

Combatants/Perpetrators:

Offenders, Beneficiaries and Bystanders

Required Reading

David Bloomfield *et al.*, eds. *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*, pp. 67-76.

Highly Recommended Reading

Wilhelm J. Verwoerd, 'On Our Moral Responsibility for Past Violations', *Alternation*, 8 (1), 2001. pp. 219-242.

Further Reading

Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. London: Abacus, 1997 [1996].

Jaspers, Karl. *The Question of German Guilt*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2001 [German orig. 1947; ET 1948].

In-class AV Resource

'Healing the Wounds of War' Programme 2: Purging The Past (10 January 2002). Different ways by which people try to come to terms with the past.

Additional AV Resource

'Healing the Wounds of War' Programme 9: Demobilising The Fighters (28 February 2002). Demobilising soldiers and demilitarising society.

Possible Films

Bonhoeffer. (2003). 93 mins. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. The story of theologian and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his resistance to the Nazi regime.

The Downfall. (2004). [*Der Untergang*]. Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel. Documentary interviews with Adolf Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge.

Eichmann. (2007). 100 mins. Directed by Robert Young. Based upon the final confession of Adolf Eichmann, made before his execution in Israel.

The Good German. (2006). 105 mins. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. Based on a novel by Joseph Kanon. An American military journalist in post-World War II Berlin is drawn into a murder investigation that exposes secrets from the past.

Judgment at Nuremberg. (1961). 186 mins. Directed Stanley Kramer. Dramatization on the Nuremberg trial of four Nazi judges in 1948.

Schindler's List. (1993). 195 mins. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Based on a book by Thomas Keneally. The story of Oskar Schindler, a Catholic industrialist, who turned from bystander (and beneficiary) to opponent of the Nazi regime.

The Reader. (2009). 124 mins. Directed by Stephen Daldry. A law student observing war crime trials in post-war Germany recognises one of the accused as the woman he had an affair with nearly ten years before without knowing her past.

The Third Man. (1949). 104 mins. Directed by Carol Reed. Based on a novel by Graham Greene. An American novelist in post-World War II Vienna investigates the death of the friend who invited him to the city.

The Language of Conflict

The language to describe state and non-state combatants is as sensitive as the language of victims/survivors and often implies different attitudes towards them and their cause. Very often the struggle over what language is used to describe a conflict is an important part of the politics of a conflict, and how the conflict is framed.

- Struggle/Criminality
- Freedom Fight/Independence Movement/Terrorism
- War [Just War]
- Ethnic cleansing
- Genocide

Terrorists and Freedom Fighters

To understand a conflict it is therefore important to understand how the different parties involved in it describe themselves and how they are described by others.

A classic contrast that appears in many conflicts is the terminology of ‘freedom fighters’ versus ‘terrorists’. The term ‘freedom fighters’ is invariably used to indicate political approval and sympathy with a cause, whereas ‘terrorist’ is invariably a negative judgement.¹

Sometimes the implied judgement of a term like ‘terrorist’ is more important than the original meaning of the term itself. Thus in the twentieth century the term ‘terrorist’ has come to be closely associated with groups who are opposed to the state but in its earlier sense (dating to the eighteenth century aftermath of the French revolution) terrorism referred to the state’s use of terror as an instrument of repression. In the process, the element of terror has often become secondary to describing a group as terrorist, and can even sometimes be applied to groups opposed to the state whether they use terror as a tactic or not. At its vaguest, ‘terrorist’ is used to describe any political group that a speaker/author does not agree with. A more balanced definition of terrorist/terrorism (that applies more evenly to non-state groups as well as state forces) would focus on the use of terror as a part of a military and/or political strategy.

¹ ‘Freedom fighter’ is always understood as someone who fights for freedom, though the terms ‘fire fighter’ or ‘crime fighter’ are always understood as someone who fights against fires or crimes.

Combatants

'Combatants' is a general term that usually describes those actively involved in a conflict in some way.

Security Forces

'Security forces' usually refers to different branches of the security apparatus of the state, including police, military, civil and military intelligence, and others.

Volunteers

'Volunteers' is a common term for republican combatants in Northern Ireland. On the Loyalist side the language of 'volunteers' finds an echo in the Ulster Volunteer Force but individual members of the group are less likely to be typically described as volunteers.

Paramilitaries

In Latin America the term 'paramilitary' (literally a group that operates alongside the military) usually has its more literal meaning and therefore describes groups that work alongside state security forces. By contrast, in Northern Ireland it is commonly used to describe both Republican and Loyalist groups regardless of their relationship to official state security forces. This usage is further complicated by acts of collusion and complicity between security forces and loyalist groups.

Roles in the Conflict

Perpetrators and Offenders

To speak in terms of 'perpetrators' or 'offenders' can help focus less on what part someone played in the conflict or what side they were on, and to focus instead on the wrongs they may have done. This can help shift attention away from what side someone was on and direct it towards the actions that they undertook. At its best, this can help break down a straightforward contrast between 'them and us'. However, some of those who are actively involved in the conflict may resist the language of perpetrators/offenders as prejudging the issue or placing too much guilt on their shoulders. A lot will depend on whether there is a shared understanding that being in the conflict in the first place is wrong, or whether the struggle is for a just cause and offenders are only responsible for avoidable abuses that they commit as part of this struggle.

Bystanders

A problem with the language of perpetrators/offenders is that it can underplay the responsibility and guilt that comes from omission (something not done) rather than commission (something done). This is especially important for assessing the role of ‘bystanders’ to a conflict. Bystanders are usually not actively involved in the conflict, but often support a conflict indirectly by failing to act (which includes failing to speak).

Beneficiaries

A third very important group are the beneficiaries of a conflict—those who gain politically, economically or in some other way from a conflict.

Having more than one role

Finally, it should be remembered that it is possible to be in more than one group at different times, or even the same time, as well as being in at least some sense a victim as well as a member of one or more of these groups. The blurring of clear demarcation between victims and perpetrators/offenders is especially difficult in cases of child soldiers or where civilians have been forced into military or paramilitary service against their wishes (such as the Civil Patrols in Guatemala). Likewise, protracted ethnic conflicts are likely to mean that many participants are both perpetrators and victims.

A Typology of Guilt

In the aftermath of World War II, German existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) suggested a four-fold typology of German guilt.² Jaspers had been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg until forced to resign when the Nazis came to power. With the fall of the Nazis he returned in 1945 and promptly undertook a series of lectures to ask the extent to which the German people were guilty for what had happened and what consequences there might be for this. He suggested that guilt could be understood as taking different forms:

- Criminal guilt: this is applicable to those who committed acts that broke national or international laws.

² See especially, Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), pp. 25-30.

- Political guilt: this is applicable to those who were complicit with the criminal acts through political leadership or political support for the regime (through commission or omission).
- Moral guilt: this is applicable at an individual level for whatever personal responsibility one bears.
- Metaphysical guilt: this is applicable to all those who lived through the period and were not able to stop what happened.

Jaspers argued that with these different sorts of guilt came different sorts of responsibilities and different sorts of consequences:

- Criminal guilt: requires punishment
- Political guilt: requires reparation and restriction of power and rights
- Moral guilt: should lead to moral growth involving penance and renewal
- Metaphysical guilt: should lead to transformation of human self-consciousness before God involving humility and modesty