



UNDERSTANDING ATROCITIES

Remembering, Representing and Teaching Genocide

19–21 February 2014
Mount Royal University



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Final Report

Understanding Atrocities Conference: Remembering, Representing and Teaching Genocide

Organizer: Scott Murray, Mount Royal University

Understanding Atrocities: Remembering, Representing and Teaching Genocide was a three-day international multidisciplinary conference, hosted by Mount Royal University in Calgary on February 19-21, 2014. The conference brought together leading experts, emerging and established scholars in the field of genocide studies, as well as undergraduate and graduate students, secondary school teachers, community members, and policy makers in order to share new scholarship and new teaching perspectives on the global, transhistorical problem of genocide. The conference was inspired by the goal of creating a forum bridging scholarly and community-based efforts to understand genocide, thereby augmenting the important specialised contributions of academic scholarship with insights and perspectives from teachers, members of non-profit groups interested in peace and conflict studies, members of aboriginal communities, and other interested members of civil society. Concerned with the automatic – and often, therefore, unexamined – identification of genocide with atrocity, our aim was to investigate how this historic relationship frames and complicates possibilities for understanding and prevention. To that end, the conference facilitated valuable exchanges of knowledge among scholars in the social sciences and humanities, as well as establishing productive new connections between academics and those outside the academy, leading to the identification of new research paths and the generation of new knowledge.

Our keynote speakers included James Waller, author of the renowned study of genocide perpetrators, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (2007), and Andrea Smith, awarding-winning author of *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (2005). Dr. Waller also joined Valerie Hebert, author of *Hitler's Generals on Trial: The Last War Crimes Tribunal at Nuremberg* (2010) and Christopher Powell, author of *Barbaric Civilization: A Critical Sociology of Genocide* (2011), in a plenary roundtable concerning the association of genocide with atrocity, and how the uncritical use of atrocitarian rhetoric and images complicate efforts at genocide prevention. Dr. Smith was also joined by Dr. Adam Muller from the University of Manitoba and William Wuttunee, an elder statesman of First Nations politics, in a plenary roundtable discussion on the new Canadian Museum of Human Rights and the politics of defining genocide as it pertains to the treatment of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. Allan Rock, University of Ottawa President and former Canadian Ambassador to the UN, and Lloyd Axworthy, University of Winnipeg President and former Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, shared their political and academic encounters with genocide in a plenary roundtable discussion that examined what's gained and lost when real-life atrocities like genocide become topics of academic debate, and what Canada's role has been in genocide prevention.

The conference also included a special screening of "Never Again: Lessons from the Holocaust," a film from University of Tennessee historian John Swanson that explores how the Holocaust is being taught in high schools and universities. And throughout the conference, MRU hosted the international travelling exhibition "Names Instead of Numbers," containing a brilliantly displayed selection of 24 biographies from the *Dachau Concentration Camp Book of Remembrance*. (<http://www.gedaechtnisbuch.de/namen-statt-nummern/english/index-engl.html>)

Fully one half of all the conference presenters were undergraduate and graduate students (undergraduate student registration was free), which richly fulfilled our goal of using the conference to provide skills development, mentoring and networking opportunities for students. Thanks to a generous Small Projects Grant from THEN/HiER, we were able to provide travel funding support for five of the graduate student presenters – Ashley DeMartini from McGill University, Laura Cohen from Rutgers University, Emmanuel Nkurunziza and Jessica Chandrashekar from York University, and Attila Ataner from the University of Western Ontario – who have shared their conference experiences on the THEN/HiER blog, "Teaching the Past." Other conference supporters included the Calgary Jewish Federation, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Native Student Centre at MRU, and the Student Association of Mount Royal University.

In conclusion, the Understanding Atrocities Conference was a great success, and the organizers wish to sincerely thank THEN/HiER for helping support this worthwhile endeavour.