



Paul Sobol, survivor of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, watches presentation about horrors of Holocaust during special Holocaust Remembrance Day observance, April 12, 2019, at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, Belgium (U.S. Army/Pierre-Etienne Courtejoie)

Expanding Atrocity Prevention Education for Rising U.S. National Security Leaders

By David Wigmore

Sixty-six years since the Holocaust and 17 years after Rwanda, the United States still lacks a comprehensive policy framework and a corresponding interagency mechanism for preventing and responding to mass atrocities and genocide. This has left us ill prepared to engage early, proactively, and decisively to prevent threats from evolving into large-scale civilian atrocities.

—SCOTT STRAUS, *FUNDAMENTALS OF GENOCIDE AND MASS ATROCITY PREVENTION*

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Deployed globally, U.S. diplomatic, intelligence, and military personnel are positioned to identify and report potential warning signs of atroci-

ties by foreign actors, in some cases beyond the capabilities and reach of the media or private organizations. Some U.S. Government-sponsored education



Young girl participates in United Nations Headquarters 16th commemoration of International Day of Reflection on 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, honoring victims of genocide with flowers, United Nations, New York, April 7, 2010 (Courtesy United Nations/Paulo Filgueiras)

in atrocity awareness and prevention exists for military and civilian professionals; however, this education is not offered to a key set of rising leaders and does not focus enough on prevention before the onset of violence. This gap could be covered by a new course at the senior Service college (SSC) level. The practical objective is to equip rising military and civilian national security leaders in 10-month SSC master's programs to recognize and report on potential atrocity warning signs in addition to regular duties. The reporting mechanism that a course prescribes would activate when other reporting mechanisms are lacking or when no similar information has been reported.

Upstream Prevention

U.S. Government education on atrocities has evolved from awareness to intervention, the latter in keeping with the aforementioned military training, but can do more to teach skills that lead to

actions to prevent them. It also can do more to foster prevention regardless of whether there are, will be, or might be U.S. military operations. This is known as “upstream prevention.”

One type of U.S. Government school convenes rising interagency national security professionals for nearly a year to study issues of strategic significance. In their 10-month programs, SSCs educate students mostly at the rising O-5 to O-6 (military), FS-2 to FS-1 (foreign service), and GS-14 to GS-15 (civil service) levels. This is a critical juncture where officials who have demonstrated the potential to exercise good judgment on issues of national significance will, after graduation, move into senior management positions and assume roles with increasingly strategic influence. Students take core courses; they also take electives based on their specializations and interests. The proposed course is intended as a core course, but there is some room for flexibility, which is discussed later.

From Understanding to Action

Outreach by the author revealed that courses of various lengths and with varying amounts of content on atrocity history and context exist at U.S. Service academies, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Army Command and General Staff College, some single-Service SSCs, and the Department of State. Most teach awareness through studying past atrocities and genocide (such as the Holocaust) and may include local museum visits, but if they address prevention actions directly, they do so largely in an operational context of a U.S. military or developmental agency intervention, often after the onset of violence, to prevent further violence. This is noble and laudable but may be too late to prevent some atrocities. In contrast to upstream prevention, prevention in the context of military or development operations is referred to as “proximate prevention.”

At the Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) II level, including at the National Defense University (NDU) in Washington, DC—the flagship U.S. institution for joint Service and inter-agency national security education—no course exists that emphasizes how to recognize and assess the often nonviolent warning signs of atrocities. The goal is to warn senior U.S. decisionmakers who can leverage all elements of national power, including but not limited to the military, to prevent potential atrocities in the making. The mere threat of U.S. lethality, delivered to the right mala fide actors, could lead to such prevention.

NDU’s deliberately ecumenical allotment of places for interagency and multi-Service students and location in the Nation’s capital make it an ideal candidate to pilot a new course. Having the Central Intelligence Agency; other Intelligence Community components; the Departments of Energy, Justice, and State; USAID; and other organizations supplying students and in many cases faculty chairs and instructors strengthens the justification for this education to be delivered at NDU.

Humanitarian and Strategic Imperatives

There are humanitarian and strategic imperatives to devote the curricular bandwidth to educate rising leaders at SSCs in atrocity prevention. The type of rising leader who attends an SSC, particularly at the JPME II level, will be tasked with keeping focus increasingly on strategic outcomes.

Rising leaders in the process of gaining a credential necessary to earn general officer/flag officer status as well as their civilian counterparts just below senior level (the senior executive service, senior foreign service, senior intelligence service for CIA staff, and senior national intelligence service for Office of the Director of National Intelligence) staff are in positions of increasing influence in the formulation and execution of policy and strategy.

Key Definitions

For the purposes of this article, the term *mass atrocities* reflects the Army defini-

tion of “widespread and often systematic acts of violence against civilians or other noncombatants including killing; causing serious bodily or mental harm; or deliberately inflicting conditions of life that cause serious bodily or mental harm.”¹ A course should not prescribe a numerical starting point for when something is an atrocity or a mass atrocity. For example, the killing of an entire village of 50 people, or all its adults, or all its men and boys, versus the killing of 8,000 men and boys in Srebrenica can both be considered atrocities. However, for illustrative purposes, the massacre of 8,000 in Srebrenica is considered a *mass atrocity* that was part of the larger Bosnian genocide.²

The term *national security professionals* reflects the interagency civilian and multi-Service military students who attend SSCs. The proposed course objectives and topics of instruction follow.

Proposed Course Objectives and Topics of Instruction

Near-Term Desired Learning Outcome (1–3 Years). Students should comprehend and be able to apply the thresholds for issuing a report of assessed warning signs, as well as produce a warning report incorporating course-prescribed elements. Students also should remember U.S. legal, policy, and other justifications for engaging in atrocity prevention.

Mid- to Longer Term Desired Learning Outcome (4–5 years). The application of precursor recognition and reporting skills has become second nature and is a trait of more and more ethical U.S. national security leaders. An annually refreshed active minority of rising senior leaders in the military and elsewhere is now prepared to report on assessed atrocity precursors in addition to regular duties, and where no other reporting exists.

Overall Desired Learning Objectives. Although there is no single causal roadmap of acts that lead to atrocities, students should evaluate, analyze, comprehend, and remember stages of atrocities through review of two or three rubrics. Students should know the types

of national responses to atrocity warning signs or actual atrocities.

Scope of Applied Learning. To contribute to preventing atrocities whether they are directly tied to military conflict or not.

Recommended Course Textbooks. These include Scott Straus’s *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*³ and Samantha Power’s “*A Problem from Hell*”: *America and the Age of Genocide*.⁴ Additional mandatory course reading is Alison Des Forges’s “Ten Lessons to Prevent Genocide.”⁵

Topics of Instruction.

- Why Teach a Specific Set of Atrocity Prevention Skills at SSCs?
- What Is “Active Bystandership”?
- Atrocities and Terrorism
- From Human Security to Responsibility to Protect to Obligation to Prevent: The Evolving Nature of Atrocity Prevention
- Environments Where Atrocities Can Happen and the Phenomenon of “Heroic Prevention”
- Learning to Recognize the Stages of Atrocities

Case Studies.

- Srebrenica
- Misuse of Personally Identifiable Information by Nazi Regime as a Precursor to Mass Deportations and Killings
- Potential U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum visit with specific learning objectives and follow-up discussion
- Reporting Thresholds, Guidelines, and Requirements
- What to Expect Based on Sending a Report

Justification for a New Course

There are many justifications for teaching atrocity prevention at SSCs. First, if not prevented, killings of targeted unarmed civilian populations will continue to claim many lives. USAID reports that “tens of millions of civilians have lost their lives in the last century in episodes of mass killings.”⁶

A U.S. Military Academy *Pointer View* magazine article posits that “genocide and mass atrocity have killed three to four times as many people as war.”⁷ As not all warning signs are violent or sensational, educating national security practitioners to recognize potential precursors is critical. Events that fall below a media reporting threshold may nevertheless warrant being shared with policymakers.

Second, the cost of prevention likely is less than the cost in lives and national treasure of response. National security practitioners, including military leaders, have an ethical obligation to safeguard both. Relatedly, U.S. national security professionals have a moral and ethical obligation to promote human rights, justice, safety, and security.⁸ Accordingly, the proposed atrocity prevention education aligns with the JPME call for character development—specifically, ethical and moral leadership.⁹

Third, on January 24, 2019, the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 was signed into law. The law, which requires U.S. Government-wide efforts to increase early warning capacities,¹⁰ received broad bipartisan support and could be leveraged to generate funding for a new course.¹¹

Fourth, if atrocity prevention continues to be viewed exclusively through a military-operational lens, the full potential of U.S. talent and technology may not be leveraged for prevention, especially upstream prevention. It is also important to point out that there is no guarantee that every atrocity can be prevented, but the United States has an opportunity to increase its capacity with a new course.

Fifth, for some intelligence analysts, the traditional focus may be on strategic decisionmaking in capital cities but not events that affect populations in the countryside. This can create scenarios where atrocity precursors could go unreported or atrocities may occur.

Sixth, in an era of renewed Great Power competition, there is a risk to U.S. credibility in doing nothing in the face of atrocity warning signs. This is discussed later in detail.

Seventh, atrocities occur in the context of armed conflicts more often than not.¹² According to the U.S.-based nonprofit Stanley Foundation, “Since 1945, two-thirds of episodes of mass killing—defined in the study as a minimum of 5,000 civilians killed intentionally—occurred within the context of an armed conflict. Between 1980 and 2010, that figure was 85 percent.”¹³ Conflicts that may not represent existential threats to U.S., ally, or partner interests nevertheless may be breeding grounds for atrocities. Doing nothing could harm U.S. credibility.

Eighth, Executive Order 13279, dated May 18, 2016, states that the “Department of Defense (DOD) shall continue to develop joint doctrine and training that support mass atrocity prevention and response operations and shall address mass atrocity prevention and response as part of its general planning guidance to combatant commands and [S]ervices.”¹⁴

Ninth, early recognition of potential atrocity warning signs enhances a proactive posture for fulfilling the international moral obligation to prevent atrocities in the spirit of the United Nations (UN) policy of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Pillar 3 of R2P asserts, “If a state is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take appropriate collective action, in a timely and decisive manner and in accordance with the UN Charter.”¹⁵ Academic discussion on the efficacy of Pillar 3 centers on its dependence on a UN Security Council whose permanent members have differing strategic interests and where competing Great Powers have played the role of spoiler. A new course’s prescribed warnings do not depend on whether R2P is approved for a given situation; instead, a course would seek to empower action at the individual practitioner level—in the spirit of, but not tethered to, Pillar 3—akin to “see something, say something.”

Finally, in a 2016 report titled *An Assessment of USG Atrocity Prevention Training Programs*, a former advisor on atrocity prevention to the Secretary of Defense reiterated the 2011 Presidential

Study Directive on Mass Atrocities recommendation that DOD “mandate and fund the National Defense University to develop a semester-long course on atrocity prevention.”¹⁶ The 2016 report also noted the following:

*Few USG-run educational institutions offer the kinds of courses that impart more advanced atrocity prevention concepts. Currently, the Department of State Foreign Service Institute, the USAID University, and NDU do not offer in-depth courses on atrocity prevention. Exceptions are found in the DOD universe: the three [S]ervice academies, the Army Command and General Staff College, and the Army War College regularly offer at least one semester-long course on the Holocaust, and/or genocide studies. In almost all of these cases, however, the courses are the result of the individual initiative of professors and instructors with personal or professional interest in the topic. Therefore, it is not clear whether the electives would survive their departure or retirement. Only West Point, with its Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, has created a permanent infrastructure—and even in that case, it resulted from the support of private donors rather than a formal institutional mandate. A related issue is a lack of scaffolding that could help ensure that those who take training at different points in their career are learning concepts comparable to their experience and needs. The lack of any mandatory training contributes to the problem.*¹⁷

Military and Civilian Scholarship and Literature

A 2012 NDU thesis by a Coast Guard officer spoke of the imperative for U.S. policy to include diplomatic and military measures to prevent atrocities. He also pointed out that some geographic combatant commands cover more countries vulnerable to atrocities than others.¹⁸ In a 2014 monograph, an Army Command and General Staff College student wrote that “the military is not properly trained at the individual level” for atrocity prevention operations. The author framed and justified



Memorial with 17,000 quarry stones marks site of Nazi Germany's extermination camp called Treblinka II, in occupied Poland, where approximately 870,000 to 925,000 Jews and others were murdered, November 6, 2010 (Courtesy Adrian Gryczuk)

atrocities prevention along a Clausewitzian model, arguing that both war and genocide are extensions of politics.¹⁹

Additional publications stand out in informing a course syllabus. The specialized and expertly crafted Mass Atrocities Response Operations (MARO) and Mass Atrocities Prevention and Response Operations (MAPRO) manuals²⁰ fall under U.S. peace and stabilization operations; prevention in this context is the aforementioned proximate prevention.²¹ While valuable for some practitioners to learn, the gap the proposed course seeks to address is the teaching of equally and universally relevant upstream-prevention skills.²² MARO and MAPRO will be

discussed, but should not be the backbone of a new course.

Moreover, in *“A Problem from Hell”*: *America and the Age of Genocide*, mentioned above, former UN Ambassador Samantha Power notes that “in the arena of foreign policy, morality is like the emperor’s clothes: everyone pretends it is there. Despite lofty rhetoric by politicians of all colors, in the end Realpolitik overwhelms Moralpolitik.”²³ Nevertheless, Great Power competition, as reflected in the 2018 National Defense Strategy,²⁴ may do well to be informed by *Moralpolitik*, where the U.S. comparative advantage in morality is leveraged to help the United States

and partners prevail against morally ambivalent competitors.

Atrocities Prevention and Great Power Competition

China’s People’s Liberation Army publications argue that China will take on a greater humanitarian intervention role and that they view such operations as a way to project soft power, gain experience, and expand their global footprint and reach.²⁵ Accordingly, Beijing’s basing strategy could be sold as creating logistical hubs to assist humanitarian operations, including in support of its Belt and Road Initiative.²⁶ The U.S. intention to leverage its perceived moral obligation



Wall of names at Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of 1995 Genocide, near Srebrenica, March 18, 2009 (Courtesy Michael Bükler)

to engage globally grates on the Chinese military and is referred to as “the American attitude that ‘I am responsible for every place under the sun.’”²⁷

For the moment, China’s efforts to project soft power through humanitarian assistance appear confined to noncombatant evacuation operations, famine aid, and disaster relief, mimicking what it has seen the United States do. Its forays into humanitarian work are increasing, however.²⁸ Reduction of global crises could make it more difficult for China to justify military expansion on “humanitarian” grounds.²⁹ This informs and further justifies an SSC mass atrocity prevention syllabus by suggesting that there are strategic benefits to the United States expanding its mass atrocity prevention capacity, which would be improved by educating more officials.³⁰

This article assesses that only the United States can lead in atrocity prevention based on its moral underpinnings, strong tradition of equipping national security professionals with ethics, and the reach and might of the Nation itself.

There will be strategic challenges and even dilemmas. For example, the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province provides an example of how China manipulates moral outrage. A cycle of *escalating to deescalate*, where each “new normal” is worse for a vulnerable population than the status quo ante, may be in store. Furthermore, China’s manipulation of humanitarian issues for its own gain has played out with Beijing’s votes on quashing UN reporting on the plight of Rohingya Muslims.³¹

David Shambaugh suggests that China’s strategic culture is one of

parabellum, or “beside war.”³² U.S. military might deters China, but China competes with the United States on other fronts, leveraging its perceived or actual comparative advantages. Shambaugh implies that either the United States address this or risk strategic diminishment, perhaps without a shot being fired. Not every atrocity may be prevented, but increased U.S. focus on atrocity prevention could keep its “moral suasion” reservoir filled in a period of Great Power competition where attracting partners based on shared interests—including beyond the purely economic—remains a U.S. comparative advantage.³³

Further Considerations and Recommendations

A proposed course is not intended to equip SSC students to meet a prosecu-

torial threshold of proof that an atrocity could occur or is occurring, but rather to be able to provide early warning to higher level decisionmakers that conditions may be favorable for one to occur.

A syllabus must incorporate a validated formula where circumstances cross a threshold requiring communication. Although atrocity environments can be complex, a notional diagnostic framework and reporting threshold will be designed for busy professionals whose sole occupation is not atrocity precursor diagnosis.

Making reporting of assessed potential atrocity precursors a critical intelligence requirement for combatant commanders and issuing a similar directive for Intelligence Community personnel would strengthen the impact of the new learning. Having military critical intelligence requirements and Intelligence Community directives overlap is preferable to having gaps between them, but care should be taken to ensure they do not contradict one another. A new course also may require new instructions in the Foreign Affairs Manual.

It merits mentioning that while this article is not about atrocious acts that could be committed by unethical U.S. personnel, it might raise consciousness. Related to ethics, a study conducted among civilian and military students at NDU indicates that SSC-educated civilians are more likely to engage in ethical behavior, even if it is not specifically required, based on the ends justifying the means in a scenario—perhaps suggesting that civilian national security professionals might be more inclined than their military officer counterparts to issue some kind of report of observed atrocity precursors regardless of reporting requirements. In contrast, following existing guidance and maintaining norms were the higher motivation to engage in ethical behavior for military SSC students who were part of the study.³⁴ Regardless of the prevailing pathways to engaging in ethical behavior that the study results indicate, learning atrocity prevention skills would be useful for civilian and military SSC students alike, as well as being in the U.S. interest.

Inauguration of a new course would benefit from one or more statements from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other leaders whose personnel attend SSCs that reporting on assessed atrocity warning signs is authorized, expected, and required. SSC provosts/vice presidents of academic affairs and the head of Joint Force Development (J7) also must endorse a proposal. Whether the reporting requirement is or should be the purview only of officials who are recipients of the prescribed education should be a decision for individual departments and agencies to make; however, an effort should be made to cultivate an interagency professional culture that is geared toward preventing atrocities. The more places such education is provided, the more this will be the case.

The proposed syllabus, albeit truncated above for the purposes of this article, is intended to fit a semester-long, mandatory core course for all SSC military and civilian students in 10-month programs. A semester-long elective may be a second-best scenario if the curricular bandwidth will not allow for all to take such a course. A hybrid may be an elective for some and a mandatory course depending on a student's chosen program. A third, less desirable option (because it may leave out important topics) would be to teach precursor recognition and reporting thresholds as a shorter module. Teaching key elements as part of distance learning or a mobile course also should be explored.

Periodically, based on classroom observations and student surveys, a syllabus should be evaluated and modified as warranted. Readings should be reviewed annually for potential updates. Educators should consider incorporating an updated version of the Shrouded Horizons tabletop exercise from NDU's Center for Applied Strategic Learning into a syllabus.³⁵ A course could fall under ethics or leadership departments or be cross-coded.

Faculty retention and turnover will contribute to a course's endurance and vitality. Atrocity prevention education will benefit from individual and institutional

champions. Institutions such as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum can serve as resources and reservoirs of support. Continued engagement with the museum is recommended.

As a near-term next step, the small but diverse group of interested parties and experts who have already met to discuss a new course should host a symposium that calls on additional experts and additional representatives from NDU.

Conclusion

Atrocities happen in the proverbial shadows or in plain sight, in slow motion or fast, noisily or quietly, but not without warning signs.³⁶ Not all are overtly violent. This article covers the strategic and humanitarian benefit, surrounding literature, relative cost savings, and additional justifications for increasing U.S. capacity to recognize and assess potential atrocity warning signs and prevent targeted killings of unarmed civilian populations on and off the battlefield. Accordingly, the article proposes education not limited to any military operational phase. The education applies to the military students prevalent at SSCs and their civilian counterparts who may be slightly lesser in number but are nevertheless well represented in the NDU classroom. The proposed education imparts portable skills relevant to practitioners at home and abroad.

Even if SSCs only taught military students, the proposed education would garner benefits. Continued and increased engagement in atrocity prevention, bolstered by capacity-growing education, would make deposits into a strategic credibility account the United States can draw on later. Including international students in the education may extend the benefit. If the education prevents harm to a single population, it will be worth the effort.

Selection to attend SSCs reflects individual maturity and potential; equipping SSC students with measures to warn about observed atrocity precursors represents a sound investment in the right people. Filling this gap in atrocity prevention education at SSCs will foster a

continuum of educated national security leaders as well as a shared vocabulary and diagnostic toolkit. A new course will educate leaders who may not have had atrocity prevention education previously, and it may even serve to bolster JPME.

For strategic and humanitarian reasons, rising national security leaders should adopt atrocity prevention as a calling and a duty. SSCs, starting with NDU, would do well to fill a gap and devote the curricular bandwidth to equip them to do so. JFQ

Notes

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