

**Memories of kindness, memories of betrayal:
Rescuers, Collaborators, and Dealing with the Past in the aftermath of Genocides and
Conflicts**

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Abstract: *The framework of human rights and transitional justice, which has received growing attention in the previous two decades, is focused on perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. However, two categories have been unfortunately absent from most discussions and projects: rescuers – those who crossed ethnic or national lines to help people from a persecuted groups (e.g. Hutus who protected Tutsis during the genocide in Rwanda), and collaborators – those who were perceived to betray their national groups by assisting the enemy regime (e.g. members of the African National Congress who became informers and helped the White Apartheid regime). Reckoning with the legacy of past conflicts and atrocities, and rebuilding societies based on democracy and respect for human rights, would be very difficult without addressing the lessons from these two groups. Documenting and commemorating the actions of rescuers can assist in achieving reconciliation, contribute to societal debate on the role of bystanders and help rebuilding a society based on taking individual responsibility. Engaging with the issue of collaboration would also assist in reaching truth and reconciliation, and ending cycles of violence and reprisals. This essay calls for more engagement with these issues by policymakers, human rights practitioners and academics.*

In recent years there has been considerable interest in the field of “Transitional Justice”: an international field of practice and scholarship which is focused on actions taken in the aftermaths of genocides and conflicts, such as truth commissions, prosecutions or reparation programs. The almost exclusive focus of attention, by both practitioners and academics, has been on two categories of individuals: perpetrators and victims. Thus, the discourse and activity centred on the questions of punishment of perpetrators (through various means ranging from the International Criminal Court to local prosecutions) versus the benefits of amnesties, and on the rights of victims to justice, truth and compensation. However, two categories have been unfortunately absent from most discussions and projects: rescuers – those who crossed ethnic or national lines to help people from a persecuted groups (e.g. Hutus who protected Tutsis during the genocide in Rwanda), and collaborators – those who were perceived to betray their national groups by assisting the enemy regime (e.g. members of the African National Congress who became informers and helped the White Apartheid regime). Reckoning with the legacy of past conflicts and atrocities, and rebuilding societies based on democracy and respect for human rights, would be very difficult without addressing the lessons from these two groups. This essay calls for more engagement with these issues by policymakers, human rights practitioners and academics.

Commemorating rescuers:

The most developed programme commemorating rescuers is the Righteous among the Nations project run by Yad-Vashem, the Israeli official Holocaust Remembrance Authority. This programme has identified over 22,000 people as “righteous” – non-Jews who, with risk to their own lives, took concrete actions to protect Jews during the Holocaust. The programme includes commemoration, research and public education, and the figure of the “righteous” during the Holocaust has consequently also been commemorated in several European countries. Perhaps surprisingly, this model was not used in any other post-genocide or post-conflict context. In Rwanda, rescuers have been identified and commemorated by several NGOs and survivor associations; there have also been some deceleration by the

government. However, all these efforts remained fragmented, in very early stages and lacking support. In Bosnia, two NGOs – the Research and Documentation Center (RDC) and GARIWO – have projects dealing with rescuers, yet here as well their impact and visibility remain very limited to date. In other contexts, from South Africa to Sri Lanka, no efforts have been done to document and commemorate the actions of rescuers.

The potential benefits of commemorating rescuers are:

A) *Contributing to reconciliation between groups.* The cause and outcome of many political/ethnic conflicts is the collective dehumanisation of the Other group. Showing that some members of the “enemy” group have not only not been perpetrators, but in fact risked their lives to help people from the other group, can surely work toward rehumanizing and countering collective demonization, countering the prejudice that all Hutus/Serbs/etc are murderers. One of the goals attributed to war crimes trials is that of individualizing guilt (Bass 2000); commemorating rescuers can achieve the same goal. It can demonstrate the ability to transcend an US/THEM framework and loyalties, showing that ethnic divisions are often manufactured as much as they are natural. The acknowledgment of those who resisted genocide and abuses can be an effective tool in rejecting a vision of nationalistic divide and promoting a transformation of societal relations, making an important contribution toward reconciliation.

From author interview with a member of the organization GARIWO (Sarajevo) (2008):

“These kind of stories [about rescuers] are the only thing that can make the process of reconciliation complete. If you have real examples of others that were “good”, people can develop their own opinions about the other nation; if we just listen to the media and to leaders who are talking in language of hate and stereotypes, we are screwed. That’s why it’s the only way, when you heard about someone, when there are good people in the other side, they’re not all bad – and we’re not all good, that’s another thing – that’s the only way to make the process of reconciliation work.”

B) *Responding to the challenge of the passive bystander.* One of the main challenges for societal reckoning in dealing with the past in the aftermath of conflict and repression is how to deal with the passive bystanders: those who say “we didn’t know”, or “there was nothing we could have done” (Cohen 2001). Transitional justice mechanisms have mostly failed to respond adequately to the complicity of those who did not intervene to stop abuses or those who benefited from the situation (Fletcher 2007); the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, was often criticized for this failure. Acknowledging rescuers can make a valuable contribution toward meeting this challenge and influencing the national discourse: demonstrating to society that some people *did* know and *did* do something can help invalidate the “alibis” of the others, putting a mirror in front of the passive bystanders, showing the obligations and responsibilities of individuals to act to save strangers. An NGO report advocating more commemoration of rescuers in Rwanda argued that “The righteous are living proof that choice was possible” (PRI 2004). In other words, the rescuers can be seen as a proxy through which societal reckoning with the legacy of passive bystanders can be encouraged.

C) *Contributing to forward-looking civic education.* Commemorating rescuers is not just about dealing with the past but also have a forward-looking element, building a society based on values of taking responsibility to learn and to act, against blind obedience and indifference – relevant also for taking actions on issues such as domestic violence, crime, or poverty.

For lack of space, other potential gains of commemorating rescuers will be summarized only very briefly: engaging with the issue of rescuers can assist in truth-seeking process, creating a richer historical record of events, and gaining a better understating of society as a whole, including – through contrast – understanding the behavior of perpetrators; Engaging with the responsibility of passive bystanders can also be part of achieving support in the society for

measures such as financial reparations for victims; Rescuers can also serve as an effective antidote for the denial of genocides and atrocities; Opportunities to acknowledge and thank rescuers could in some cases help the rehabilitation of victims and survivors. Finally, the rescuers themselves were often also victims, persecuted by their in-group because of their actions, but they can often be neglected by reparation programs unless their status is publicly recognized.

While all of the goals above would be commonly be desired in and of themselves, it is important to note that there can be a contradiction, or at least a tension, in pursuing all of them simultaneously, and this should be kept in mind when designing actual projects. For example, if the goal is to encourage reconciliation between ethnic/national groups (through convincing people that not all members of a group with which they were in conflict are villains) the emphasis and spirit of an intervention would be different than if the goal is to generate a debate on the culpability of passive bystanders in a society; if one seeks to cultivate reconciliation the shape of the intervention would be different than if one seeks to discourage blind obedience to government. Therefore projects will have to begin with identifying the particular goal they seek to achieve.

Potential counter-productive effects of commemorating rescuers:

As with almost any policy in the aftermath of genocide and conflicts, the commemoration of rescuers could also have unintended and even negative consequences, and it is important to detail these as well.

For example, there is a danger that the role, numbers or overall importance of rescuers would be exaggerated and result in an over-sentimental, inaccurate, view of the past. This could also then have implications regarding the willingness of a group to carry a collective burden to compensate victims, through for example the granting of reparations or affirmative action programs. In other words, while one of the potential goals is to counter notions of collective responsibility that stigmatize an entire ethnic or national group, this can be “overdone” to the degree that it will erode willingness to apply collective responsibility even when one is actually legitimate (e.g. a collective financial burden). A related potential risk is that the rescuer label will over-emphasize or exaggerate the risks that rescue or resistance have entailed, thus in fact giving too much of an excuse to the passive bystanders.

An exaggerated emphasis on rescuers can result in taking focus away from victims, or in portraying them purely as passive object of rescue. The rescuers should not “become the story” in a way that lead to resentment from victims and survivors. This can be a particular worry when the outsiders or the international community exalt rescuers to the degree that victims feel bitter (see e.g. in Rosoux 2006).

Another potentially problematic consequence can be if a strict dichotomy between rescuers/righteous and the non-righteous is created, in a way that can stigmatize the rest of the group. This is a critique that was leveled at the Yad-Vashem project: Bartov (2003) for example argued that “the state’s official recognition of ‘righteous gentiles’ merely highlights the alleged essential characteristics of the majority”; Novik (1999) argued that the intention is to “damn the vast ‘unrighteous majority’”, an “exception that proves the rule”. While I believe Novik’s critique is mistaken in the context of Yad-Vashem, the risk is an important one to confront, and strict dichotomies of righteous/non-righteous should be avoided.

Finally, the fact that the category of rescuers is based on crossing ethnic lines (since rescuers help people from another ethnic/national group) can have some undesired results:

First, many rescuers acted out of pure humanitarianism that does not recognize any ethnic lines; as humans who help humans. Categorizing them as “Serbs” or “Hutus” in order to

designate them as rescuers can erode the perception of pure cosmopolitan humanitarianism that has been the root of their behavior to begin with.

Second, the figure of the rescuer can be in tension with attempts to build non/post-ethnic society. For example, if the categories of “Tutsi” and “Hutu” are erased in favor of “Rwandese”, then the figure of rescuers becomes impossible – and vice versa. This is a paradox whose solution would be tricky.

All of these risks should be acknowledged and addressed; however, recognizing them should not deter policymakers and civil society organizations from engaging in such interventions.

Collaborators:

Collaborators are to some degree the mirror-image of rescuers. They too cross national/ethnic lines, but in this case in order to assist regimes of occupation. In numerous modern conflict, such as in Northern Ireland, South Africa and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the phenomenon of collaboration had a very important role. First, the collaborators and informers themselves have been involved, or facilitated, human rights violations, repression and discrimination. At the same time, reprisals against informers and collaborators by armed groups such as the ANC, IRA or Hamas have themselves been a form of human rights abuse. Indeed, the “necklacing” of alleged informers in South Africa, the kneecapping of alleged informers by the IRA and the executions of alleged Palestinian informers in the West Bank and Gaza are some of the common icons of these conflicts. Moreover, the hunt for collaborators and informers is often merely an excuse for armed groups to assassinate rivals and to silence internal dissent. Often the stigma of informing and collaboration attached itself also to family members. In general terms the phenomena undermines whole communities with suspicion and mistrust. It also important to emphasize that many informers have been recruited through coercion, pressure and blackmail, thus they themselves can also be victims.

The activities of collaborators vary and can include international crimes such as torture, domestic crimes such as spying, and political activities such as propaganda. And even more difficult, sometimes there might even be a right to collaborate or to inform (perhaps even a duty to do so), e.g., when one knows about a planned attack against civilians. This perspective is challenging in the context of national conflicts, and may seem cold and remote to those who view the situation through nationalistic lens; but this may be the unavoidable challenge of inserting a human rights perspective to a political conflict.

Notwithstanding the importance of collaboration and informing – and the actions of armed groups against alleged informers and collaborators – the transitions in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere have not involved societal examination of these issues. However, full truth, justice and reconciliation cannot be achieved without untangling the webs of betrayal and reprisals involved in collaboration, and without such a process the issue is likely to keep pestering society and to re-emerge later on.

There are several similar issues involve in addressing the legacies of rescuers and collaborators. One of them is that of definitions: both categories do not have legal definitions (unlike perpetrators and victims which could be legally defined) and necessitate context-specific definitions. Such definitions would have to address also difficult normative questions: is there a duty to risk one’s life and become a rescuer? What is society’s duty toward rescuers? When, if ever, would blackmail and coercion make the decision to become a collaborator legitimate? Are collaborator legitimate target during a war? While such questions may not have clear answers it is important to try to engage societies and communities in them. Another shared challenge is that of methodology: how can researchers be clear about the identities of rescuers and collaborators? Often these would be harder to identify than those of victims or perpetrators.

In both cases, there is also the resistance and reluctance of societies to formally engage with these issues. Regarding rescuers, members of the victims community may not want to highlight rescuers among their persecutors; and members of the perpetrators community may also not want to highlight these cases, as it would be tantamount to acknowledging that people had a choice (it is telling that the first memorial to rescuers – as oppose to resisters – in Germany was established only very recently). Societies may also be reluctant to engage with collaboration, which makes it impossible to retain a clean image of heroism versus evil. But civil society and policymakers must find way to overcome these challenges.

Finally there is the question of *how* to address these issues, how to deal with the past in such contexts. Regarding both issues, there would be a need to employ the widest possible package of mechanisms. Truth commissions seems like the most suitable way to address these issues, alongside textbooks, monuments, memorials and the other means of public education.

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