8 Democra:ies, Dictatorial Regimes, and Atrocities

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Abstract

A lot of research has been done on the relationship between regime type and mass atrocities and other human rights violations. The field has been hampered, however, by the diverse definitions that are employed for these violations and because of the lack of interaction between qualitative and quantitative strands of scholarship. This chapter takes a first step to remedy these difficulties. It will provide an overview of the most prominent empirical research on the relationship between the regime type and the prevalence of atrocities and will reflect on the consensus among scholars that established democracies are least likely to perpetrate mass atrocities. Subsequently, the most commonly used explanations for this finding are set out. In order to understand further why dictatorial regimes are more likely to perpetrate mass atrocities, a qualitative analysis is put forward that links the regime type to other known risk factors for mass atrocities.

Keywords: dictatorship, democracy, repression, risk factors, war, difficult life conditions, history of violence, plural society

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1. Introduction

In 2019, the Freedom House index indicated that for the 13th consecutive year democracy was in decline across the world, and that 37 percent of the world population is currently living in countries that were labeled as “not free.” Perhaps even more troubling, the NGO also noted that existing authoritarian regimes seem to have cracked down harder on any political opposition, violating human rights in the process. Given the latter observation, it is not surprising that dictatorships are generally seen in a negative light. While this has not always been the case (Linz, 2000, p. 61), nowadays dictatorial regimes are frequently associated with widespread repression, economic hardship, and even mass atrocities. Yet the exact relationship between the level of democracy of a country, and the extent to which mass atrocities are perpetrated, remains highly debated, with some scholars arguing that “power kills and absolute power kills absolutely” (e.g., Rummel, 1994, p. 1), and others finding that there is “more murder in the middle,” meaning that mainly countries transitioning to democracy are at risk of mass atrocities being perpetrated (e.g., Fein, 1995).

In addition, the reasons why non-democratic regimes are more likely to perpetrate mass atrocities remain understudied. Most of the quantitative research takes a rational choice decision-making perspective (Hill and Jones, 2014, p. 663) in which regimes are said to weigh the costs and benefits of different measures that are meant to secure their hold on power. Most of the qualitative research looks at broader facets of the interaction between the regime and its population, often moving beyond a clear focus on mass atrocities (e.g., Fromm, 1942; Hoffer, 1951; Post, 2004; Padilla et al., 2007; Moghaddam, 2013). Davenport and Inman
2.1. The crimes

(2012), therefore, suggest that in order to move the eld further, it is important to combine the knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative strands of research. That blending of research is exactly what this chapter aims to do. It will shed light on how dictatorship and democracy is defined in both qualitative and quantitative literature and will survey the reasons why most scholars believe consolidated democracies to be less violent. Furthermore, the chapter will argue that in order to fully comprehend the relationship between the nature of the regime and the extent to which human rights are violated, it is not enough only to analyze the nexus between mass atrocities and the state’s dictatorial or democratic features. Rather, it is equally important to analyze how dictators relate to the other risk factors for mass atrocities that have been identified, such as economic and political crises, war, a plural society, and a history of violence.

Part of the difficulty of reaching an overarching conclusion is that much of the research is difficult to compare. Many scholars have their own definitions of the human rights violations they investigate, and since much of the literature on the topic stems from political science, it tends to avoid the more legalistic terms that are used in international criminal law and criminology, such as international crimes or atrocity crimes. This chapter will delineate some of the key terms and definitions of the various crimes and human rights violations that different authors have developed, sketching how the terminology overlaps or deviates from the core focus of this book, namely, mass atrocities and atrocity crimes. Throughout the chapter, however, when referring back to existing literature, I will primarily use the terms as they were used by the original authors, allowing the reader to assess the extent to which this research contributes to understanding mass atrocities. This chapter will then provide an overview of the scholarly debate surrounding the relationship between regime type and the likelihood that mass atrocities are perpetrated, and will end by theorizing the reasons why dictatorial regimes seem to be more likely to perpetrate mass atrocities, incorporating the other risk factors in the analysis as well.

2. Democracies, Dictatorships, and Atrocity Crimes

Debates on the definition of dictatorial regimes (Richter, 2005, 2007; Kalyvas, 2007; Turchetti, 2008; Liden, 2014), democracies (Donnelly, 1999; Dahl, 2000; Diamond, 2003), and debates on the definition and scope of the violations they perpetrate, abound. Because these diverging definitions complicate any thorough analysis of the relationship between regime type and mass atrocities, I will discuss each in turn, starting with the definitions of the crimes these regimes perpetrate.

2.1. The crimes

The terms used by various social scientists and legal scholars to denote violations of human rights vary and signify different levels of gravity. Some refer to “genocide,” or the broader terms “politicide” and “democide” (Rummel, 1994; Harff, 2003), while others focus on “repression,” which encompasses a wide variety of human rights violations, including many violations which are much less severe (Davenport and Inman 2012, p. 620). In order to analyze the comparability of this body of literature, it is important to analyze the definitions more in depth. Starting with the graver definitions, attention will be paid to both the qualitative descriptive definitions as well as the numerical definitions, often used to guide quantitative literature.

Genocide is legally defined in the 1948 Genocide Convention, and its definition is rather restrictive, encompassing only those situations where there is the intent to destroy (part of) a national, ethical, racial, or religious group. Because genocide excludes per definition political groups that are targeted, the term “politicide” was developed to incorporate a wider array of groups that can potentially be targeted, and several scholars have favored their combined use (Rummel, 1994, Krain, 1997; 2000; Harff, 2003). Rummel (1995, p. 4) explains this rationale by stating that genocide “hardly covers the variety and extent of ruthless murder carried out by governments.” He tried to capture all these forms of violence conceptually by using the word “democide,” which, according to Rummel, encompasses both genocide as well as politicide. More specifically, Rummel holds that democide entails (1995, p. 4)

The intentional killing of people by government. It excludes the killing of those with weapons in their hands or those indirectly killed as a result of military action; it excludes judicial executions for what are normally considered capital crimes, such as murder and treason (unless such are clearly excuses for the executions, as the Stalin show trials in the 1930s).
Krain prefers using the overarching term “state sponsored mass murder” to denote violence that would constitute either genocide or politicide (e.g., Krain, 1997, 2000).

Another common term often used by political scientists is “mass killings” (Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003; Mukherjee and Koren, 2019). In order to distinguish it from genocide, Staub and Bar-Tal (2003, p. 713) hold that mass killings lack the intent to destroy the group as such but is rather done to intimidate or dominate the group. Mukherjee and Koren’s (2019, p. 5) definition of mass killings, in contrast, is quite similar to politicide, as they define these crimes as “situations where the regime intentionally kills a large number of noncombatants for political reasons.”

Kreutz (2006, p. 180) favors the term “government one-sided violence,” using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. He seeks to avoid using high fatality thresholds that other scholars have used, with the aim of being more comprehensive and incorporating all instances where the government kills civilians, as long as they tally 25 deaths per year. Similarly, Mukherjee and Koren (2019, p. 6) focus on rather low death tolls as they aim to analyze local dynamics and, therefore, decided to cover incidents of at least 50 noncombatants.

An even broader term which is frequently evoked is that of “life integrity violations,” stemming from human rights law discourse. Zanger (2000, p. 214) explains that life integrity violations include “state-sponsored torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearance.” The same concept has also been referred to as a “violation of physical integrity rights” (Zanger, 2000, p. 214). Fein is more specific, pointing at a fourfold categorization where “the biological and social integrity of persons and groups” is violated (Fein, 1995, p. 171). These are violations of:

- A) the integrity of mind and body (denied by genocide, murder, torture, and terror); B) of being the owner of one’s labor and being able to move (denied by slavery, segregation, and apartheid); C) the integrity of self and family which creates progeny (denied by prohibiting marriage and family development); and D) of the reciprocal guarantees for the protection of human groups (denied by genocide) (Fein, 1995, p. 171).

Fein, in her research, however, only focused on the first category, which encompasses among others the right to life and to be free from arbitrary seizure or detention.

The research into repression investigates an even wider array of acts, encompassing the violation of civil liberties as well as human rights (Regan and Henderson, 2002, p. 120). Davenport and Inman (2012, p. 620) describe repression as the

(A)ctual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to be challenging to government personnel, practices or institutions.

However, there continues to be some disagreement among scholars about this particular concept, with some authors having a much broader definition than the one just mentioned, exceptionally even including violence perpetrated by non-state actors (Earl, 2011, p. 262).

Some of these conceptual incongruences stem from the various scholarly traditions, and sub-fields, in which these debates have developed. Overall, mass atrocities, international crimes, and state terror seem to denote more serious violations of human rights than repression or life integrity violations. However, since the above-mentioned concepts tend to be very broad, there is a large amount of overlap among the frequently used concepts (Fein, 1995, p. 170; Zanger, 2000, p. 214). Many of the human rights violations discussed in these various works will amount to atrocity crimes and will constitute either war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide. However, some violations, especially in the research focusing on life integrity violations and repression, might not amount to one of the core crimes when they entail isolated incidents, are not perpetrated in a widespread or systematic manner, or occur outside of the context of war. Nevertheless, because the overlap between these categories seems to be significant, the present chapter will incorporate the literature that includes all these various definitions to try to distill the common ground among their findings. It should be noted, however, that it is pertinent that scholars from various academic disciplines find a common language that allows research findings to be more easily comparable and facilitates knowledge being shared across disciplinary boundaries.
2.2. Democracies and dictatorships

There are currently so many different terms to denote democracies, dictatorships, and regimes falling somewhere in between, that some scholars have warned against the emergence of a “terminological babel” (Bogaards, 2009, p. 415). While many scholars use the different terms as synonyms, with some being favored over others at different points in time, the concepts potentially denote subtle differences, which is why the most prominent terms and types of (non-)democratic regimes will be discussed in more depth.

The term “democracy” comes from the Greek word demokratía, which is composed of the words for people (demos) and rule or power (kratos) (Donnelly, 1999, p. 615). Throughout much of its history, the concept denoted the struggle that results from competing interests among different social classes, which meant it was not necessarily looked upon positively (Donnelly, 1999, p. 616; Diamond, 2003, p. 29). As Donnelly (1999, p. 616) explains, “only during the past two centuries have liberal, socialist, and anti-colonial struggles transformed dominant conceptions of ‘the people,’ and thus delegitimized non-democratic rule.”

Quite the opposite holds true for the concept of dictatorship. While today it is usually associated with great misery, the concept originally did not have a negative connotation (Linz, 2000, p. 61). Its origins can be traced back to Roman times, when dictatorship was a constitutional provision that allowed a ruler to take charge, for a maximum of six months, when there was a crisis and order needed to be restored (Kalyvas, 2007, p. 416). The first known rulers to have abused this provision were Caesar and Sulla, tarnishing the positive connotation the concept had enjoyed (Kalyvas, 2007, p. 413). Consequently, the term “dictatorship” became increasingly associated with the term “tyranny,” which always carried a much more negative undertone (Kalyvas, 2007, pp. 413–414; Turchetti, 2008, p. 163).

Whenever scholars used the word “tyranny,” they considered it to be illegal and violent. The tyrant sought to attain power illegitimately and acted to advance his own interest at the expense of the common good (Richter, 2005, p. 224; Kalyvas, 2007, p. 416). As such, it was a much more permanent condition in which the regime fell victim to a malicious leader (Kalyvas, 2007, p. 417; Richter, 2007, p. 12). Because of the importance attached to the individual leader, the idea of tyannicide—killing the tyrant—emerged to remedy his abusive rule (Richter, 2005, p. 224; 2007, p. 12). Throughout the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation, “tyranny” was the favored term to denote abusive rule (Richter, 2007, p. 13). However, from the eighteenth century onward, “despotism” started to become more popular (Richter, 2007, p. 16; Turchetti, 2008, p. 163; p. 172). The term was used to signify a system of rule that ousted its individual ruler (Richter, 2007, p. 16). Originally, the term was used to typify a system of rule where the subjects had willingly, due to culture and tradition, subjugated themselves to the despot (Richter, 2005, pp. 228–229; Turchetti, 2008, p. 166). In sum, while many scholars will use “despot” or “tyrant” as synonymous to a dictator, the terms have a different origin and as such a slightly different meaning.

“Autocracy” can, furthermore, be added as a contemporary term denoting non-democratic rule. According to Tullock (1987, p. 1), autocracy as a concept is distinguishable from dictatorship by including hereditary forms of non-democratic rule, such as kingdoms, in its definitions while these are sometimes seen to lie outside of the scope of dictatorships. Other 20th-century terms, like “authoritarian” and “totalitarian” regimes, rather stem from different typologies that have emerged to distinguish among dictatorial regimes (see e.g., Linz, 2000). The distinction emerged mostly in response to the non-democratic regimes that were influential during the World War II; Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Italy under Mussolini (Tucker, 1965, p. 555). These totalitarian regimes were viewed as “historically novel,” and a debate emerged on the characteristics of the concept itself (Arendt, 1962; Friedrich and Brezinski, 1963, p. 23; Linz, 2000).

In quantitative analyses, the Polity IV database is influential. The database goes beyond the binary distinction between democracy and autocracy and instead captures an “authority spectrum on a 21-point scale ranging from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy),” and suggests a threefold distinction can be made among autocracies, anocracies, and democracies. It does so based on “six component measures that record key qualities of executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority and political competition.” Another influential database is the aforementioned Freedom House index, which also places regimes in three separate categories, namely; Free, Partly Free, Not Free. Freedom House scores the countries from 0 to 4 points on the basis of political rights and civil liberties indicators. The autocratic regimes database of Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) is unique because it is designed to analyze...
Also among democracies, various types and degrees to which democracy is consolidated have been distinguished. An important distinction is, for instance, made between procedural or electoral democracy and liberal democracy. The latter is particularly important when analyzing its relationship with human rights (Donnelly, 1999). The procedural variant, or electoral democracy, does little to facilitate the protection of human rights (Diamond, 2003, p. 30; Donnelly, 1999). In fact, as Donnelly points out, constitutional review is there to limit the will of the people in order to protect the basic rights that are enshrined in the constitution (Donnelly, 1999, p. 620). There is, arguably, a more direct link between “liberal democracy” and the protection of human rights. Definitions of liberal democracy focus on the protection of the rights of citizens, the rule of law, accountability, and pluralism (Zakaria, 1997, p. 22; Donnelly, 1999, p. 620; Diamond, 2003, pp. 29, 34–35). The idea that democracy and systematic human rights violations may go hand in hand was central to the conception of illiberal democracies, which Zakaria (1997, p. 22) explained are “democratically elected regimes ... which are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.” “Illiberal democracy” is one of the many terms used to describe different forms of hybrid regimes which are neither fully democratic nor fully dictatorial (Bogaards, 2009, p. 399). Bogaards (2009) argues that literature generally tends to characterize these regimes either as flawed democracies or as weak authoritarian regimes. Given this more recent work that highlights the gradual distinctions among regimes, the dichotomy between democratic and dictatorial should be considered a false one. Regimes are perhaps better conceptualized as lying somewhere on a spectrum, with ideal typical democracies and dictatorships at either end.

Within this spectrum, there is tremendous variety in the extent to which these regimes perpetrate atrocities. The relationship between regime type and the extent to which a regime perpetrates atrocities is a complex one. Analyzing this relationship is particularly complicated because respect for human rights is inherent in some of the definitions of the regime types themselves. As explained, some versions of the definition of a non–democratic regime (tyranny in particular) involve, per definition, the violation of human rights while some versions of democracy, such as “liberal democracy,” have the protection of rights built into its definition. This makes the influence of the regime type on the perpetration of crimes impossible to disentangle. For the large body of (mostly quantitative) empirical research that seeks to investigate the relationship between the democratic nature of a regime and the extent to which it violates human rights (which will be discussed in depth later), this definitional overlap is obviously challenging. Hill and Jones (2014, p. 663) argue in this respect that it is problematic that definitions of democracy often encompass “the extent to which the government tolerates competing policy preferences” while repression is partly operationalized as the use of coercion by the government against political opponents (Hill and Jones, 2014, p. 663). Consequently, there is a relationship, by design, between repression, which includes human rights violations, and democracy; making democratic regimes per definition less prone to repress opposition. According to Hill and Jones (2014, p. 677), “this means that one of the strongest results in the literature is partially the result of estimating what are essentially tautological statistical models.” While not all research suffers from this caveat, and recent research even tries to distil which elements of democracy have a positive effect on the respect for human rights (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; Hill and Jones, 2014), the review that follows should be read with this limitation in mind.

3. State of the Art of the Current Debate

The last thirty years have seen an upsurge in quantitative studies that investigate why some governments violate basic human rights more than others (Hill and Jones, 2014), and a large number of them emphasized the influence of regime type in explaining the violence. This quantitative strand of research that investigated the relationship between regime type and human rights violations started to gain momentum in the mid-1990s with research from Poe and Tate (1994) and Rummel (1994). Poe and Tate sought to explain why human rights violations were more prevalent in some countries in comparison to others and found that, among others, democracy was an important factor in explaining the extent to which personal integrity rights are violated (Poe and Tate, 1994; Poe et al., 1999). Focusing on democide, Rummel (1994, p. 5) reaches a similar conclusion and argues that more democratic countries perpetrate less democide, and when they do, they start behaving more like dictatorial states, acting mostly in secret to circumvent checks and balances.
In contrast to Rummel, Fein (1995) argues there is actually “more murder in the middle,” meaning that there are more life integrity violations when some steps to democracy have been taken but it is not yet fully institutionalized. While both unfree as well as partly free states have poor track records when it comes to life integrity violations, she finds the worst violators tend to be partly free states (Fein, 1995, p. 184). Kreutz (2006, p. 182) similarly found that one-sided violence occurs more often in partly free states. While Regan and Henderson (2002) focused on repression, they also found that there is an inverted U-shape relationship, indicating intermediate levels of democracy have the most political repression, but argue that the threat level experienced by a government has more explanatory value than the type of regime. Not all forms of dissent will likely lead to equal amounts of threat perception by states, and subsequent research has shown that only guerrilla attacks increase the risk of repression and state terror (Carey, 2010, p. 182). While guerrilla attacks increase the probability that repressive measures will be used for all regime types, established democracies seem to be least likely to engage in a violent response, while semi-democracies are more likely to repress (Carey, 2010, p. 182).

There is less of a focus on the perpetration of mass atrocities by non-state actors in democratic and dictatorial regimes, but there are indications that consolidated democracies are more vulnerable to this type of violence than consolidated dictatorships. However, it seems that, again, these attacks are most prevalent in states that lie in the middle of this spectrum (Kreutz, 2006, p. 184). While the exact reasons why this is so remain uncertain, Kreutz suggests non-state actors might believe that there is a small chance they will be held accountable in states that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic (Kreutz, 2006, p. 184).

Davenport and Armstrong (2004) have clarified the debate on whether there is a non-linear relationship between regime type and government repression and human rights violations. They showed that below a certain level of democracy, there is no mitigating effect of democracy on political repression, while above this point, repression decreases as democracy increases. In a more dynamic model, Davenport (1999) also analyzed the effect of changes in the regime type on the amount of repression that is used and came to the conclusion that autocratization is likely to increase the level of repression, and that this change lasts for several years, until the dictatorial regime is consolidated. However, it was not the change in itself that led to repression, because he found repression waned when the regime became more democratic (Davenport, 1999, pp. 108–109). Zanger (2000) similarly found that when a dictatorship transitions to a democracy, human rights abuses already decrease the same year in which the transition takes place. When a stable democracy moves more toward becoming a mixed regime with dictatorial characteristics, human rights violations increase in the year in which the transition takes place. After dictatorial rule has been consolidated, however, the level of life integrity violations decreases again.

There is also reason to believe, however, that democracies have a dark side and that modern democracies may be particularly prone to perpetrate atrocities (Mann, 2004). When rule by the people comes to signify rule by a particular ethnic group, “the majority might tyrannize minorities,” as was argued by Mann (2004, p. 4). This proposition, however, is criticized by some (Laitin, 2005, p. 329) because, upon a closer reading, the way Mann formulates his main argument is somewhat misleading; it is not democracy itself, but the process of democratization and the perversion of democratic ideals that lead to mass atrocities. As such, Mann’s seminal work is actually much closer to the empirical findings that in semi-democratic states, mass atrocities occur relatively frequently in comparison to other types of regimes.

To sum up, the overall conclusion seems to be that stable democracies are safest. As Davenport and Inman (2012, p. 622) explain, “[t]he findings are consistent that to a greater or lesser extent at certain levels, all democratic political institutions that have been examined rigorously decrease state repression. This result holds across time, space and types of repressive behavior; indeed, it is so robust that it has been referred to as the ‘domestic democratic peace,’ mirroring the finding in international relations.”

With the exception of Rummel, most of these scholars have, as explained previously, used measures of violence that do not necessarily amount to atrocity crimes. However, research that explicitly focuses on these more extreme violations of human rights has pointed in a similar direction (Harff, 2003, p. 63).
4. Explaining Atrocity Crimes in Dictatorships and Democracies

Much of the literature that focuses on repression in relation to the level of democracy looks at repression as a strategy for dealing with political opposition (e.g., Gartner and Regan, 1996). Krain argues that it is not the degree or concentration of power that best predicts such violence, but rather whether there are openings in the political opportunity structure (such as war) (Krain, 1997, pp. 332, 334). When accommodation or repression on a smaller scale does not suffice, elites, according to Krain (1997, p. 333), may resort to state-sponsored mass murder to remove any threats to their regime that may be caused by such openings. Zanger (2000, p. 228) suggests that life integrity violations might decrease after dictatorial rule is consolidated, and that this is potentially due to the inclination of leaders to get rid of their opponents as soon as they are in power and that the need to violate life integrity rights dissipates once the regime is established.

In addition, there are more official and legitimate routes available for voicing dissent in democracies which may avoid escalation into violence (Regan and Henderson, 2002, p. 121). The fact that there will be more pluralism and free speech, including dissenting voices to repressive policies as well, makes it less likely that harmful policies will evolve into genocide and mass killing (Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 723).

Much of the literature on the causes of repression in democracies and dictatorships assumes the costs of repression are simply higher in democracies than in dictatorships and is thus largely based on a rational-choice decision-theoretic model (Gartner and Regan, 1996, p. 273; Hill and Jones, 2014, p. 663). According to Zanger (2000, p. 216), for instance, “the accepted norms of democracies, which emphasize the non-violent solution of problems, and the institutional structures seem to prevent governments from utilizing terror as a policy tool.” In addition, the institutions that allow leaders to be held accountable for their actions provide an important incentive for them not to resort to violence and repression (Zanger, 2000, p. 216; Regan and Henderson, 2002, p. 121). This can be because they will be less likely to be re-elected (Kreutz, 2006, p. 177), but a number of scholars have also found constitutions and courts important as constraining factors on governments (for an overview, see Hill and Jones, 2014, p. 663).

Davenport (1999, p. 96) also mentions accountability, but adds three additional reasons why democracies are less repressive. First, he notes that elites are socialized to use alternative means to regulate conflict, such as discussions and voting. Second, according to Davenport, coercive agents are less powerful and less capable of influencing policy in a direct manner. Third, within democracies, one group that wishes to impose its will unilaterally is usually stopped by others and these checks and balances also prevent the use of repression (Regan and Henderson, 2002, p. 121). In addition, according to Harff (2003, p. 63), democracies tend to protect minorities better and are more accommodating to political opposition. Furthermore, she argued that the electoral process makes it less likely for elites with an exclusionary ideology—which is another important risk factor for genocides and politicides—to get into power (Harff, 2003, p. 63).

5. Incorporating Other Risk Factors for Atrocity Crimes into the Explanation

Beyond the rational choice explanations offered earlier, there is another important reason why consolidated democracies seem to experience fewer mass atrocities. Here it will be argued that part of the explanation is the manner in which dictatorial regimes relate to the other risk factors that make the perpetration of mass atrocities more likely.

Next to the non-democratic nature of a regime, there are several risk factors that have consistently been associated with episodes of mass violence, both on a theoretical basis (e.g., Staub, 2000; Woolf and Hulsizer, 2005) and on the basis of empirical, quantitative research (e.g., Harff and Gurr, 1989; Fein, 1993; Harff, 2003). These include a history of violence and a plural society, especially when there is unrest due to political or economic crises or war (Harff and Gurr, 1989; Fein, 1993, Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003; Harff, 2003, Woolf and Hulsizer, 2005). The preconditions will be discussed in turn with an analysis of the manner in which dictators can use these preconditions to further their own policy interests, potentially orchestrating the perpetration of mass atrocities in the process.
5.1. Political and economic crises and war

While sometimes in literature political and economic crises are discussed separately from war, they frequently go hand in hand and overlap. Economic and political factors may lead to war, and war in turn may be detrimental to economic growth and political development (Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002; Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 717). In addition, war and political crises are sometimes even seen as extensions of one another. As Shaw (2007, p. 466) explains, “it is when political conflicts become violent or military that genocide is most likely to result.” For these reasons, the present chapter will cover them as one overarching risk factor in which the two sub-components—political and economic crises and war—interact.

5.1.1. Political and economic crises

Political and economic crises taken together are what Staub and Bar-Tal (2003, p. 714) call “difficult life conditions,” which they explain signifies “economic hardship, political tension and disorganization, and great and rapid social change that separately and especially in combination are potential starting points for processes that lead to mass violence.” It should be noted, however, that it is for a large part the way in which the population experiences the hardships that make mass atrocities more likely, and as such, it is more about crises and relative deprivation than absolute poverty (Woolf and Hulsizer, 2005, p. 104; Moghaddam, 2013, pp. 63–64). However, it is not just the population that is impacted by these societal conditions: the leader is too, and he can use this knowledge to his own benefit. As Staub explains (2010, p. 174), “both their awareness of what is happening to the population and the shared experience enables leaders to speak to people’s concerns and psychological needs.” This might enable the leaders to consolidate power and stave off any threats to their regime, as the population will gravitate more toward powerful individuals who profess ideological certainty when they feel like their livelihoods or collective identity are threatened (Moghaddam, 2013, pp. 61–72). There is thus an interplay between the dictatorial leader, the environment, and his following (Weerdesteijn, 2017, p. 63).

Because of difficult life conditions, individuals will struggle to meet their basic human needs, such as a sense of security and a positive identity for the individual and for the group an individual identifies with (Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 715). In addition, people have a need to understand the world around them and they may have spiritual needs, the need to have a sense of meaning in their lives (Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 715). The frustration of these needs leads to processes that may facilitate mass violence. Individuals may start to identify more strongly with a particular group, and correspondingly scapegoat the out-group. Ultimately, they may start to make sense of the world through a destructive ideology (Staub, 2000, p. 370; and Bar-Tal, 2003, pp. 718–719). In addition, groups who experience these difficulties are more likely to be drawn to leaders who advocate destructive solutions to these problems (Staub and Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 724; Moghaddam, 2013, pp. 60–65).

In an analysis that combines qualitative and quantitative research methods, Mukherjee and Koren (2019) argue that food crises can motivate people to mobilize against a repressive regime, prompting the latter to strike back and engage in mass killings. Dictators may thus wish to stave off threats to their regime through repression and direct violence, but they may also decide to withhold food from disobedient parts of the population, starving them into submission (Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002, p. 154). Nafziger and Auvinen therefore conclude (2002, p. 154), “the policies of governing elite are at the root of most humanitarian emergencies.” In dictatorships particularly, the elite can create these crises, can aggravate them, or can use them to stay in power (Ayittey, 2011, pp. 18–19). In addition, they can also seize the moment and the sense of relative deprivation and dissatisfaction among the population to rise to power and pave the way for the perpetration of atrocity crimes. As Staub and Bar-Tal (2003, p. 716) point out, Instigators can give rise to social psychological processes in groups of people and to the evolution of societal beliefs that help fulfill basic needs but at the same time move the group toward turning against another group or, when there is already group conflict, intensify antagonism (emphasis added).

The extent to which these processes actually happen in dictatorial regimes depends a lot on the individual leader. While crises are relatively common, fortunately mass atrocities are relatively rare, and they will only materialize when a justification and rationale for the violence is created (Chirot and McCauley, 2010, p. 67). Countries with relatively similar risk factors may experience entirely different levels of violence in their
5.1.2. War

Much of the quantitative research supports the theoretical proposition that war makes atrocity crimes more likely. Hill and Jones (2014, p. 662), for instance, argue that while the extent to which a regime can be classified as democratic offers some explanatory value for the amount of repression which is perpetrated, the presence of civil conflict is a much better predictor for these repressive measures. In a theoretical reflection, Shaw (2007, p. 461) even argues that the “problems of genocide and war are so intimately linked that we need to see them in a common frame.” He notes both are about a destructive process with genocide meant to destroy a specific group of people and war meant to destroy the enemy (Shaw, 2007, p. 464). In addition, both are brutalizing forces, for the soldiers involved but also certainly for the wider population (Alvarez, 2001, p. 68). War may also awaken or further strengthen nationalistic tendencies to create more of an “us” versus “them” mentality that is frequently associated with genocide (Alvarez, 2001, p. 69). The victim is then likely to become the enemy and can even be blamed for the violence (Fein, 2000, p. 51). Similar to the effects of political or economic crises, people may struggle to survive and may seek to search for scapegoats to blame for their misery (Alvarez, 2001, p. 69).

Another reason why war facilitates the perpetration of state-sponsored mass murder is that during this time the coercive institutions of the state are strengthened, and the position of revolutionary elite who favor violent policies might consequently be reinforced, making violence more likely in the future (Krain, 2000, p. 42; Fein, 2000, p. 49). Wars in general also often put genocidal regimes in power, and war can form a cover for the crimes (Krain, 2000, p. 42), since the state is likely to act more secretly and defensively during this time, reducing the power of others to oppose them (Alvarez, 2001, p. 69). At the same time, the military is also more easily mobilized to perpetrate genocide during times of war (Alvarez, 2001, p. 70). Finally, certain groups in society, oftentimes minorities, become more vulnerable, and while military victories make genocides or politicides more likely because they allow the victor to impose its will on the defeated, peace negotiations frequently fail (Alvarez, 2001, p. 71; Krain, 2000, p. 43). In addition, linking wars again to political and economic crises, the social disruption and the political and economic instability that may result from war can cause a sense of relative deprivation which can produce discontent and, through this process, ultimately contribute to the perpetration of state violence and mass atrocities (Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002, p. 154).

War, therefore, seems to be one of the strongest predictors of mass atrocities and state repression (Hill and Jones, 2014, p. 671), and dictatorships are more likely to engage in war. Democracies rarely fight each other, and war becomes more likely when at least one of the warring parties is a dictatorial regime (Peceny et al., 2002). The most common explanation that is provided holds that democratic leaders are much more cautious to use force because when they do, they will be held accountable by their constituents (Weeks, 2014, p. 2; Peceny et al., 2002, p. 15). While this reasoning is contested (Rosato, 2003), and there seems to be much variation among dictatorial regimes (Weeks, 2014, p. 171; Peceny et al. 2002, Ezrow and Franz, 2011, pp. 143–145), most of the data continues to suggest that democracies are somewhat less prone to wage wars (Müller and Wolff, 2006). In addition, democracies will be more likely to minimize losses as a consequence of war among their own population, although such restraint is not extended to foreign civilian populations (Valentino et al., 2010, p. 543).

Looking at civil wars, it has been argued that consolidated democracies and consolidated dictatorial regimes are less prone to wage war inside their countries, and countries that are semi-democratic are more likely to get bogged down in civil war (Kreutz, 2006). Kreutz (2006, p. 176) explains, “[t]hese countries, it is argued, lack the capacity of autocracies in effectively suppressing opposition as well as factors inherent to democracy that make it less likely that the use of force is employed to promote political change.” While Fearon and Laitin (2003) also argue weak states are more prone to civil war, they offer a different argument why this is so. They argue (2003, pp. 75, 88) that it is not the lack of democracy per se that increases risks for civil war, but rather that weak states are more prone to civil war mainly because “financially, organizationally, and politically weak central governments render insurgency more feasible and attractive.” Hegre et al. (2001) find that these intermediate regimes even tend to be more likely to wage civil wars when they have been given time to recover from a regime transition. When democracies are engaged in wars,
democracies are more prone to experience attacks against civilians than non-democratic regimes, however, these violations are then often perpetrated by non-state forces (Kreutz, 2006, p. 185–187).

Importantly, Fein (1995, p. 180) points out that there is clearly a relationship between war and life integrity violations, but merely claiming that war causes life integrity violations would be too simplistic because sometimes repression by the state may cause the civil war. In addition, state violence may cause a cycle of violence which makes it quite impossible for non-state actors to lay down their weapons even when militarily they are unlikely to win (Fein, 1995, p. 180).

Overall, there seems to be a mutually reinforcing relationship between war, the perpetration of atrocity crimes, and the non-democratic nature of a regime. War and the non-democratic nature of a regime increase the chances that mass atrocities are perpetrated, but a dictatorship is also more likely to engage in war and less likely to limit casualties when they do, increasing the chances that atrocity crimes materialize.

5.2. Plural society and a history of violence

Kuper was one of the first scholars who argued that mass atrocities were due to a plurality of groups in society. According to Kuper (1981, p. 17)

(genocidal conflicts) are particularly a phenomenon of the plural or divided society in which division persists between peoples of different race or ethnic group or religion, who have been brought together in the same political unit.

The link between the presence of mass atrocities and a plural society was subsequently affirmed in empirical research (Harff and Gurr, 1989). Others have, however, questioned this relationship (Krain, 1997, p. 353) or suggested it is not the plural nature as such that heightens the risk of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes, but rather the political exclusion which may result from it and the rebellion, and subsequent violent government response, it may spark (Fein, 1993, p. 89; Harff, 2003, pp. 67–68).

According to Staub (2000, p. 370), having a plural society is particularly dangerous when a group of people is subsequently devalued. There are indications that this is not only the case in dictatorial regimes. Fein (1995, p. 180) found that there are higher levels of life integrity violations when there is more ethnic discrimination in free states, as well. In addition, when antagonisms between groups have turned violent in the past, this history of violence forms another risk factor.

A history of violence is an important contributing factor for the outbreak of genocide and life integrity violations (Zanger, 2000, p. 229; Harff, 2003). A potential explanation for the recurrence of mass atrocities is that groups carry the memories of collective trauma with them across generations. These stories can become embedded in the collective memory of groups, through a sense that injustice was done to them (Staub and Bar–Tal, 2003, p. 722). The collective memory may subsequently be tied to a collective emotional orientation (Bar–Tal et al., 2007, p. 442). These emotions are based not on the experiences of the individual members, but on the experiences of the collective; experiences usually only a small number of group members lived through directly (Bar Tal et al 2007, p. 442). The material consequences of conflict are also transferred across generations (Berckmoe et al., 2017, p. 5). The legacy of previous victimization may subsequently cause the victimized group to become perpetrators in cycles of violence (Staub & Bar–Tal, 2003, p. 722), but perpetrator groups may also experience the sense that they were victimized and wronged and thus perceive themselves as being victimized, which can be explosive as well. As Chirot and McCauley (2010, p. 91) point out:

Memory and historical reconstruction, often invented but nevertheless sincerely believed, are important contributors to demands for vengeance of past wrongs that in turn can lead to a new series of mass killings.

This, of course, does not necessarily mean violence will break out. Harff (2003, p. 68), for instance, suggests that leaders may be a crucial determinant, since she argues that ethnic cleavages only lead to mass atrocities when there was discrimination in society or when the elite stems from a particular ethnic minority. Zanger (2000, p. 229) concludes in this respect that “leaders who have used terror in the past are generally willing to use violence again in the future.”
There are indications that non-democratic elites potentially have more capabilities to actually orchestrate the perpetration of atrocity crimes. According to Woolf and Hulsizer (2005, p. 107), especially leaders who demand unconditional support and trust from their population can manipulate how tolerant or violent the population is. Woolf and Hulsizer (2005, p. 108) emphasize that “one of the most powerful tools available to a leader is the ability to manipulate how the population thinks about, influences and relates to each other.” In dictatorial regimes, where the freedom of speech might be significantly impeded and a dominant narrative of a country’s past may be imposed on the population, this tool is more readily available (Moghaddam, 2013, p. 51).

Leaders, especially dictatorial ones, can use their power to further enhance polarization in society by limiting dissenting voices. Studies have shown that interaction between people who reinforce each other’s opinions tends to lead to even more extreme positions (Woolf and Hulsizer, 2005, p. 113). While propaganda may be important in shaping public opinion as well, its influence should not be overstated. It is mostly effective when there is much exposure to the message in the propaganda, if the population’s opinion on the topic is weak and ambiguous, or when propaganda is used to reinforce pre-existing beliefs (Woolf and Hulsizer, 2005, p. 111). Semelin (2003, p. 196) likewise points out that destructive ideologies will always have to be adapted to the local culture for them to have any influence on the broader population.

An exclusionary ideology and increased in- and out-group feeling can be beneficial to the dictatorial leader. In-group/out-group polarization creates more cohesion among the in-group, and cohesive groups tend to respect their elite more (Chirot and McCauley, 2010, p. 65). This process is very closely related and associated with previously mentioned preconditions since, as explained earlier, the out-group can also conveniently be blamed for the difficult life conditions in society. As I explained in my previous work, the tremendous influence a dictatorial leader potentially has over the most prominent narratives in society allows him to use the plurality of groups in society and exploit memories of past violence (Weerdesteijn, 2017, pp. 64–67).

6. Conclusion

Much has been said about the relationship between the democratic or dictatorial nature of a regime and the implications this has for human rights violations and atrocity crimes. However, this research is not always easily comparable. Scholars have used disparate terms and definitions for the type of human rights violations they analyze, resulting in scattered conclusions, each with its own scope which often tends to be broader than war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. In addition, the field could gain from more interaction between the quantitative and qualitative strands of research. This could potentially lead to a deepening of our understanding by moving beyond the simple rational choice explanations that focus on accountability to differentiate democratic and dictatorial policies with respect to human rights. This chapter has tried to provide a starting point for such research by analyzing how dictatorial regimes interact with the other risk factors for mass atrocities to further understand why dictatorships are more prone than established democracies to violate human rights and perpetrate mass atrocities. It has done so by combining qualitative and quantitative insights on the risk factors and used qualitative scholarship to further analyze how dictators can use these risk factors to foster a climate in which mass atrocities can be perpetrated.
References


Notes


2. According to Gorokhovskaia (2017, n.p.), “A democracy becomes consolidated—that is, it is expected to endure—when political actors accept the legitimacy of democracy and no actor seeks to act outside democratic institutions for both normative and self-interested reasons.”

3. Many human rights violations may amount to mass atrocities, but not necessarily all of them do. Given the complications of the many definitions of violent acts and their labels pose for analyzing the link between regime type and mass atrocities, it is nearly impossible to derive conclusions from literature about the impact of regime type on each of the atrocity crimes, e.g., genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. As terrorism is often not seen as one of the core crimes, I will not refer explicitly to research investigating the relationship between regime type and terrorism (although some literature is included which mentions state terror). For more information on regime type and terrorism see e.g., Kingma et al. (2015) and Gaibulloev et al. (2017).


5. For the full definition see article 2 of the Genocide Convention. See also Chapter 1 of this volume by Jeremy Kuperberg and John Hagan. Other scholars tend to use a more comprehensive definition of genocide; for an overview see Jones (2006, pp. 15–23).

6. Politicide, according to Krain (2000, p. 41), encompasses “mass killings in which victims are defined primarily in terms of their hierarchical position or political opposition to the regime and dominant groups.”

7. Other scholars have tended to use much higher thresholds. Valentino (2000, p. 5) for instance relies on a definition of “50,000 intentional deaths over the course of five years.”

8. This is potentially even more problematic because there is reason to believe the relationship between human rights and regime type differs for different forms of repression. Hill and Jones (2014, p. 662), for instance, argue that the democratic nature of a regime can explain the extent to which human rights are violated, but that this explains particular types of repression better than others.

9. Some authors, e.g., Hill and Jones (2014), equate life integrity violations (which they call physical integrity rights) with repression, while others (e.g., Carey, 2010, p. 168) equate state terror—which she defines as the “large scale and widespread violation of life-integrity rights”—with repression.

10. For an overview of the tensions that emerge when equating human rights violations, genocide, and repression as well as a discussion of the opportunities if the fields would merge more, see Earl (2011).

11. While much of the literature focuses predominantly on the development of the terms in Western discourse, it should be noted that democratic practices also have a long tradition on the African continent, see e.g., Ayittey (2011, pp. 37–60).

12. It has been mentioned, however, that appointing a dictator generated fear among the people (Kalyvas, 2007, pp. 415–416).

13. For a more elaborate discussion on the different types of non-democratic regimes see Weerdesteijn (2017).


This research was later updated (Poe et al., 1999).

Or one-sided violence, as Kreutz (2006) calls it.

Although, as is explained later, the picture changes slightly when the state is at war (see Kreutz, 2006, 185).

In addition, different types of dictatorial regimes are linked to varying degrees of repression with single-party regimes being the least repressive (Davenport, 2007).

Mann focuses explicitly on ethnic cleansing (2004).

The literature discussed in this paragraph primarily focuses on human rights violations that are perpetrated within state borders. See section 5.1.2 later for a brief reflection on the extent to which democracies are willing to perpetrate violence outside their state’s borders. In addition, the reflection earlier mentioned is only focused on the human rights violations, potentially amounting to mass atrocities, as discussed in section 2.1., not about other harms to the population, such as those stemming from structural discrimination or poverty, for instance.

It should be noted in this respect that Hill and Jones (2014, p. 661) argue “democratic political institutions predict certain kinds of repression much more accurately than others.”

While they do use a rational-choice model that takes costs and benefits of repression into account, Gartner and Regan (1996, p. 278) posit that the costs of repression actually do not differ so much. According to these authors, “Highly democratic countries generally do not repress as much as less democratic varieties, not because the costs are different, but rather because the extent of the challenges to the status quo in highly democratic countries is generally insufficient to make the benefits of violent repression outweigh the costs.”

According to Kuper (1981, p. 17), a plural or divided society is one in which “division persists between peoples of different race or ethnic group or religion, who have been brought together in the same political unit.”

Shaw consistently speaks of genocide but seems to adopt a broad definition, also including other mass atrocities such as ethnic cleansing and even terrorism (2007, pp. 468–470).

Although, high inequality within a society is more likely to lead to mass atrocities. According to Fein (1995, p. 184), “state killing increases in less developed states with high inequality because inequality incites more social conflict.”

Slobodan Milosevic for instance seems to have consolidated his power by instrumentally using nationalism to garner support among the population and certain segments of the elite. See Weerdesteijn (2017) for a more elaborate analysis.

Hill and Jones (2014, p. 677) point out that this relationship is also partly based on definitional overlap because “many government-inflicted casualties in civil conflicts will be non-combatants and thus are likely to be picked up in measures of state repression.”

War has also been associated with particular types of atrocity crimes, such as sexual violence, but as Wood shows, there is great variation in the amount of sexual violence that is perpetrated in conflicts, with sexual violence being extremely pervasive in some conflicts and not at all in others (Wood, 2009). See also Chapter 27 by Kim Thuy Seelinger and Elisabeth Wood in this volume.

For a more elaborate overview of different reasons see Müller and Wolff (2006).

See also Chapter 6 by Jolle Demmers in this volume.

See also Weerdesteijn (2017, pp. 68–69).

Harff (2003, pp. 67–68) found discrimination to have only a weak effect, but did see an increase in the risk of genocide and politicide when the elite were from an ethnic minority.

This was the case in Serbia for instance (Morus, 2007). See also Chapter 24 by Lidewyde Berckmoes in this volume.