Beyond State-Centrism: Revisiting Genocide Prevention Theorizing

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Abstract

This article revisits genocide-prevention theorizing, concentrating on strategies aiming at stopping or deterring actions that appear to have genocidal intent. Adopting a process-oriented understanding of genocide, the study compares international prevention efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Kosovo (1998-1999) - two conflicts marked by similar structural conditions but divergent outcomes. Using a qualitative comparative case study design, the analysis demonstrates that delayed, legally constrained responses shaped by narrow constructions of national interests enabled genocidal processes to consolidate in Bosnia, whereas earlier, risk-based intervention in Kosovo disrupted escalation before genocide occurred, albeit without addressing underlying structural drivers. The findings suggest that while early operational prevention can yield limited success, sustainable genocide prevention ultimately requires integrating structural and community-centered mechanisms that target the societal foundations of mass violence.

Keywords: Genocide, international intervention, human rights, operational, structural, community-centered prevention

Devlet Merkezliliğin Ötesinde: Soykırımın Önlenmesine İlişkin Kuramsal Yaklaşımların Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

Özet

Bu makale, soykırım niyeti taşıdığı görülen eylemleri durdurmayı veya caydırmayı amaçlayan stratejilere odaklanarak soykırımın önlenmesine ilişkin kuramsal yaklaşımları yeniden ele almaktadır. Soykırımı tekil bir olaydan ziyade süreç olarak kavramsallaştıran bir yaklaşımı benimseyen çalışma, benzer yapısal koşullara sahip olmalarına rağmen farklı sonuçlar doğuran Bosna-Hersek (1992–1995) ve Kosova (1998-1999) örneklerinde uluslararası soykırım önleme çabalarını karşılaştırmaktadır. Nitel karşılaştırmalı vaka analizi yönteminin kullanıldığı çalışmada, Bosna'da ulusal çıkarların dar yorumlanmasıyla şekillenen, gecikmiş ve hukuki kısıtlamalara tabi önlemlerin soykırımsal süreçlerin pekişmesine olanak tanıdığı; buna karşılık Kosova'da daha erken ve risk temelli müdahalenin, kitlesel şiddetin altında yatan yapısal nedenleri ortadan kaldıramamış olsa da, soykırıma varabilecek bir tırmanmayı engellediği ortaya konulmaktadır. Bulgular, erken dönemde uygulanan operasyonel önlemlerin sınırlı ölçüde başarı sağlayabildiğini, ancak kalıcı ve sürdürülebilir bir soykırım önlemesinin, kitlesel şiddetin toplumsal temellerini hedef alan yapısal ve topluluk temelli mekanizmaların bütüncül biçimde sürece dâhil edilmesini gerektirdiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Soykırım, uluslararası müdahale, insan hakları, operasyonel, yapısal, topluluk temelli önleme

Introduction

This article is about genocide prevention theorizing. By assessing the strengths and limitations of existing strategies aiming at preventing genocidal crimes from happening, it seeks to identify where effective preventive capacity ultimately resides. In doing so, it hopes to draw the attention away from the state and decision-makers to the society, where the actual root causes of atrocities lie. This realignment, it suggests, would help us better understand how atrocities of great

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magnitude, diversity, and character evolve and, thereby, how can we come up with better strategies that would produce more promising results.

Conceptually, since its formulation by Raphael Lemkin in 1943, the term "genocide" has attracted more scholarly attention than any other atrocity crime. Varying in their emphases, scholars from various disciplines in their attempts to make sense of this hotly-debated phenomenon of the twenty-first century have offered a substantial number of definitions. What lies at the core of all these is the recognition that genocide is the ultimate violation of, and the highest threat to, fundamental human rights.[1]

This recognition, following the horrors of WWII and of the Holocaust, galvanized an unprecedented international cooperation toward the creation of a new global human rights order. The considerable progress that has been made for the last seventy years notwithstanding, genocidal crimes continued to unfold all around the world and deeply shock the conscience of humanity. This is to a certain extent because efforts largely focused on preventing perpetrators from getting away with a crime they committed, thereby missing another paramount objective: to stop or prevent genocidal acts from happening in the first place. Another major reason was that existing mechanisms of deterrence were inefficient in preventing genocidal crimes because national governments and international organizations were constrained by the necessity of providing official evidence showing that the crime has indisputably occurred.[2] Whether embraced in good faith by some out of genuine concern for legal rigor and institutional legitimacy,[3] or used strategically by others to excuse political inaction,[4] the insistence on indisputable evidence of genocide ultimately functioned as a structural barrier to timely preventive measures, thereby allowing atrocities to exact a far greater human toll.

History is replete with such failures. None were arguably more emblematic than the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina which unfolded over four years in full view of the international community. Credible evidence of forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, mass detention camps and systematic killings was already widely available as early as 1992.[5] Nevertheless, international responses remained largely constrained by inadequate political will and restrictive legal mandates, paving the way for the Srebrenica massacre - an atrocity formally recognized as genocide nearly a decade later.[6]

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[1] Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944).; Leo Kuper, "Theories of Genocide," Ethnic and Racial Studies 4, no. 3 (1981): 320–333, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1981.9993342.; William A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).; Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

[2] Scheffer, David. "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes." Genocide Studies and Prevention 1, no. 3 (2006): p. 230-231.; Gregory H. Stanton, "Could the Rwandan Genocide Have Been Prevented?," Journal of Genocide Research 6, no. 2 (2004): 211–228, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462352042000225958.; Alex J. Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect-Five Years On," Ethics & International Affairs 24, no. 2 (2010): 143–169, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7093.2010.00254.x.

[3] Alex J. Bellamy, "The Responsibility to Protect and the Problem of Military Intervention," International Affairs 84, no. 4 (2008): 615–639, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00729.x.

[4] Stanton, "Could the Rwandan Genocide Have Been Prevented?".

[5] Human Rights Watch, World Report 1993: The Former Yugoslav Republics (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993), https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/WR93/index.htm, accessed on December 25, 2025.

[6] *Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic*, Case No. IT-98-33-A, Appeals Chamber, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Judgment, 19 April 2004, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/acjug/en/, accessed on June 11, 2025.

Major powers and international organizations nevertheless proved reluctant to intervene, largely because, as David Scheffer has observed,[7] legal constraints did put an intimidating brake on effective responses. Economic sanctions and arms embargoes yielded no results and, in practice, disproportionately disadvantaged the victims,[8] while diplomatic initiatives failed to alter the conduct of Serbian political elites. Military action was out of sight, because legal finding was lacking. When such a determination eventually emerged, it came too late to protect civilians or mitigate the devastation. In stark terms, international peace efforts failed to prevent the deaths of more than 100,000 people and the displacement of over two million others.[9]

The Srebrenica genocide is not the first of its kind, nor the last. It is only one instance of ultimate violations of fundamental human rights. So, the question arises: How effective are existing genocide deterrence efforts? What does the literature on genocide prevention tell us? And, where exactly does effective preventive capacity reside?

To address these, this article will first review the literature on strategies for genocide prevention. Following brief sections where research questions and objectives, methodology and case selection, and analytical framework are laid out, will be a comparative analysis of two case studies, namely the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. For the scope of this study, the primary concern here will be to examine national, international, and hybrid conflict resolution efforts and, thus, explore the strengths and limitations of the current state of genocide prevention strategies. A critical analysis of the data drawn from these cases will conclude this study.

Definition of Terms

The term ‘genocide’ is marked by significant conceptual ambiguity and normative tension. What actually genocide is, or what distinguishes it from other atrocity crimes, or whether it encompasses all victim groups it should or possesses universal applicability across all political and historical contexts has long been debated. Due to the difficulty of a one-size-fits-all definition, almost every mass killing has become to be easily described as genocide, on the one hand, and the line between genocide and other atrocities of great magnitude has become transitive, on the other. Thus, genocide has become a metaphor used by many to define almost everything they do not like.

Notwithstanding these debates, genocide is nonetheless understood to possess several widely accepted characteristics. First and foremost, it represents the gravest existential threat to the enjoyment of fundamental human rights-what William A. Schabas has described as belonging “at the apex of the pyramid,”[10] and what the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has characterized in its jurisprudence as “the crime of crimes.”.[11] Second, genocide is best conceived not as a single event, but as an ongoing process aimed at dismantling “the essential foundations of life of national groups,” as originally conceptualized by Raphael Lemkin.[12] It is this group-destructive intent - directed at the identity and existence of the targeted collectivity - that

[7] Scheffer, “Genocide and Atrocity Crimes.” 230.
[8] David Scheffer, All the Missing Souls: A Personal History of the War Crimes Tribunals (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 98.
[9] Ewa Tabeau, Conflict in Numbers: Casualties of the 1990s Wars in the Former Yugoslavia (1991–1999) (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2009), Testimonies no. 33.; International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “The Conflicts,” ICTY Legacy Website, https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts, accessed on November 7, 2025.
[10] Schabas, *Genocide in International Law*, 9.
[11] Prosecutor v. Kambanda, Case No. ICTR-97-23-S, Judgment and Sentence, International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, 4 September 1998, para. 16.
[12] Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79.

constitutes the defining feature of genocide and distinguishes it from other atrocity crimes, including crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes.

This study uses United Nation's definition of genocide, which means "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."[13]

Literature Review

Scholars of genocide studies across several disciplines, in their attempts to identify the root causes and make sense of the underlying processes and patterns of genocide, have traced the origins of this hotly-debated phenomenon of the twenty-first century. For some, the origins of genocide lie underneath one of the most profound shifts in human development, precipitated by the spread of the modern state system, industrialization, modernization, the global ascendancy of the West, and the rise of nationalism. The emergence of the Westphalian state system, they contend, shifted the legitimacy underlying political power away from religion and church to the 'nation', enabling the state, as the sole protector of the well-being and consciousness of the nation, having exclusive sovereignty over its territories and authority over administrative, fiscal, and legal functions. The modern state's absolute authority over decision-making process, its love affair with one-ness, and dislike for multiplicity and difference gave rise to a process that gradually laid the groundwork for conditions vulnerable to genocidal crimes.[14] Chief among these conditions is the lethal embrace of the idea that the nation would be better off if certain groups were excluded or eliminated.[15]

For others, the roots of genocide lie in the workings of colonialism. In order to legitimize colonial domination and obscure its underlying economic imperatives of exploitation, colonial entrepreneurs - from the medieval period onward - advanced ideologies of racial hierarchy that normalized notions of superiority and inferiority and fostered ethnic prejudice, intolerance, and hatred. To achieve this required policies of forced assimilation, invention of fabricated histories, and the systematic erosion or annihilation of the collective identities of the colonized. Dehumanizing discourses and exclusionary ideologies that underlie ultimate violations of fundamental human rights, therefore, were rendered possible by the logic of colonialism and

[13] United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, adopted 9 December 1948, entered into force 12 January 1951, United Nations, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocitycrimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf, accessed on December 20, 2025.

[14] Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, Volume 2: The Rise of the West and the Coming of Genocide* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).; A. Dirk Moses, "Genocide and Modernity," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 156–194.; Dan Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond 'Uniqueness' and Ethnic Competition," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 1 (2004): 127–142.; I. Louis Horowitz, *Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power* (New York: Routledge, 2017).; Jürgen Habermas, *Küreselleşme ve Millî Devletlerin Geleceği* (İstanbul: Yarın Yayınları, 2018).

[15] Edward Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time," in *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 140–147.

subsequently reinforced by the historical processes it set in motion, most notably the rise of Western dominance and modernity.[16]

Still others argue that genocidal behavior originate from revivalist cults, cultural stereotyping, devaluation of respective races, and religious prejudices.[17] In this sense, genocidal crimes are not peculiar to the modern times or the medieval colonial era. The roots go back antiquity. A well-known instance occurred, according to Cheick Anta Diop, when the Egyptians imposed measures intended to prevent births and eliminate male babies within the Jewish people, lest they turn into a national threat which might increase enemy ranks in time of war.[18]

Although scholars of genocide differ in their assessments of how deeply the roots of genocide extend and which social structures and processes render such atrocities conceivable, there is broad consensus that genocide constitutes "the crime of crimes"[19] and the most serious existential threat to the enjoyment of fundamental human rights. This shared recognition, particularly salient in the post-Cold War era, has invigorated a more activist scholarly agenda focused on developing strategies aimed at deterring and preventing genocidal crimes.

Chief among these efforts was the establishment of the Carnegie Commission on *Preventing Deadly Conflict* in 1994. Grounded in their belief that mass violence and atrocity crimes are neither inevitable nor unforeseeable,[20] the commission embarked upon an ambitious research project led by leading policymakers and scholars. Its final report, *Preventing Deadly Conflict* (1997), identified two categories of strategies for atrocity prevention: a) operational strategies to preclude imminent deadly conflict, and (b) structural strategies, or peace-building, to target the long-term political, economic, and social causes of mass human rights violations.[21] Effective prevention, therefore, involved early warning coupled with early action and coordinated political, economic, diplomatic, and-where necessary-military responses, on the one hand, and persistent efforts to address root causes such as discrimination, weak governance, economic deprivation, and the erosion of the rule of law, on the other.[22] Despite its preventive orientation and emphasis on the shared responsibility of states, international organizations, and civil society actors to build durable institutions that promote security, well-being, and justice, which the Commission believed would reduce the likelihood that conflicts evolve into mass atrocities, the

[16] Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1989).; Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).; Robin D. G. Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," in *Discourse on Colonialism*, ed. Aimé Césaire (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 7–28.; Lorenzo Veracini, "Genocide and Colonialism," *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 27 (2002).; Jacques Depelchin, "The History of Mass Violence since Colonial Times: Trying to Understand the Roots of a Mindset," in *Revisiting the Heart of Darkness: Explorations into Genocide and Other Forms of Mass Violence*, ed. Henning Melber and John Y. Jones (Uddevalla, Sweden: Mediaprint for *Development Dialogue*, 2008), 13–33.; Henning Melber, "Colonialism, Genocide and Mass Killing: Integral Parts of Modernity," in *Revisiting the Heart of Darkness: Explorations into Genocide and Other Forms of Mass Violence*, ed. Henning Melber and John Y. Jones (Uddevalla, Sweden: Mediaprint for *Development Dialogue*, 2008), 263–271.

[17] Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).; Ervin Staub, "The Origins and Prevention of Genocide, Mass Killing, and Other Collective Violence," *Peace and Conflict* 5**,** no. 4 (1999): 303–336.; Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[18] Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*, 6.

[19] *Kambanda*, ICTR-97-23-S, para. 16.

[20] Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997), xvii.

[21] Carnegie Commission, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, xv.

[22] Carnegie Commission, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, xiii.

Carnegie model nonetheless remained largely state-centric owing to the primacy it gave to top-down policy responses over societal or community-based dynamics.[23]

More recent genocide-prevention theorizing efforts have shifted attention from reactive crisis management toward the political and structural conditions that facilitate timely preventive action. A prominent example is the *Will to Intervene (W2I)* project of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies. Central to W2I is the argument that the international community often possesses sufficient warning and capacity to act, yet fails to intervene due to narrow constructions of national interest. Ineffective atrocity prevention, therefore, results from inadequate political will rather than insufficient legal authority or information.[24] Inaction in turn substantially increases political, financial, and security costs, whereas early preventive engagement is comparatively less costly and more effective. To overcome these barriers, the report identifies four interrelated pillars of effective prevention: enabling leadership, enhancing coordination, building capacity, and ensuring knowledge.[25] Concomitantly, unlike earlier models, W2I places particular emphasis on mobilizing domestic constituencies, civil society, media, and regional actors to generate pressure for early action.[26] Although still operating primarily within a state-based international system, W2I represents a conceptual shift toward understanding prevention as a dynamic process requiring sustained political engagement rather than episodic crisis response.

More recent scholarship has further expanded the scope of genocide-prevention theorizing. Challenging the dominance and efficiency of state-centric and externally driven approaches, Edward Kissi's Obligation to Prevent (O2P) framework advanced a community-centered model that conceptualized genocide prevention as a shared moral, legal, and practical responsibility, first and foremost, of local communities and neighboring states.[27] Central to this approach was a self- preservationist outlook which Kissi suggested, was key to protecting a 'shared space' from genocide.[28]

Kissi's O2P rests on the premise that genocidal violence is not enabled solely by elite decision-making. Rather, as he rightly points out, "it takes a community to commit a genocide."[29] Since violence is essentially facilitated by social processes through which prejudice and dehumanization become normalized within communities, it should, above all, take the same community to prevent it. Prioritizing proximity, development of a new understanding of community and shared space, and early societal intervention, therefore, Kissi claims that prevention is most effective before violence escalates to levels demanding international military intervention.[30] In this vein, O2P challenges prevention models that rely heavily on legal determinations or distant international action, arguing that such approaches have been so far anything but "truly effective in preventing genocide with any sense of regularity."[31] In doing so,

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[23] Carnegie Commission, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*.
[24] *Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies*, Mobilizing the Will to Intervene: Leadership and Action to Prevent Mass Atrocities *(Montreal: Concordia University, 2009), v.*
[25] *MIGS*, Mobilizing the Will to Intervene, *2*.
[26] *MIGS*, Mobilizing the Will to Intervene, *v.*
[27] *Edward Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P): Proposal for Enhanced Community Approach to Genocide Prevention in Africa,"* African Security Review *25, no. 3 (2016): 243; Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."*
[28] *Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)," 243.; Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."*
[29] *Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)," 243.*
[30] *Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)," 242.*
[31] Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."141.

it suggests reorienting genocide prevention toward structural and cultural transformation as the most durable means of addressing the root causes of mass atrocities.[32]

Taken together, these three models illustrate a clear evolution in genocide-prevention theorizing: a gradual shift away from reactive, state-centric responses toward more proactive and socially grounded approaches. The Carnegie Commission's framework provided an essential conceptual foundation by introducing the distinction between operational and structural prevention. It however largely envisaged prevention as a function of governmental and intergovernmental action within existing international institutions. The Will to Intervene (W2I) initiative advanced this framework further by introducing (lack of) political will as the key obstacle to timely and effective action. Although remained mainly focused on mobilizing political leadership within a state-based international system, W2I made a significant contribution to our understanding of genocide prevention as a dynamic process rather than episodic crisis response. Edward Kissi's Obligation to Prevent (O2P) marked a more radical departure by calling for shifting the focus of prevention strategies away from states and international actors to local communities themselves. Skeptical of top-down state-centric approaches as well as the vision to eradicate genocidal human will from earth at once, it emphasized cultural transformation and community-level responsibility to reduce the incidence of genocide "one region, one community, and one street at a time."[33] While all three models clearly agree upon the importance of early action and structural conditions, they diverge fundamentally in their assumptions about where effective preventive capacity ultimately resides - an analytical tension that this study explores through the cases of Bosnia and Kosovo.

Proponents of operational prevention typically conceptualize genocide as a crime perpetrated through state power. They assume that violence at such scale and magnitude can only be organized and executed by actors who control the state apparatus. Preventive responsibility, therefore, they suggest, rests primarily with national governments and international organizations to develop early-warning mechanisms and crisis-response strategies to avert imminent threats.[34]

Scholars favoring structural prevention, by contrast, propose a more comprehensive approach focused on addressing the deeper political, social, and cultural conditions that render genocidal violence conceivable in the first place. For them, these conditions lay the groundwork for exclusionary national narratives, entrenched discrimination, and processes of dehumanization and, thus, are as consequential as the actions of political elites or frontline perpetrators. Concomitantly, central to this approach is the rejection of a sharp distinction between society and the state. It rather emphasizes the ways in which societal norms and attitudes and collective practices both enable and constrain elite decision-making. In this respect, operational strategies are criticized for neglecting the socio-cultural dimensions of genocide as well as intervening only after mass violence has escalated.[35]

In the strategies advanced by scholars advocating operational prevention, three broad categories of measures stand out. First, as crises escalate, concerned states are encouraged to pursue unilateral and multilateral preventive diplomacy. Maintaining open channels of communication with political elites and group leaders is viewed as a critical component of early

[32] Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)."
[33] Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."141.
[34] Scheffer, *All the Missing Souls*.; Bellamy, "Responsibility to Protect—Five Years On."; Gareth Evans, "The Responsibility to Protect: An Idea Whose Time Has Come … and Gone?," *International Relations* 22, no. 3 (2008): 289, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117808094173.
[35] Shaw, *What Is Genocide?*; Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)."; Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."

response. At this stage, special envoys supported by advisory teams, along with nongovernmental organizations, may play a valuable role in mediating disputes, brokering political agreements, or averting the onset of large-scale violence.[36]

Concurrently, international organizations - most notably the United Nations (UN) - are generally seen as central actors tasked with a critical monitoring function. Through systematic tracking of human rights abuses, these institutions can signal when political conditions move toward large-scale violence and, in response, engage diplomatically through dialogue facilitation or targeted political pressure.[37] At the regional level, scholars further emphasize the importance of strengthening regional organizations and institutions capable of promoting compliance with civilian-protection norms and reinforcing states' long-term commitment to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) agenda.[38]

Where preventive diplomacy proves ineffective, proponents of operational prevention argue that economic measures should constitute the next line of response. Commonly proposed measures include the suspension of financial assistance to offending states, the imposition of targeted sanctions and boycotts, and the freezing of personal assets belonging to perpetrators and their supporters.[39] A growing body of literature, however, increasingly questions the effectiveness of these measures. Poorly designed sanctions, Matthew Krain and Rebecca Tinsley contend, frequently fail to curb ongoing atrocities and often miss their intended targets (elites) while exacerbating humanitarian suffering and broader human rights conditions.[40] To mitigate these unintended effects, Tinsley emphasize the importance of precision targeting, with particular attention paid to disrupting the financial infrastructures - such as Western-based tax havens - that enable perpetrators to safeguard illicit assets.[41]

Alongside punitive measures, scholars have also drawn attention to the role that economic and political inducements can play in prevention efforts. When carefully designed, inducement strategies may encourage offending states to implement specific policy changes in exchange for material or diplomatic benefits.[42] Striking the right balance between punishment and reward

[36] Staub, "The Origins and Prevention of Genocide."; Edward C. Luck, "Why the United Nations Underperforms at Preventing Mass Atrocities," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 11, no. 3 (2018): 32–47.
[37] Andrew Marx, "Using Satellites to Detect Mass Human Rights Violation: A Call for the International Community to Implement an Early Warning Detection System," in *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 171–181.; Staub, "The Origins and Prevention of Genocide."
[38] Carla Barqueiro, Kim Richard Nossal Seaman, and K. T. Towey, "Regional Organizations and Responsibility to Protect: Normative Reframing or Normative Change?," *Politics and Governance* 4, no. 3 (2016): 37–49.; David Carment, Joe Landry, and Stewart Winchester, "The Role of Regional Organizations: A Responsibility Gap?," in *The Oxford Handbook of Responsibility to Protect*, ed. Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 335–355.; Staub, "The Origins and Prevention of Genocide."
[39] Staub, "The Origins and Prevention of Genocide."; Jeremy Farrall, "The Use of UN Sanctions to Address Mass Atrocities," in The Oxford Handbook of Responsibility to Protect, ed. Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 655–673.; Henry K. Kopel, "The Case for Sanctioning State Sponsors of Genocide Incitement," *Cornell International Law Journal* 49 (2016): 415–468.
[40] Matthew Krain, "The Effect of Economic Sanctions on the Severity of Genocides or Politicides," *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 1 (2017): 88–111.; Rebecca Tinsley, "The Al Capone Strategy: Follow the Money," in *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 135.
[41] Tinsley, "The Al Capone Strategy," 135.
[42] Carnegie Commission, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*.; Alexander Mayer-Rieckh, Karim Kamel, and Sebastian Stein, *Atrocity Prevention in a Nutshell: Origins, Concepts, and Approaches* (New York: Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, 2016), https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn2/cppf-atrocity-prevention-in-a-589df681b84a0.pdf, accessed on December 11, 2025.

provides a more flexible - and in some cases more effective – alternative to exclusively coercive sanctions.

As a measure of last resort, operational prevention approaches propose the use of military force against the offending state when crises escalate into large-scale violence. Such action is most effective however, proponents claim, if it is undertaken collectively and proactively. Ideally with the authorization of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), collective military intervention of the international community enhances legal legitimacy and distributes the political and material costs of action among participating states.[43] Yet, in practice collective military action is often difficult to realize. Political risk aversion, competing national interests, and institutional veto powers (UNSC) usually delay or block timely intervention altogether. Some scholars have advocated the "selective use of force" as a more viable alternative to address these constraints.[44] Limited, targeted, and timely military engagement, Seybolt claims, offers much better results at halting mass violence than delayed or unattainable multilateral consensus.[45]

Again, however, there is a key obstacle to timely and effective response to acts that seem to have genocidal intent. Scheffer argues that such responses often become practically unthinkable because both national governments and international organizations feel bound by the necessity to demonstrate incontrovertible legal proof that genocide has already occurred.[46] This emphasis on formal legal classification over rapidly unfolding social and political realities on the ground, Scheffer maintains, frequently immobilizes decision-makers and, thus, causes delayed action until atrocities have been judicially confirmed.[47]

Scheffer proposes overcoming this paralysis by separating the legal definition of genocide from its political and preventive functions, urging policymakers to move beyond rigid terminological caution. Particularly, he suggests the more consistent use of the concept of "precursors of genocide" to describe patterns of violence and persecution that indicate an approaching risk of genocidal escalation.[48] Removing the requirement for a prior legal determination, he argues, would better position international organizations, the UN in particular, as well as concerned states to exert diplomatic, economic, or, if necessary, military pressure on perpetrators at earlier stages. In Scheffer's view, such an approach would make preventive action more effective and, therefore, significantly increase the likelihood of saving human lives.[49]

Explicit in this examination is that scholars advocating operational approaches to genocide prevention do not constitute a monolithic group. Their tools rather vary considerably in coerciveness, political cost, and legal authorization. Uniting these intellectuals together however is the shared recognition that both genocidal violence and effective prevention require capacities - organization, coordination, and strategic planning – that are typically available only to actors who control the state apparatus. Atrocities of such scale and magnitude can thus be prevented most effectively through state-level action, both domestically and internationally. As a result,

[43] Matthew C. Waxman, *Intervention to Stop Genocide and Mass Atrocities: International Norms and U.S. Policy*, Council Special Report no. 49 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009).; Sarah Sewall, "From Prevention to Response: Using Military Force to Oppose Mass Atrocities," in Mass Atrocity Crimes: Preventing Future Outrages, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 159–174.
[44] Taylor B. Seybolt, "The Use of Force," in *The Oxford Handbook of Responsibility to Protect*, ed. Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 561.
[45] Seybolt, "The Use of Force," 561.
[46] Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes."
[47] Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes."
[48] Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes," 229.
[49] Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes."

operational prevention suggests focusing particularly on elites and frontline perpetrators, on the one hand, and strives to develop strategies through which the international community can be mobilized to deter governments from committing genocidal violence or to pressure them into complying with the R2P, on the other.

This state-centrism that lie at the heart of operational prevention constitutes the central criticism that structural and community-centered prevention frameworks have long been raising. Accusing operational prevention as ineffective and insufficient, recent scholarship highlights that mass violence is made possible long before elite decisions are translated into policy. Primarily responsible for genocidal acts instead are social processes of exclusion, discrimination, and dehumanization that pave the way for the lethal embrace of the idea that the nation would be better off if certain groups were excluded or eliminated. By focusing primarily on state officials or frontline perpetrators as the principal agents of atrocity, therefore, operational prevention neglects the deeper structural conditions that give rise to mass violence in the first place.

Central to structural and community-centered prevention frameworks is the argument that elites cannot be meaningfully separated from the broader societies of which they are an integral part. Their ideas, decisions, and actions both shape and reflect prevailing social norms. Addressing the root causes of genocide require, therefore, sustained, long-term, and bottom-up efforts aimed at transforming societal attitudes, beliefs and practices. Explicit in this contention is that genocide prevention ought to extend beyond state-level intervention and be relocated to the community level.[50]

In a nutshell, structural and community-centered prevention frameworks propose to defeat genocidal behavior from the bottom up. According to Edward Kissi, to name one, this means encouraging each community and region to find ways to create their own safe environments and inspire their own collective survival norms.[51] By acknowledging that their own safety, survival, and dignity depends on making that environment safe and free from genocide, local communities should collectively work towards reducing the incidence of atrocities in their own region. This sense of shared threat and shared space, or what Kissi calls self-preservationist outlook, could help develop a regional civic consciousness and culture of peace. Accompanying these efforts should be to develop genocide-reduction literacy supported by regional civic education curricula. Briefly stated, the key to success in genocide prevention lies in reducing the incidence of it locally, before violence escalates beyond control.[52]

Gregory Stanton, another prominent proponent of bottom–up deterrence, proposes more of a hybrid solution.[53] His formula involve the establishment of local anti-genocide organizations - an effort he argues should be reinforced by genocide-reduction literacy via both secular and religious institutions. This is because dehumanizing national discourses and state ideologies can only be defeated by teaching people and vaccinate empathy and tolerance for their neighbors. Furthermore, he emphasizes the necessity of international engagement in fostering anti-genocidal

[50] Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)."; Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."; Ekkehard Strauss, "Local Structures of Prevention and the Obligation to Prevent Genocide as an Individual Right," in *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 129–134.; Israel W. Charny, "The Time Has Come for Genocide Scholars to Innovate: The Critical Need to Develop and Implement New and Unique Tools for Prevention," in *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 147–152.; Gregory H. Stanton, "The Ten Stages of Genocide," in *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018), 49–64.
[51] Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."
[52] Kissi, "Obligation to Prevent (O2P)."; Kissi, "Reducing Genocides, One Region at a Time."
[53] Stanton, "Ten Stages of Genocide."

norms and cultures beyond the local level. In situations involving imminent threats, Stanton further highlights the importance of developing an international police capacity capable of rapid deployment to prevent the escalation of mass violence.[54]

Ekkehart Strauss too sees genocide prevention as an ongoing, locally grounded process. Preventive efforts, in his line of reasoning, should be shifted away from an exclusive focus on inter-state mechanisms and, instead, actively involve communities facing imminent risk.[55] Complementing this perspective, Israel W. Charny suggests reinforcing the development of regional anti-genocidal cultures and civic consciousness with a global campaign for the protection of human life.[56] Charny maintains that these efforts should be accompanied by the creation of transnational associations linking communities that have experienced genocidal violence, on the one hand, and the establishment of an international peace force, on the other.[57]

Structural and community-centered prevention strategies, to put briefly, concern largely with the underlying roots of violent conflict, seeking to cultivate social and political environments that are inherently less conducive to atrocity crimes. Rather than concentrating exclusively on immediate perpetrators or crisis moments, this outlook assigns primary weight to the structural drivers of mass violence so that such conditions neither emerge in the first place nor recur over time. Achieving this require a carefully designed bottom-up approach and at its core lies the construction of an anti-genocidal culture.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study revisits contemporary genocide-prevention theorizing, exploring how different prevention models conceptualize timing, responsibility, and thresholds for action. Through a comparative analysis of international responses to mass violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999), it assesses the strengths and limitations of state-centric, operational prevention strategies in comparison with structural and community-centered approaches. By placing prevention efforts within the temporal dynamics of conflict escalation, the article seeks to identify how genocidal processes might be interrupted at earlier stages and in ways that are more sustainable over time.

Three interrelated research questions guide this study. First, how did international prevention efforts unfold at different stages of escalation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and why did they produce divergent outcomes? Second, to what extent were state-centric, operational prevention strategies able to interrupt mass violence once escalation was already underway, and where did their limitations become evident? And third, what insights do the Bosnian and Kosovar cases offer regarding the need to incorporate structural and community-centered prevention mechanisms into broader genocide-prevention frameworks?

Methodology and Case Selection

The primary objective of this study, to reiterate, is to identify how genocidal processes can be disrupted earlier and more sustainably. The three approaches reviewed above offer different recipes for action to achieve this goal. One suggests focusing mainly on states, elites, frontline perpetrators whereas the other two proposes addressing the structural drivers of mass violence. Besides their conventions about whether a top-down or a bottom-up approach constitutes a better

[54] Stanton, “Ten Stages of Genocide.”
[55] Strauss, “Local Structures of Prevention.”
[56] Charny, “Time Has Come for Genocide Scholars to Innovate.”
[57] Charny, “Time Has Come for Genocide Scholars to Innovate.”

strategy, these models diverge in their prescribed tools as well as their assumptions about timing and thresholds for action. A comparative qualitative case study methodology is therefore particularly well suited to the study's objective, as it allows assessing different genocide-prevention models and tracing how each model operates at distinct stages of escalation and assessing.

Addressing causal complexity in case study research necessitates the systematic use of process tracing and detailed empirical evidence.[58] Through detailed within-case evidence, process tracing allows exploring the hypothesized causal mechanisms linking explanatory variables to the outcome of interest, thereby enabling researchers to test whether theoretical expectations hold or derive new, testable propositions from the case itself.[59] Defined broadly as "the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case,"[60] the process tracing method is also well suited to this study's analytical framework which regards both genocide and genocide prevention not as a discrete events but rather as ongoing processes.

The conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999) are examined here as most-similar cases. The choice rests on the fact that, despite shared conditions, genocide-prevention efforts in the two contexts led to divergent outcomes. To name a few, both conflicts emerged from the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. Political elites mobilized populations along ethnic lines and framed coexistence with other groups as a threat to the survival of the nation. Belgrade-backed political and military structures played a key role in escalating the violence. Furthermore, civilians were not incidental victims but primary targets and violence was used deliberately to alter demographic realities on the ground. Above all, all took place under constant international scrutiny.

These similarities notwithstanding, genocide-prevention efforts produced markedly different results. While Bosnia stands as a classic textbook example of a case of preventive failure, Kosovo is for many a case of partial success. International deterrence mechanisms collapsed in Bosnia, allowing violence to escalate to genocide in Srebrenica whereas in Kosovo preventive action fell short of transforming the broader context but nonetheless managed to disrupt an escalating pattern of mass violence before it culminated in genocide.

The main difference between these cases lies in their differing temporal patterns of intervention. Multilateral preventive measures were delayed, legally constrained, and largely reactive in Bosnia. Coercive measures were introduced only when it's too late- after genocidal violence had revealed, as ICTY Judge Fouad Riad observed, "scenes of unimaginable savagery… truly scenes from hell, written on the darkest pages of human history".[61] Whereas in Kosovo operational prevention was put into practice earlier in the escalation process. Rather than relying on formal legal determinations, international responses were based on assessments of imminent risk. This contrast enables a systematic evaluation of when and how operational prevention can alter violent trajectories, as well as where its limitations become apparent.

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[58] *Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett,* Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences *(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).*

[59] *George and Bennett,* Case Studies and Theory Development.*; Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel,* Process Tracing and the Social Sciences: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool *(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).*

[60] *Bennett and Checkel,* Process Tracing, *7.*

[61] International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, "Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic Accused of Genocide Following the Take-Over of Srebrenica," press release, The Hague, 16 November 1995, https://www.icty.org/en/press/radovan-karadzic-and-ratko-mladic-accused-genocide-following-take-over-srebrenica, accessed on October 19, 2025.

The comparative analysis is organized around three analytical dimensions derived from the study's research questions. *Timing* refers to the stage of escalation at which preventive measures were introduced. The *level of prevention* distinguishes between state-centric operational responses and measures that emphasize structural factors and community-based engagement. The final dimension, *scope,* assesses whether prevention efforts targeted immediate violence alone or also addressed the broader societal conditions that facilitate mass atrocities.

Taken together, genocide prevention efforts are not evaluated simply by whether violence was avoided, but by the extent to which genocidal processes were interrupted or allowed to consolidate. By embedding conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo within this comparative framework, the study aims to clarify why prevention fails when it arrives too late, why operational strategies can achieve limited success, and why sustainable prevention ultimately requires engagement with the structural and societal drivers of mass violence.

Analytical Framework

To evaluate the explanatory power and limitations of competing genocide-prevention models reviewed above, this study adopts an analytical framework that regards genocide as a process of escalation rather than as a single, isolated event. Building on this process-oriented understanding, which reflects a widely shared position among leading scholars of genocide studies,[62] the framework disaggregates prevention along three interrelated dimensions: phases of escalation, timing of preventive action, and levels of intervention. This approach allows for a systematic comparison of the two cases in hand, concerning when and how preventive measures were deployed towards evolving dynamics of mass violence.

Accompanying this is a phased approach. Both cases are examined in the study across four analytically distinct but overlapping stages: (1) early structural tension; (2) escalation; (3) mass violence; and (4) international response. Rather than treating these phases as rigid categories, the analysis traces how violence developed over time and how external actors reacted to it, thereby assesses whether preventive measures were introduced before, during, or only after genocidal processes had become entrenched.

A core assumption guiding the analysis is that the timing of preventive action is decisive for its effectiveness – the earlier the better. Structural and community-centered approaches largely share this assumption, emphasizing the necessity of early engagement aimed at the root causes that render mass atrocities conceivable in the first place whereas operational prevention strategies, by contrast, tend to be activated during advanced stages of escalation which are often introduced in response to visible mass violence or the accumulation of indisputable evidence. Accordingly, the analysis evaluates prevention efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo based on whether they were initiated reactively, after violence had escalated, or proactively, in response to what Scheffer called "precursors of genocide".[63]

Building on the three genocide-prevention models reviewed above, the analysis distinguishes between two typical levels of prevention. State-centric operational prevention focuses primarily on political elites, state institutions, and international organizations. Its top-down approach hence prioritizes tools such as preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, sanctions, and military intervention to deter or halt violence. Conversely, structural and community-centered prevention targets the societal foundations of mass violence. Its bottom-up approach seeks to

[62] *Lemkin,* Axis Rule in Occupied Europe.*; Schabas,* Genocide in International Law.*; Stanton, "Ten Stages of Genocide."*
[63] *Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes," 229.*

address social cleavages, exclusionary ideologies, and processes of dehumanization. Unsurprisingly, the instruments its proponents draw attention to include education, civic engagement, and the cultivation of anti-genocidal norms. In sum, the former prioritizes crisis response whereas the latter concerns with long-term transformation.

Finally, the analytical framework advanced here draws attention to the decision thresholds that shape when and how preventive action is taken. History is replete with examples showing that legal thresholds often delay intervention until violence has escalated. These include the requirement of formal evidence or judicial determination of genocide. Political thresholds, be it states' strategic, national interests or domestic public opinion, shape external actors' willingness to act in the absence of legal certainty. Lastly, social thresholds refer to the normalization of exclusion and violence within societies. For structural and community-centered prevention advocates, these constitute the point beyond which prevention becomes increasingly difficult. Examining how these thresholds operated in Bosnia and Kosovo clarifies why similar international actors responded at different points along the escalation trajectory.

Case Studies

Bosnian War and the Srebrenica Genocide

Nationalism, as conceptualized by John Breuilly, is primarily a political tool utilized to advance elite interests.[64] It is also a powerful ideology that makes its followers willing to fight and die for their 'imagined communities,'[65] thus, again, serves the interests of elites. The Bosnian War was an outgrowth of the marriage of these two. Elites weaponized ethnic identity to consolidate power. Narrowly constructed national interests, ethnic nationalism, discrimination, prejudice, and disrespect for moral values and human rights paved the way for one of the most devastating experiences of the twentieth century. Conflict resolution efforts remained inconclusive until the damage was irremediable.

Chief among the factors leading to the disintegration of Yugoslavia were Serbia's pursuit of dominance and the resulting survival imperative of the other republics. Slobodan Milosevic's embrace of ethnic Serb nationalism urged other Yugoslav republics to seek self-help and independence, facilitating the intrastate ethnic strife and the death of the old South Slav dream. There was no sizable Serbian population in Slovenia. Hence, Milosevic lacked a motive and a legitimate basis for a territorial takeover. Croatia was however a different matter. Home to a substantial Serb minority with contested territorial claims, it provided both the demographic basis and the plausible justification for intervention, producing a violent conflict devastating for civilians and regional stability. For a combination of demographic, historical, ideological, and strategic reasons Bosnia meant much more to Serbia. Consequently, Bosnian Serb political elites with the support from Belgrade had already declared the self-proclaimed "Serb Autonomous Regions" in Bosnia, soon followed by the declaration of the "Republic of the Serbian People in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (BiH), long before BiH opted for independence.[66]

Mass violence followed BiH's drive for self-determination, yet its structural roots preceded the breakup. By early 1992, several indicators were already present. These included but not limited to hate speech, elite discourse framing ethnic coexistence as a threat, the establishment

[64] *John Breuilly,* Nationalism and the State*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), xii.*

[65] *Benedict Anderson,* Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2006).*

[66] Eleonora Emkic, *From Segregation to Sustainable Positive Peace through Reconciliation and a Sustainable Education System in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (PhD diss., Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2015), 6.

of parallel political institutions, the proliferation of paramilitary formations, and systematic discrimination against non-Serb communities.[67] From a process-oriented understanding of genocide and prevention, these developments constituted early warning indicators of potential mass violence and should have stimulated international preventive action.

Following independence in March 1992, violence erupted and escalated rapidly. Extensive documentation by humanitarian organizations revealed that by mid-1992 credible evidence of forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, mass detention camps and systematic killings of thousands of civilians "on the basis of their religion or nationality" was widely available.[68] Human Rights Watch explicitly stated in its report that "the goal was to rid all Serbian-controlled areas of non-Serbs, or at least to diminish their numbers significantly."[69] The UN Commission of Experts too reached the same conclusion: "grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and other violations of international humanitarian law have been committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia on a large scale, and were particularly brutal and ferocious in their execution."[70] The secretary-general of the UN in his letter to the president of the Security Council implied genocide, stating that the practices were carried out "so systematically that they strongly appear to be the product of a policy."[71]

While the UN Commission of Experts was "shocked by the high level of victimization and the manner in which these crimes were committed,"[72] the conflict was frequently framed by many including media outlets and the international community as a civil war, obscuring the organized nature of violence.[73] Despite rich, credible evidence signaling escalation, this delayed recognition, coupled with lack of political will, legal caution, and procedural ambiguity, deterred early, effective preventive action.

Lack of coercive action notwithstanding, international and supranational organizations as well as national governments and NGOs employed a range of measures to halt the ongoing crisis. Diplomatic efforts, as scholars advocating operational prevention have argued, included the employment of special envoys, use of political inducements, establishment of regional organizations and peace keeping missions (UNPROFOR, IFOR, EUFOR) responsible primarily for monitoring ongoing human rights abuses, and unilateral and multilateral efforts to exert pressure on parties and broker political agreements. Among these efforts four diplomatic missions, proposed by the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States (aka. the "reluctant sheriff") stand out: Carrington - Cutileiro Plan (1992), Owen - Vance Plan (1993), Owen -

[67] Dino Abazovic, Nerzuk Curak, Zarije Seizovic, Nermina Sacic, and Sead Turcalo, *Ethnic Mobilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Bolzano: EURAC - European Academy, March 2007), https://www.academia.edu/49599295/Ethnic_Mobilization_in_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina, accessed on June 15, 2025.; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), *Third Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina* (adopted 6 December 2016; published 28 February 2017), Council of Europe, https://rm.coe.int/third-report-on-bosnia-and-herzegovina/16808b5602, accessed on June 15, 2025.; Amnesty International, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Behind Closed Gates — Ethnic Discrimination in Employment*, AI Index: EUR 63/003/2006 (London: Amnesty International, 2006), https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur63/003/2006/en/, accessed on June 15, 2025.

[68] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1993*, "The Former Yugoslav Republics."

[69] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1993*, "The Former Yugoslav Republics."

[70] United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992)*, UN Doc. S/1994/674 (27 May 1994), 1.

[71] UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts*, UN Doc. S/1994/674, 2.

[72] UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts*, UN Doc. S/1994/674, 72.

[73] Medecins Sans Frontieres, *Speaking Out: Srebrenica 1993–2003* (Paris: Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2004), 15, https://www.msf.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/MSF%20Speaking%20Out%20Srebrenica%201993-2003_1.pdf, accessed on December 20, 2025.

Stoltenberg Plan (in late 1993), and Contact Group Plan (1994).[74] Despite these efforts to find a peace solution, the crisis continued to escalate. Diplomatic efforts, hence, proved ineffective.

Concomitant with diplomatic measures, as scholars advocating operational prevention have argued, national governments and international organizations resorted to economic measures. Considering it an effective alternative to military involvement, the UN Security Council imposed a series of economic sanctions against the Milosevic regime and Bosnian Serbs since 1992.[75] In compliance with these, the US also imposed several measures.[76] Chief among these were UNSCR (United Nations Security Council Resolution) 757 and 787 in which the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was subjected to a trade embargo and ban on transshipment of crude oil, coal, steel, iron, energy-related equipment, and petroleum products.[77] Moreover, an arms embargo against all the republics of FRY was imposed by the UN.[78]

Whether these measures were effective, is however a different matter. Studies reveal that the unfocused and ill-considered economic sanctions, along with the absence of monitoring mechanisms, not only led to the failure of these efforts but also enabled the Milosevic regime to make fortunes by manipulating the black markets.[79] Arms embargoes, on the other hand, did more harm than good, widening the military capabilities gap between the parties (Yugoslav National Arms vs. Bosnian Muslim paramilitary units).[80]

Finally, conflict resolution efforts included military engagement – limited and institutionally constrained during the early phases of the conflict. The UN employed peace keeping and peace enforcements missions in the region and imposed no-fly zones over Bosnia and Herzegovina. These missions prioritized neutrality and humanitarian access over civilian protection.[81] NATO, with the support of the Western European Union (WEU) and in concert with UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force), conducted limited military operations seeking to quell the war. These included Operation Sharp Guard (1992) and Operation Deny Flight (1993), conducted to ensure the implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions and deter ongoing violence.[82]

However, the effect of these efforts on the severity of conflict was limited. The genocide at Srebrenica in 1995 marked the culmination of these failures. Designated by the UN as a "safe

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[74] Fiona Cameron, *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War: Global Hegemon or Reluctant Sheriff?* (London and New York: Psychology Press, 2005).

[75] Paul Lewis, "U.S. Seeks U.N. Ban on Yugoslav Trade Over Bosnia Strife," *The New York Times*, May 29, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/29/world/us-seeks-un-ban-on-yugoslav-trade-over-bosnia-strife.html, accessed on December 20, 2025.; Dianne Rennack, *Economic Sanctions and the Former Yugoslavia: Current Status and Policy Considerations*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1996), https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/19961216_97-20_92de1e618a5d683521ce8f1eb5d8f7cbf212d9c8.pdf, accessed on December 20, 2025.

[76] Charles J. Kacsur, *Economic Sanctions Targeting Yugoslavia: An Effective National Security Strategy Component* (Strategy Research Project, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2003).; Rennack, *Economic Sanctions and the Former Yugoslavia*.

[77] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 757, *S/RES/757* (30 May 1992), para. 4, 13.; United Nations Security Council, Resolution 787, *S/RES/787* (16 November 1992), para. 9.

[78] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 713, *S/RES/713* (25 September 1991), para. 6.

[79] Tinsley, "The Al Capone Strategy," 135.; Kacsur, *Economic Sanctions Targeting Yugoslavia*.

[80] Roger Cohen, "Arms Trafficking to Bosnia Goes on Despite Embargo," *The New York Times*, November 5, 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/05/world/arms-trafficking-to-bosnia-goes-on-despite-embargo.html, accessed on December 20, 2025.

[81] MSF, *Speaking Out: Srebrenica 1993–2003.*

[82] Niccolo Figa-Talamanca, "The Role of NATO in the Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina," *European Journal of International Law* 7 (1996): 164–175.; Sheila Z. Ahmad, "The UN's Role in the Bosnian Crisis: A Critique," Pakistan Horizon 51, no. 2 (1998): 83–92.

area which should be free from any armed attack or any hostile act,"[83] Srebrenica hosted UN forces who lacked both the authority and capacity to prevent, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported, the "terrorization of women, children and the elderly and… systematic, mass executions of… thousands of civilian men and boys.".[84] HRW further reported that the UN peacekeeping officials "were unwilling to heed requests for support from their own forces stationed within the enclave, thus allowing Bosnian Serb forces to easily overrun it and—without interference from U.N. soldiers.".[85]

Success only came following NATO's air campaign over Bosnian Serbs with the support of UNPROFOR's ground operations later that year - after genocidal processes had fully consolidated and inflicted irreversible harm. The humanitarian crisis finally came to an end with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Whether the Dayton Accord was a success however has long been debated. It did manage to stop the ongoing large-scale hostilities, on the one hand, but institutionalized a fragmented political order that preserved many of the structural drivers of the conflict, on the other. BiH remains to this day a country characterized by deep ethnic divisions, persistent discrimination, ethnonationalist hate speech, and dehumanizing national discourses.[86]

From a process-oriented understanding of genocide and genocide prevention, the Bosnian case stands as a paradigmatic failure. This failure is rooted not in the absence of warning but in the inability and, to some extent, unwillingness of international actors to respond to an approaching risk of genocidal escalation in a timely and proactive manner. As detailed above, several structural indicators of mass violence were already present in Bosnia - well before violence escalated, and credible evidence of genocidal acts, as explicated in HRW and UN reports, was widely available as early as mid-1992. Nevertheless, prevention efforts were delayed and remained constrained by lack of political will, legal caution, and procedural ambiguity. Overreliance on diplomatic and economic measures was arguably another important factor explaining the failure to interrupt a rapidly but steadily intensifying humanitarian plight. Multilateral military intervention finally discouraged further attacks; however, it arrived too late to protect civilians or mitigate the devastation. This failure of the international community underscores the central importance of timing and level of response in formulating genocide prevention strategies.

The Kosovo Crisis and NATO Intervention

If Bosnia held a major place in Serbian leadership's plans, Kosovo stood at the core of it – or using Milosevic's own words, "Kosovo is the very heart of Serbia."[87] Occupying an irreplaceable position in Serbian national mythology since the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, it has long been regarded both by ordinary self-identified Serbs as well as Serbian political, religious, and literary elites - regardless of their ideological orientation - a matter of domestic politics. Its loss would mean, unlike other former Yugoslav republics, a direct challenge to Serbia's territorial integrity and political authority. Arguably this is why Milosevic's embrace of ethnic Serb

[83] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 819, *S/RES/819*(1993) (16 April 1993), para. 1.
[84] Human Rights Watch, *The Fall of Srebrenica and the Failure of UN Peacekeeping in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, October 15, 1995, https://www.hrw.org/report/1995/10/15/fall-srebrenica-and-failure-un-peacekeeping/bosnia-and-herzegovina, accessed on December 20, 2025.
[85] Human Rights Watch, *The Fall of Srebrenica*.
[86] Reporting Diversity Network, *Monitoring Report on Hate Speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina – 2025* (2025), https://www.reportingdiversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/MRHS_BiH.pdf, accessed on December 20, 2025.; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Bosnia and Herzegovina*.
[87] BBC, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, documentary series (London: BBC, 1995), accessed via YouTube, 4:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVUg-VoPAeA, accessed on December 27, 2025.

nationalism and subsequent drive for imposing Serbia's "will on the rest of Yugoslavia" began in Kosovo - with his famous remarks "You will not be beaten again!".[88]

The conflict in Kosovo originated from a long-standing process of structural exclusion and repression. After declaring martial law and revoking Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989, Serbian leadership systematically eliminated Albanian political representation, excluded Kosovo Albanians from public employment, suppressed cultural and educational institutions, and imposed discriminatory security measures resulting in human rights violations including police violence and political trials.[89] As in Bosnia, non-Serbs were portrayed as an existential threat, deepening the already intense polarization within the society.[90]

From a process-oriented understanding of genocide and prevention, these developments constituted early indicators of an upcoming mass violence. Large-scale violence had not yet erupted. However, state aggression, denial of rights including political representation, and forced exclusion from public life created a permissive environment where armed conflict became increasingly likely. As in Croatia and Bosnia, these were well documented long before the outbreak of mass violence.

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was formed against this backdrop. Scarcely less important factors encouraging its formation and expansion included the failure of non-coercive measures, taken by the international community during the conflict in Bosnia, in deterring Serbian leadership from further aggression and Dayton's nonrecognition of Kosovo. The latter was particularly disappointing for Kosovo Albanians – the current Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti would later confirm this claim in an interview by saying that "Dayton was a game-changer".[91] As Kosovo was entirely excluded both from the negotiations and the final agreement, they were effectively relegated to a domestic Serbian issue and their several years long non-violent resistance and call for international recognition went unnoticed. Self-identified Albanians' frustration in turn ushered in increasing domestic support for the KLA's armed resistance at the expense of Ibrahim Rugova's strategy of non-violent resistance.

By 1998, tensions escalated into armed confrontation between Serbian security forces and the KLA. Belgrade-backed counterinsurgency operations targeted civilian populations through village burnings, forced displacement, and extrajudicial killings.[92] The KLA targeted both Serbian security forces and civilians it thought were cooperating with security services.[93] Again, credible evidence of mass violence was widely available and, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair warned, a humanitarian disaster was impending.[94] The UN too took notice of the reality on the ground, expressing concerns over "the excessive and indiscriminate use of force by Serbian security forces and the Yugoslav Army."[95]

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[88] BBC, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, 1:06, 12:30.
[89] Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*, 10, 28-29.; Human Rights Watch, "Crisis in Kosovo," https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/kosovo98/old/back1.htm, accessed on December 27, 2025.
[90] BBC, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, 0:30 – 31:15.
[91] Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*, 92.
[92] Paul Williams, "The Road to Resolving the Conflict Over Kosovo's Final Status," *American University Law Review* (2003), 397, https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2814&context=facsch_l awrev, accessed on December 27, 2025.; Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*.; Tim Judah, "The Kosovo Liberation Army," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (September 2000): 61–77.
[93] The Prosecutor v. Ramush Haradinaj, Idriz Balaj, and Lahi Brahimaj**,** Case No. IT-04-84-I, Indictment (24 February 2005), International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), https://www.icty.org/x/cases/haradinaj/ind/en/har-ii050224e.pdf, accessed on December 27, 2025.; Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*.
[94] Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*, 124.
[95] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1199, *S/RES/1199*(1998) (23 September 1998).

Until this point, prevention efforts of the international community in the Kosovo conflict largely mirrored the measures employed in Bosnia - diplomacy, sanctions, and peace monitoring. First and foremost, international responses remained at inter-state level and included only state officials and leaders of paramilitary groups. Serbia's excessive use of force brought economic sanctions and arms embargoes with it.[96] Furthermore, special envoys as well as UN led peace keeping and peace-enforcement missions worked diligently to halt the crisis.[97] None proved effective.

What was different in Kosovo was that military engagement could be put into practice this time before another potential irremediable damage like Srebrenica occurred. Acknowledging that diplomatic and economic measures were insufficient to obstruct Serbian aggression and, thereby, to halt escalation, the US-led international community's response to the spreading deadly conflict was to take military air campaign against the Serbian forces. Held without authorization from the UNSC and justified on humanitarian grounds, the Operation Allied Force destroyed the Serbian military capabilities and obliged Serbian leadership to participate in peace talks.[98] Subsequently, UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo MIK (UNMIK) was tasked with maintaining stability in the region until Kosovo's final status was determined in 2008.[99]

Practically, military intervention did stop the ongoing humanitarian plight in Kosovo before large-scale genocidal violence had fully consolidated and prevent a potential spill-over effect spreading into the region, making the Kosovo case widely regarded as a success and used as a reference in scholarly works calling for state-centric deterrence to atrocity crimes. In this sense, the intervention succeeded in interrupting an escalating process before it reached its most destructive phase. On the other hand, however, it also put the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into an economic depression via the destruction of factories, industrial infrastructure, transportation networks, and public institutions in Serbia, thereby putting the stability of Serbia in jeopardy.[100] The intervention targeted civilian centers as well, including a hospital and bridge in Belgrade, Serb Radio and Television headquarters, and the Chinese embassy in Serbia.[101] Moreover, it failed to create a stable Kosovo and caused another humanitarian crisis due to the loss of tens of thousands of lives and displacement of more than a million civilians occurred during the air campaign.

Nor was the intervention successful in rendering a context less prone to further atrocities. Mutual intolerance and hatred, vital structural factors of violent conflict, continue to exist between the two nations. State ideologies remain hostile to each other and continue to shape the public discourse in a way that has kept ethnic rivalries alive. Impunity for war crimes and war criminals within both states remains a critical issue to be solved.[102] In essence, therefore, the NATO intervention in the Kosovo conflict largely failed to address and resolve the root causes of the conflict, but rather transformed it into a frozen one awaiting to be surfaced.

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[96] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1160, *S/RES/1160*(1998) (31 March 1998), para. 8.

[97] Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*.; Tim Judah, "The Kosovo Liberation Army," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 5, no. 3 (September 2000): 61–77.

[98] Phillips and Burns, *Liberating Kosovo*.

[99] Julie Kim and Steven Woehrel, *Kosovo and U.S. Policy: Background to Independence*, Congressional Research Service Report (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008).

[100] Ved P. Nanda, "Legal Implications of NATO's Armed Intervention in Kosovo," International Law Studies 75 (2000): 313–340.

[101] Eric Larson, *Interoperability of U.S. and NATO Allied Air Forces: Supporting Data and Case Studies*, RAND Report no. 1603 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003).

[102] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Bosnia and Herzegovina*.; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2025: Serbia/Kosovo*, World Report (2025), https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/serbia/kosovo, accessed on December 27, 2025.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999) underscores that the effectiveness of genocide-prevention strategies depends less on the availability of policy tools than on the timing, manner, and level at which they are applied. In both cases, characterized by similar structural conditions, early indicators of mass violence were present long before genocidal acts unfolded, however preventive action diverged sharply in timing and scope, producing divergent outcomes.

Bosnia demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of delayed intervention - where coercive measures were put into practice late, after genocidal dynamics had already consolidated. Moreover, these measures responded primarily to the consequences of violence rather than interrupting the process that produced it. Effective and timely response was constrained by legal caution, procedural ambiguity institutional inertia, lack of political will, and overreliance on state-centric tools. Bosnia thus illustrates a case in which genocide prevention failed not because neither warning signs nor policy tools were absent, but because intervention occurred after critical thresholds of escalation had already been crossed.

Conversely, Kosovo demonstrates how earlier activation of similar operational tools can alter the trajectory of violence. Despite the fact that the structural drivers of the conflict resembled those present in Bosnia, the international community intervened at an earlier stage - when escalation was reversible. Its contested nature - conducted without authorization from the UNSC - and unintended results notwithstanding, NATO's timely and effectively use of military force disrupted the consolidation of large-scale genocidal violence and limited the overall scale of atrocities. Kosovo therefore illustrates partial preventive success, attributable primarily to the timing of intervention rather than to a fundamentally different prevention strategy that aimed at the actual root causes of atrocities.

Kosovo also exposes the ceiling of state-centric operational prevention, thereby highlighting the critical need to move genocide prevention efforts from state-level to community-level, where these actual root causes of atrocities lie. While relatively early military action succeeded in bringing an end to further atrocities, it did not address the underlying societal and structural conditions that had enabled escalation in the first place. Kosovo was hence a case of early intervention without long-term resolution, not an example of a comprehensive genocide prevention.

Structural prevention strategies, in this regard, offer much better insights. Measures to prevent atrocities should not only be anchored in state actions. Structural factors that give birth to violent conflicts in the first place are vital as much as the role of elites and frontline killers in organizing and conducting the actual plan of atrocities. Without understanding and addressing them, any political action, whether economic or military, lacks promising potential to prevent atrocities of great diversity and magnitude from happening in the first place or from reoccurring.

Equally important, it should be remembered that elites, be it political, cultural, or literary, cannot be separated from the broader society they are born into. Governments are the sum of its people and represent the general mindset of its society to a certain extent. Focusing exclusively on state officials as the sole perpetrators of atrocity crimes, thus, misses a crucial component of genocide prevention. To prevent future genocidal acts from happening requires, first and foremost, a bottom-up approach centered on helping local communities develop their own anti-genocidal ethic through proper education. Atrocity crimes can best be prevented, therefore, by working diligently toward creating cultural mechanisms fighting against discrimination, intolerance, hatred, and dehumanizing national discourses and state ideologies.

At the same time, the comparative evidence from Bosnia and Kosovo cautions against interpreting the shortcomings of state-centric prevention as a rejection of coercive measures altogether. While structural and community-centered approaches are crucial for addressing the deeper societal conditions that render genocide conceivable, they also need to integrate military force in their action plan lest a moment like Srebrenica never happen again. In such times, timely and decisive military action may constitute the only available means of preventing irreversible harm.

The cases examined here highlight the significance of timing and of such action, thereby drawing attention to the temporal scope and limitations of structural and community-centered prevention. Evidently, such approaches are most effective in pre-escalatory phases when escalation is reversible. Once violence intensifies however, community-level initiatives lack the coercive toolkit to halt large-scale coercion and mass displacement on their own.

The primary contribution of bottom-up approaches lies instead in mitigating societal participation in violence during early phases and in preventing recurrence in post-conflict settings. These are indispensable for durable genocide prevention in the long term but insufficient given their limited capacity to interrupt organized violence. Concerning the scale and magnitude of such violence, a comprehensive prevention strategy requires reactive, state-level measures capable to preclude imminent deadly conflict. Bottom-up approaches should therefore be understood not as alternatives to operational prevention, but as complementary strategies whose effectiveness depends significantly on timing.

Kosovo demonstrates that such action, even if it is legally contested and normatively imperfect, can disrupt escalating dynamics before they reach their most destructive stage. The absence of it in Bosnia, by contrast, underscores the catastrophic consequences of delay. The comparative analysis, hence, suggests that structural prevention and military intervention should not be understood as rival approaches, but as complementary components of a layered prevention strategy.

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