagiography, yet the notion of tragic history survives, not least in a problematic mimetic participation of critical analysis, as Smith expounds in 2003:

> The paradigm of tragic remembrance was highly adaptive. The historiography is implicated in this paradigm, too [...]. The violence so pervasive through the long Russian Revolution haunts the historiography. 'Tragedy' has become one of its most universal themes and enduring clichés. [...] Shakespearean imagery comes easy with a tyrant like [Stalin]. But we should guard ourselves against colouring our narratives too dramatically with the spectacles of violence that raise tyrants and count victims. Because in doing so, we participate in the culture of violence.[70]

In a 2005 speech, president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, adopts the notion of tragic history, stating:

> the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical [*catastrophe*] [катастрофой] of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine *drama* [настоящей драмой]. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory.[71]

This political historiography, outlined in the vocabulary of Greek tragedy, is the background justifying the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine, aimed at making up for the 'drama'.[72] In his speech of 22 February 2022 preceding the invasion, Putin spoke of 'inevitable tragic consequences for the country [неизбежных трагических для страны последствиях]'[73] should Ukraine stay on its course. Overtly a lament over the state of affairs, this reference to tragedy is unmistakably a

70 Smith, 'Martyrs', pp. 114–5; our brackets.

71 Vladimir Putin, *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, 25 April 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>; translated to English <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> [accessed 23 February 2022]; our brackets.

72 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448a.28. Certainly related but not yet published is Nicolai Petro, The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us about Conflict Resolution (Berlin: deGruyter, 2022), forthcoming.

73 Vladimir Putin, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 22 February 2022, <https://russische-botschaft.ru/ru/2022/02/22/obrashhenie-prezidenta-rossiyskoy-fed/>, translated to English <https://russische-botschaft.ru/de/2022/02/22/address-by-the-president-of-the-russian-federation> [accessed 04 March 2022].

covert threat of consequences should Ukraine not give in to Russian demands. Putin's reference to tragedy detaches violence from a responsible actor, and binds current warfare to Khrushchev's strategy of simultaneously voicing and silencing past mass violence. In a 2015 speech held on the opening of the 'Monument to the Victims of Political Repression Wall of Grief', Putin did not mention Stalin but 'spoke vaguely of the "tragedy" […] and "dark events" that should never be forgotten or justified'.[74]

4) A fourth instance of usage of the trope will further illustrate why tragedy is particularly well suited to analyze the problematic mimetic participation of critical analysis in discourses justifying mass violence against which Smith cautions. The instance is taken from a 1942 call to resistance against Nazi mass violence, the opening of the first leaflet of the Munich student resistance group White Rose, whose core members were executed in 1943. The authors refer to tragedy and the most canonical German author to capture the readers' goodwill:

> Goethe speaks of the Germans as a tragic people [*einem tragischen Volke*], like the Jews and the Greeks, but today it would rather appear that they are a spineless, will-less herd of hangers-on, who now [...] are waiting to be hounded to their destruction. So it seems—but it is not so.[75]

Here, the trope of tragedy is employed as appeal to the indisputable cultural authority of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The reference is rhetorically authoritative but textually dubious. A likely source we could identify is a *fictional* dialogue between Goethe and Schiller in a 1941 essay published by the Prussian Academy of Sciences—which, however, mentions neither Greeks nor Jews.[76] It is unclear whether the authors were aware of the fictitious character of their reference, yet either way this does not impair its rhetorical function. Every reference to the cultural canon entails its reinterpretation in a given context, and there is no shortage of examples of invention working as an extreme form of reinterpretation. Philological accuracy is not what is critical to the

74 Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler, *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia* (Indiana University Press, 2021), p. 7.

75 Hans Scholl and others, 'Flugblätter der Weißen Rose I,' <https://www.weisse-rose-stiftung.de/widerstandsgruppe-weisse-rose/flugblaetter/> [accessed 31 December 2022]; translated to English in Paul Shrimpton, *Conscience before Conformity* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2018), p. 147.

76 Eduard Spranger, 'Schillers Geistesart,' in *Erzieher zur Humanität*, ed. by Otto Dürr (Heidelberg: Quelle&Meyer, 1972), pp. 184–268 (p. 268). The passage is marked as fictional by the expression 'a new conversation of the two' (*einem neuen Gespräch der beiden*).

White Rose leaflet. Its point is to elicit participation in resistance, and the reference to Goethe's authority serves this purpose. It aims at raising the readers' desire to live up to how the author of *Faust: A Tragedy* supposedly saw them, namely as being 'a tragic people' in the romantic nineteenth century notion mentioned above: erring temporarily (by supporting the Nazis) but proceeding on an upward trajectory to salvation (from Nazi rule). The leaflet's rhetoric is based on an often overlooked dimension of the trope: tragedy implies a spectator.

Tragedy and the Implicated Spectator

Qualifying mass violence as tragedy, we stated at the outset, implies the notion of a violent but limited plot. This corresponds to the view of acts of mass violence as single, exorbitant incidents which may be held by different voices: those who plan and justify acts of mass violence (as necessary for the greater good, like Himmler), those who evaluate such acts (as transitory error, like Khrushchev), but also those who criticize and commemorate them. Lea David writes: 'In 2014, the United Nations (UN) adopted *memorialization standards*, promoting Western memorial models as a template for the representation of past tragedies or mass crimes'.[77] Speaking of 'past tragedies' is in itself a central 'memorial model' linking memorialization to the assumption that the respective acts of mass violence are bygone and distanced from the present observer. This is an understandable hope, but logically at odds with the performance of memorialization which represents episodes of the past as having a formative and identificatory meaning for the present and the future. The ambivalence of temporal insularity and ongoing transmission is mirrored in tragedy: as a part of the Attic state cult, tragedy has been a matter of the past for more than two millennia; as trope, it has permeated a plethora of discourses ever since.

Of relevance for discourses on mass violence is that ancient tragic performance and its complex reception history linked fact and fiction. This link might appear problematic from a historiographical and juridical point of view. Yet its point is not to feign facts but to comprehend political communities, and participation in social structures, as production.

In Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BCE), a chorus voices Zeus' dictum that has been read as the purpose of tragedy: 'wisdom comes by suffering

77 Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 4.

[τὸν πάθει μάθος]'.[78] About hundred and twenty years later, Aristotle conceptualizes this way of learning as catharsis, as fictional plot creating a factual psycho-social effect in the audience. Yet roughly fifty years before Aristotle expounds his paradigmatic poetics of tragedy, Plato is alarmed by the fact 'that imitations [μιμήσεις] […] settle down into habits and nature',[79] that tragic fiction begets political facts. Plato, therefore, rules out literary representation: 'our polity is framed as a representation [μίμησις] of the fairest and best life, which is in reality, as we assert, the truest tragedy [τραγῳδίαν τὴν ἀληθεστάτην]'.[80] Plato's 'truest tragedy' is no 'true tragedy' in the modern sense of a negative event, but the best conceivable production of human life in a community devoid of suffering. This glance at the conceptual history of tragedy indicates that already at the outset of its reception in classical philosophy, tragedy is, at the same time, a poetical genre and a trope of political discourse that points to two contrasting notions of social production, particularly of how individual participation in the community can be brought about. Tragedy's subsequent reception in a broad variety of discourses spans the scope of *mimesis* as representation and becoming by imitation. As in modern languages, Latin *tragoedia* denotes both a theatrical performance and a deplorable event.[81]

Both aspects come together in modern dramas, and artworks in general, which negotiate perpetration and the transgenerational effects of mass violence. They face the criticism that referring to tragedy bestows a meaning onto meaningless suffering.[82] Aesthetic imposition of meaning onto suffering is particularly problematic in redemptive narratives that prioritize relief over affectedness in adapting Aristotle's concept of catharsis. Theodor Adorno notes in 1974: '[w]hen genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature […] it implies, purposely or not, that even in the so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes'.[83] But since not addressing acts of mass violence amounts to denial, critical works

78 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. by Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 177.

79 Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), V:395d.

80 Idem, *Laws*, trans. by R.G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), XI:817b.

81 Carol Symes, 'Forms and Media,' in *Cultural History of Tragedy*, 6 vols (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), II, 15–26.

82 Jonas Grethlein, 'Die Tragödien der Shoa,' in *"Holocaust"-Fiktion: Kunst Jenseits der Authentizität*, ed. by Iris Roebling-Grau and Dirk Rupnow (Paderborn: Fink, 2015), pp. 113–131 (p. 118).

83 Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment,' in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. by Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), pp. 177–195 (p. 189).

of contemporary literature desist from consolation by questioning the participatory intent of readers, or spectators: why watch, or read, the representation of atrocious violence or its desolate aftermaths? Critical artworks reflect the ambivalence of audience interest in the commemoration of mass violence, which may inspire awareness and empathy for victims, but may equally exploit them as a source of both entertainment (akin to crime fiction) and complacent consolation (of being on the morally right side).[84]

Reflecting on his writing, Lévi negotiates the role of his audience in a passage that evokes tragedy's ambivalent implication of temporal insularity and ongoing transmission:

> when describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have deliberately assumed the calm, sober language of the witness, neither the lamenting tones of the victim nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge [...] only in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his talk, which is that of preparing the ground for the judge.[85]

Along the same lines, Gideon Hausner, the chief Israeli prosecutor in the Eichmann trial, writes: 'It was beyond human powers to represent the calamity in a way that would do justice to six million tragedies. The only way to concretize it was to call surviving witnesses […], and to ask each of them to tell a tiny fragment of what he had seen and experienced'.[86] Lévi's testimony evokes a broader audience. The passage ends with 'you are the judges [*I giudici siete voi*]'[87]— you, the readers of Lévi's text. This address brings out an ambivalence in Lévi's poetics of witness, tangible in the trope of tragedy. Speaking of 'the tragic world of Auschwitz' delimits the experience of victimization both spatially and temporally. At the same time, Lévi's text relies on its ongoing transmission by high-

84 Juliane Prade-Weiss, 'Complicities, Re-presented: Literary Portrayals in Totalitarianism and Neoliberalism,' in *Compromised Identities? Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond: Compromised Identities?*, ed. by Stephanie Bird and others (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), forthcoming.

85 Primo Lévi, *If this is a Man/The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987), p. 382 [English original].

86 Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem* (New York: Harper&Row, 1966), p. 292.

87 Judith Woolf, "From If this is a Man" to "The Drowned and the Saved"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, ed. by Robert Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 35–49 (p. 38).

lighting the participation of the audience that is requisite to rendering a performance of actors a tragedy and an account a testimony.[88]

Taking the reference to tragedy in discourses on mass violence at face value points to a much-commented aspect of the juridical paradigm of genocide studies: apart from discovering facts and culprits, the law 'often functions as emotional theater'.[89] Trials do not only examine but also stage the role agents play in committing wrongdoings. They contribute to forming the 'image of the perpetrator […] as an *extreme other*', Kjell Anderson writes, by reintroducing clearly defined roles into situations 'characterized by the breakdown in social relationships'.[90] Arendt reluctantly remarks that the Eichmann 'trial resembles a play in that both begin and end with the doer, not with the victim'.[91] Shoshana Felman points out that, far from being a defect, 'the dramatic *was* indeed endowed with *legal meaning*'.[92] Yet the dramatic meaning of trials addresses the general public, staging 'justice not simply as punishment but as a marked symbolic exit from the injuries of a traumatic history: as liberation from violence itself'.[93] The post-1945 trials have 'assumed the metaphysical and cathartic dimensions of tragedies', as Richard Golsan notes.[94] His reference to tragedy does justice to the Greek literary genre. Staging the triumph of (rational) justice over (irrational) violent emotions in front of the public eye had been a key domain of Attic tragedy, paradigmatically articulated in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the only fully preserved tragic trilogy. The *Oresteia* settles that kinship-based norms of retaliation shall be replaced by a law-abiding court of citizens in Athens; that public ritual lament—taken to arouse vindictiveness—shall be silenced; and that revenge (embodied in the Erinyes) shall be transformed into the spirit of benevolence (the Erinyes renamed as Eumenides).

88 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 70-71: 'Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude.'

89 Kjell Anderson, 'The Perpetrator Imaginary: Representing Perpetrators of Genocide,' in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide,* ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23–48 (p. 29).

90 Ibid., p. 24 and 30.

91 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 9.

92 Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 161.

93 Ibid., p. 1.

94 Richard Golsan, 'The State, the Courts, and the Lessons of History,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, ed. by Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 513–534 (p. 514).

On the one hand, the tragic antagonism of juridical norms is ill suited for describing acts of mass violence as they do not spring from a conflict of norms, but from norms which legitimize violence.[95] On the other hand, it is, still, the very emotional theatre of codified law staged in the *Oresteia* to which Lévi refers in stating that he represents 'the tragic world of Auschwitz' neither in 'lamenting tones […] nor the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge' but in the role of a witness 'preparing the ground for the judge'. In the *Oresteia*, what Feldman calls 'liberation from violence' is attained by integrating violent impulses into the body politic, adopting the Erinyes-turned-Eumenides as deities of the polis. This classical background is relevant for modern trials since it helps to clarify the issue of audience participation. The definition of clear-cut roles produces clarity where it is acutely absent. Clarity is attained, however, by 'removing perpetration from the collective context',[96] and so juridical discourses tend to under-address forms of involvement such as complicity.

The primary audience for the establishment of clarity is the public. Affecting the public is the purpose of the 'emotional theatre' of the law, just as it had been the purpose of ancient Greek tragedy: a competition of three tragic trilogies, staged on three consecutive days, was an element of the Attic state cult; all (viz. male) citizens not involved in performing formed the audience which declared the winner.[97] Lévi's address to his audience as judges refers to this aesthetico-political convention of ancient Greek tragic performance. The plot of the *Oresteia* mirrors the process of aesthetic judgement in producing the triumph of codified law over the supposedly archaic, violent convention of retaliation in front of the political collective. A similar staging of the triumph of a legal norm over a violent social form can be seen in contemporary war crimes trials. As a 'theatre of justice'[98] addressing the public, the trials respond to the counterintuitive fact that mass violence is made to be seen, too. Sémelin notes that 'the act of massacring is the most spectacular practice which those in power have at their disposal to assert their ascendancy, martyrizing and destroying the bodies of those

95 Martin von Koppenfels, *Schwarzer Peter: Der Fall Littell, die Leser, und die Täter* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), p. 83.

96 Anderson, 'Imaginary,' p. 31.

97 P.E. Easterling, 'A Show for Dionysus,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. by idem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 36–53 (p. 38).

98 Felman, *Unconscious*, p. 2.

identified as their enemies'.[99] Mass violence stages power, even if it is denied before, during, and after the act; prosecutions for genocide and crimes against humanity stage an overruling, corrective power.

Classical tragedy and modern trials that prosecute acts of mass violence can be understood as media of performing, and thus reinforcing, fundamental social norms and institutional procedures for the sake of consoling the audience. For although Aristotle's concept of catharsis has been read in different ways, one politically relevant understanding is that the production of violence on stage provides purification from the politically detrimental affects of misery and fear.[100] Just as the Erinyes-turned-Eumenides are integrated into the new legal order in the *Oresteia*, eliciting potentially overwhelming emotions during the play serves to integrate into the social sphere emotions that can neither be ignored nor accepted to dominate political action. While often deemed problematic, the emotional aspect of the 'theater of justice' in modern trials does not run counter to the fact-based determination of truth. It hinges on that notion: what can grant public consolation in the face of mass violence is the performance of institutions capable of identifying and punishing culprits. While this consolation is often cut short by the realities of court procedure, a structural conflict between truth-claims and emotional consolation arises when the perpetrator role is staged in academic discourse: 'academic studies run the risk of staging a form of epistemic theater', Daniel Bultmann notes, when methods of 'access to the field and the positionality of the researcher are excluded from the analysis'.[101] Taking the trope of tragedy in discourses on mass violence at face value serves not to find a coherent meaning in its divergent uses (it cannot be found), but to point out what demands attention in all of the different scenes we have outlined: the role of the spectator. This is particularly true for justificatory discourses.

In political rhetoric, the trope of tragedy marks the audience in front of which acts of mass violence have to be justified or condemned. Khrushchev does not only speak *about* Stalin's terror, but also *to* an audience; the paradox of a secret speech testifies to an awareness of the pivotal role of recipients in justifications. Himmler's memorandum speaks *of* planned actions and *to* implied readers to whom he seeks to

99 Sémelin, *Purify*, p. 6.

100 Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. by Corinne Pache (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

101 Daniel Bultmann, 'Evidence and Expert Authority via Symbolic Violence: A Critique of Current Knowledge Production on Perpetrators,' *JPR*, 3.1 (2020), 207–213 (p. 208).

present mass violence as just. Labelled 'top secret',[102] Himmler's memorandum suggests that the audience of justificatory discourses includes, as Anderson notes, 'the perpetrator's self-image',[103] which demands that any sense of guilt must be appeased. In discourses justifying mass violence, the trope of tragedy that implies an emotionally affected, judging audience points out the social context in which violence requires justification. This is also true for political positions that decide not to sanction mass violence. Perry's references to tragedy mark the awareness that both the inactivity in Bosnia and the intervention in Rwanda must be justified.

In politics, popular parlance, theory, and literature, the trope of tragedy marks the fact that a social community is a production which elicits participation in a dramaturgy of distance and involvement. Evoking the cultural memory of tragedy as theatrical production implies an audience, where the spectator is both distanced from, and emotionally affected by, the action on stage. Taking evocations of tragedy in discourses on mass violence at face value, particularly in justificatory discourses, facilitates the highlighting of audiences' implication[104] in the transmission of their terminology, narratives, and heuristics—in which the exculpating reference to tragedy is a pervasive element. The issue that mimetic participation in discourses justifying mass violence may effect their transmission is particularly pressing in scholarly analysis.

What to do about the trope of tragedy in the language of research? Dismissing it seems short-sighted, precisely in view of the participation that the poetics of tragedy highlights. Partaking in a common hermeneutical framework is unavoidable, as researchers are part of communities that communicate based on a cultural canon and thus cannot but share in cultural memories. That, however, makes it even more mandatory to reflect on the implications of common tropes: the distance which terms seem to provide—be it aesthetic, as in the trope of tragedy, be it analytical, as in the supposed descriptor 'ethnic cleansing'—is part of the production.

102 Himmler, 'Denkschrift,' p. 195: *geheime Reichssache*.

103 Anderson, 'Imaginary,' p. 37.

104 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

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