

Investigating Extreme Violence: Editors' Introduction

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All of the authors contributing to this issue of *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* (JHA) agreed to write articles elaborating on the presentations they gave at the international conference hosted by FMSH (Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme) and MSF-CRASH (Médecins Sans Frontières – Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires) on 20–22 March 2019 at the Hôtel de Lauzun in Paris. The title of the conference was 'Extreme violence: investigate, rescue, judge. Syria, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo'. This issue also includes a recent text, germane to the issues surrounding situations of extreme violence, which recounts a research discussion entitled 'Biafra, Humanitarian Intervention and History' held in January 2020 in Manchester by the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute.

The aim of the Paris conference was to present the investigative approaches used by social science researchers, humanitarian practitioners, human rights activists and journalists. This issue of the *JHA* shows that while these groups have different objectives and field practices, there are connections (and in some cases cooperation) between them, and between some of the questions they are asking – for example, questions about the modalities of humanitarian aid; about how, and under what conditions, studies are conducted; about the roles and capacities required of people who serve as intermediaries between the investigators (analysts and practitioners) and the subjects of – or local actors in – conflicts (e.g. current members of armed groups, former combatants, citizen activists and movement spokespeople); about gathering and evaluating witness accounts; and about how difficult it is to know what is happening due to the uncertainties intrinsic to situations of extreme violence, to the fears they – to a certain extent – share, feel and

overcome, to the practices of the various armed groups and authorities, and to unexpected events.

The contents of this issue could have been organised in several possible ways – according to the country the studies looked at, or to their main focus of interest. We chose the latter approach, distinguishing between three categories of studies: those that focused on medical aid activities (Hakim Khaldi, Abdulkarim Ekzayez and Ammar Sabouni, as well as Sophie Roborgh); those whose main thread was a reflection on research situations (Bert Ingelaere and Myfanwy James); and those that retraced the research process and analysed modes of observation in violent places (Justine Brabant and Timothy Longman). These distinctions are not, in truth, clear-cut, nor do they tally with competing, or rival, approaches. They are the expression of different – though not contrasting or conflicting – types of involvement and approaches. Apart from that, all of the authors have one thing in common: they are examining how knowledge is acquired.

The contributors to this issue represent different types of involvement: some of the authors were – and in some cases still are – engaged in humanitarian aid activities in Syria, solidarity, and human rights activities in Rwanda. Others have done fieldwork as researchers and academics in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Reporting from the field as a journalist is discussed with regard to eastern DRC. There is an historian's approach to the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), combined with analysis on the aftermath of the events in Biafra – in particular, the emergence of different types of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and use of the word 'genocide' –

and memory of the Holocaust – to internationalise a cause and mobilise against extreme acts of violence.

Hakim Khaldi, Abdulkarim Ekzayez and Ammar Sabouni were all aid workers during the Syrian conflict and all analysed the situations they observed in the field. Khaldi, as a member of an international humanitarian organisation, tells of the constant, intense negotiations, the position-taking, and the search for the data and information needed to conduct such precarious, dangerous aid operations.

Abdulkarim Ekzayez and Ammar Sabouni are Syrian doctors. They analyse the war tactics employed during the nine years of conflict. They were caregivers confronted with intense violence committed by the Syrian government against civilians and medical facilities – violence designed to ‘induce submission of civilian populations and break their resilience’, using a range of tactics from sieges to chemical weapons. Their descriptions are horrifying and merciless.

Sophie Roborgh, an academic researcher with the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, has a different perspective. Also dealing with the Syrian conflict, she analyses the production of data on the conflict as it was happening – its objectives, relevance and limitations. She discusses, in particular, the investigation and formatting constraints caused by judicial use of the data. Her contribution offers an analytical accompaniment to the preceding articles.

The studies by Bert Ingelaere and Myfanwy James share a Central African context. Their research deals with a period that starts with the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, runs through the wars inside the Democratic Republic of Congo that followed and, over the longer term, those wars in the eastern part of that country, in Kivu, which is still an area with serious armed violence.

Bert Ingelaere spent a long time studying the post-genocide community courts, known as *gacaca*. It represents an extraordinary effort, both for the rigour of its analysis and for its detailed observations during public sessions of those courts. His study was the subject of a book, *Inside Rwanda's Gacaca Courts: Seeking Justice*

after Genocide (University of Wisconsin Press, 2016). The highly original work presented in this issue concerns ‘styles of truth’, and demonstrates a deep understanding of Rwandan ways of thinking. Because it could not be included in the published work, we are happy we can finally offer it here.

Myfanwy James analyses how NGO Médecins Sans Frontières manages project security and negotiates access for its medical teams. Her observations centre on the experiences of the Congolese national staff and its role in aid operations; she focuses on the risks and tensions created by such activities, due in particular to the staff members’ close ties with the local population.

Finally, Justine Brabant and Timothy Longman tell the story of their work on extreme violence by describing the paths they took in their research.

Drawing on her experience as a journalist and as an independent researcher (working regularly in eastern DRC), Justine Brabant examines two particular aspects of journalistic practice observed in the Congo: first, reporters’ *lexical* dependence – for describing war, in particular – and second, their *physical* dependence on humanitarian organisations and its potential effect on the articles produced.

Timothy Longman was one of the authors of Alison Des Forges’ *Leave None to Tell the Story*, a study on the Rwandan genocide published in 1999 by Human Rights Watch and the International Federation for Human Rights. He shows how innovative this study – conducted by a team of researchers – was, and how it continues to have validity despite new questions raised by other studies. He acknowledges that some of the analyses should now be updated with information from studies done since the 2000s.

To conclude this introduction, we should recall one characteristic common to all the contributors: they were all in the field where the conflicts they investigated were happening, either as researchers or, in some cases, as both researchers and humanitarian workers or human rights activists. The research historians studying Biafra are also investigators, but of a different type – they do their fieldwork in the archives.