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UNDERSTANDING ATROCITY SITES: DEFINITION, TYPES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

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***Summary:** This article examines the concept of “atrocity sites” – physical locations of mass atrocities and human rights violations – and analyzes their varieties and their impact on peace and security. Definitions of atrocities and a typology of the places where such acts are committed are introduced, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and other mass violations. The article considers the theoretical frameworks related to these sites, as well as practical aspects of addressing them – from preserving evidence and memory to the role of the international community and UN peacekeeping operations. Examples are presented from conflicts such as Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia, alongside historical cases (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, etc.), and different perspectives on the “peace vs. justice” dilemma are discussed. The working hypothesis is that understanding and appropriately managing atrocity sites – through pursuit of accountability and memorialization – contributes to sustainable peace and prevention of future conflicts. A comparative analysis of literature, a review of UN documents, NGO reports, and case examples are used to test this hypothesis.*

***Keywords:** Atrocity Sites; Mass Atrocities; War Crimes; Peacekeeping Operations; Peace and Security*

INTRODUCTION

In the global context of frequently recurring armed conflicts and gross violations of international humanitarian law, the need for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of “atrocity sites” and its significance for peace and security has grown (Task Force on the ICC [ASIL], 2022). We refer to atrocity sites as those specific locations where mass atrocities have been committed – for example, scenes of civilian massacres, genocidal campaigns, concentration camps, mass graves, secret torture prisons, etc. These places not only bear witness to atrocities that occurred, but also have long-term effects on post-conflict societies, international justice, and efforts to restore peace (Task Force on the ICC [ASIL], 2022; UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025). The relevance of this inquiry stems from contemporary crises like the conflict in Syria, the war in Ukraine, and the civil war in Ethiopia (Tigray region), where international organizations and media have documented horrifying atrocities at specific locations – from

cities like Bucha in Ukraine to prisons like Saydnaya in Syria and the city of Axum in Ethiopia – which raise serious questions about global security and justice (Amnesty International, 2017; Amnesty International, 2021).

The aim of this article is to define the concept of “atrocities sites” and classify the types of such sites, as well as to evaluate their influence on peace processes and international security. The article seeks to show how the systematic neglect or mismanagement of these sites can undermine efforts for lasting peace, whereas adequately addressing them – through investigation, justice, and memorialization – can contribute to reconciliation and prevention of future conflicts.

Working hypothesis: The author posits that understanding and appropriately dealing with atrocity sites are critically important for achieving sustainable post-conflict peace and security. This means that if the places where mass atrocities occurred are duly preserved as evidence and memorials, and if perpetrators are held accountable, societies will be less inclined to relapse into violence. Conversely, neglecting or erasing these sites can deepen trauma and desires for revenge, undermining peace efforts (Task Force on the ICC [ASIL], 2022; International Center for Transitional Justice, 2022).

Methodology: An interdisciplinary approach is used to achieve the objectives, including a literature review, analysis of UN and NGO reports, as well as a comparative case analysis. The latter involves comparing different conflicts and peacekeeping missions to distill common features and differences in authors’ views regarding the importance of atrocity sites. For example, the article compares perspectives on the role of justice versus peace in situations like post-genocide Rwanda and post-war Bosnia, as well as current discussions around Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia. On this basis, conclusions are drawn about best practices and recommendations for the international community.

1. DEFINING ATROCITIES AND THE PLACES OF THEIR COMMISSION

1.1. The concept of “atrocity”. The term *atrocity* usually denotes an act of extreme violence that is universally condemned as a violation of moral norms and the laws of war (Kramer, 2017). In historical context, “atrocity” has been used to describe actions perceived as barbaric – for example, the slaughter of defenseless civilians, mass executions of prisoners of war, torture, rape and other cruelties that violate established rules of warfare (Kramer, 2017). Although the term is not a strict legal term, it often overlaps with modern legal categories of mass atrocities, namely genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing (United Nations, 2005). These four categories, sometimes collectively termed *atrocity crimes*, have internationally defined meanings and engage the responsibility of both states

and individual perpetrators. For example, genocide is defined (in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention) as specific acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group – ethnic, religious, racial, or national (United Nations, 1948, art. II). Crimes against humanity encompass a broad range of acts (murder, enslavement, deportation, torture, rape, etc.) committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population. War crimes include serious violations of the laws and customs of war (e.g. willful killing of non-combatants, mistreatment of prisoners of war, unlawful destruction of towns and cultural sites, etc.) (Kramer, 2017). The term “atrocities” is often used informally to refer to all of these grave offenses, with an emphasis on their especially cruel nature and the outrage they provoke in the international community (Kramer, 2017).

1.2. Defining “atrocities sites”. Building on the above concepts, by *atrocities sites* we mean specific geographic locations where the aforementioned mass atrocities were committed. These can be open crime scenes – for example, villages or towns where large numbers of civilians were massacred (such as Srebrenica in Bosnia or Bucha in Ukraine) – as well as specific facilities: buildings or installations that were the scene of atrocities. Examples of the latter include concentration camps (e.g. Auschwitz), prisons and detention centers used for systematic torture and executions (e.g. the Saydnaya prison in Syria), so-called “killing fields” or mass execution sites (like Choeung Ek in Cambodia), and mass graves where victims were secretly buried. What all of these have in common is that the space holds the memory and evidence of the atrocities – either through physical remnants (bones, artifacts, documents) or through symbolic significance to survivors and society.

It is important to note that atrocity sites are not necessarily officially recognized or marked as such immediately. Very often these locations are initially crime scenes requiring investigation and evidence gathering. Subsequently, after hostilities end, they may also be transformed into memorial sites – monuments, museums or other forms of commemoration intended to educate future generations and honor the victims (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025). For example, the former S-21 torture center in Phnom Penh, where around 15,000 people were tortured and killed under the Khmer Rouge regime, has today been turned into the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – a space for memory and education (Dawn, 2025). Similarly, the Choeung Ek killing field, where the S-21 prisoners were executed and buried, is now a memorial complex (part of the recently inscribed UNESCO World Heritage site “From the Centres of Repression to Places of Peace and Reflection”) (Dawn, 2025; UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025). However, turning an atrocity site into a memorial is a socio-political process that depends on the willingness of the state and society to acknowledge and mark what happened. Not all atrocity sites

immediately receive such status – some may remain neglected or deliberately hidden, which in itself creates additional problems related to denial or forgetting of the past.

1.3. Typology of atrocity sites. We can classify atrocity sites along several dimensions:

- **By the nature of the atrocity.** For example, sites of mass killings (massacres) – villages, towns or locales where a large number of people were slaughtered in a short time; sites of detention and torture – secret prisons, camps or centers where victims were held for prolonged periods and subjected to systematic abuse; sites of mass graves – remote areas (forests, ravines, etc.) where the bodies of the killed were buried, often with the intent to conceal the crime.

- **By context.** Atrocity sites during war (e.g. Srebrenica during the Bosnian War, 1995); atrocity sites during peacetime or under a dictatorial regime (e.g. the torture at Saydnaya, Syria, which occurred in the context of authoritarian rule and civil war, 2011–2015); sites of ethnic cleansing (e.g. villages in Rwanda in 1994 where genocide against the Tutsi was carried out, or Rohingya settlements in Myanmar in 2017).

- **By status after the conflict.** Some places remain active forensic sites long after the atrocities – for example, mass graves are exhumed over time and judicial investigations continue. Elsewhere, sites are quickly memorialized – monuments are erected, museums established, annual commemorations held. Still others remain contested and unmarked – for instance, in some post-conflict societies atrocity sites are ignored or downplayed by those in power for political reasons, leading to divergent historical narratives and tension between communities.

In summary, understanding what constitutes “atrocity sites” combines both a legal/historical perspective (regarding the atrocities themselves) and a socio-political perspective (regarding the role of these places after the atrocities). In the following sections we will examine why these sites are significant for sustainable peace and security, including how they figure into the mandates of international peacekeeping missions.

2. ATROCITY SITES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Mass atrocities are not only a tragedy for the directly affected communities, but also a phenomenon with deep consequences for international peace and security. As early as 2005, world leaders recognized that grave crimes like genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity constitute a threat to peace – at both national and international levels (United Nations, 2005). This logic underpins the doctrine of the *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P), adopted at the 2005 World Summit, according to which states have the primary responsibility to protect their

populations from mass atrocities, and the international community has an obligation to respond (with measures ranging from diplomacy to collective action via the Security Council) if a state is "manifestly failing" in that responsibility (United Nations, 2005).

2.1. Threat to international peace. Mass atrocities often lead to regional destabilization – they generate refugee waves, cross-border flows of displaced people, humanitarian crises, and even an expansion of conflicts into neighboring states (Task Force on the ICC [ASIL], 2022). For example, the Rwandan genocide (1994) not only exterminated around 800,000 people in the span of 100 days, but also triggered a huge influx of refugees into neighboring countries (Zaire/DR Congo, Tanzania, etc.), which in turn helped ignite new conflicts in the Great Lakes region. Similarly, the atrocities in Darfur (western Sudan) in 2003-2004 prompted intervention by the UN Security Council, which deemed the situation a threat to international peace and security and deployed peacekeeping forces (the UNAMID mission) to the area.

2.2. Protracted conflicts and cycles of revenge: Unaddressed atrocities or their inadequate acknowledgment can fuel new cycles of violence. When communities see that perpetrators of mass killings and torture remain unpunished, distrust in peace processes and state institutions deepens. There is a risk that victims or their descendants will seek vigilante justice or support extremist groups promising retribution (Task Force on the ICC [ASIL], 2022). International analysts note that mass atrocities create severe trauma and a sense of injustice which, if not addressed through justice and reconciliation, can evolve into new conflicts. A classic example is the tension in former Yugoslavia – some of the atrocities in the 1990s (such as those in Srebrenica in 1995 or the “ethnic cleansing” in Croatia and Bosnia) were motivated by historical grievances and repressions that had been left unresolved from previous wars and periods (for instance World War II and the subsequent communist era). This shows how the historical memory of atrocity sites can be manipulated to incite new violence if there is a lack of objective reckoning and acknowledgment of the past.

2.3. Atrocity sites as evidence and memory. Another aspect of impact on security is related to the role of these places in post-conflict justice and peacebuilding. Atrocity sites often become sites of memory and symbols of group identity. On one hand, preserving them as forensic sites – for example, not disturbing a mass grave until investigators arrive – is crucial to securing evidence for prosecuting the perpetrators (Naidu, Gabriel, & Hoque, 2012). Without the victims’ bodies, the murder weapons, the inscriptions on prison cell walls and other material proof, many atrocities could be denied or downplayed by those who initiated them. For this reason, international tribunals (e.g. the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the International Criminal Court, etc.) devote significant time and resources

to investigating crime scenes – exhumations, forensic examinations, on-site inspections in places like Srebrenica, Lake Kivu (DRC) or Houla (Syria). For example, after Russian forces withdrew from the Kyiv region of Ukraine in April 2022, Ukrainian authorities, with the help of international experts, conducted detailed inspections in the town of Bucha – where over 900 civilian bodies were eventually found in the area, more than 350 of them in Bucha itself, 95% with gunshot wounds, indicating that people had been deliberately executed on the spot (Associated Press, 2022). The evidence collected from Bucha (photographs, witness testimonies, forensic reports) became the basis for war-crime charges against those responsible. Actions like these – turning atrocity sites into sites for uncovering the truth – are critical for achieving justice, which in turn has long-term impacts on peace. As ICTJ President David Tolbert points out, ignoring justice leaves a high risk of repeated violence, whereas justice and peace actually reinforce each other (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2022).

On the other hand, once secured and documented, atrocity sites become memorials and lessons in history. Properly integrating them into collective memory can have a deterrent effect against future atrocities. UNESCO acknowledged this when, in 2025, it inscribed three key sites from the Khmer Rouge genocide period (Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek, and the former M-13 prison) on the World Heritage List, noting that these places bear witness to one of the most serious violations of human rights in the 20th century and that turning them into places of memory “encourages peaceful coexistence and a commitment to never repeat such atrocities” (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025). The Cambodian Prime Minister even emphasized during the nomination that remembrance of these dark chapters of history serves as a reminder that peace must always be defended, and that “from the darkest chapters of history we can draw strength to build a better future for humanity” (Cheang, 2025).

In summary, the consequences of atrocity sites for peace and security manifest in several ways:

- **They are a factor in prevention policy.** The existence of early warning mechanisms (e.g. monitoring potential future “hotspots” of atrocities) is part of modern strategies for conflict and atrocity prevention. International documents underline that mass atrocities are rarely spontaneous – they have warning signs and preparation leading up to them (United Nations, 2005). This is why the UN created positions such as the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, who monitors potential flashpoints (for example, missions to countries at risk like the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Burundi) (United Nations, 2005). In this context, “atrocity sites” also serve as a warning of the cost of inaction – each new report of a mass killing (for instance, the discovery of yet another mass

grave) draws the attention of the Security Council and can lead to more serious measures deemed necessary for the maintenance of peace.

• **They play a role in reconciliation and stability.** Properly addressing these sites (through investigation, punishment of the guilty, reparations for victims, and memorialization) helps break the cycle of hatred. Otherwise, the result is what is called “peace without justice” – an unstable truce in which tensions smolder beneath the surface. Many experts now consider the old *peace versus justice* standoff a false dilemma, since long-term peace is difficult to achieve without some element of justice (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2022). Kofi Annan himself, former UN Secretary-General, observed: “This debate between justice and peace ... is a false one, because we need both. Justice reinforces the long-term peace” (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2022).

Next, we should consider how the international community, and in particular the United Nations, addresses atrocity sites – through peacekeeping operations, judicial prosecution, and other mechanisms.

3. UN PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS AND RESPONDING TO ATROCITIES

The experience of the United Nations in recent decades shows an evolution in the approach to protecting civilians and preventing atrocities during conflicts. Whereas early peacekeeping missions (e.g. during the Cold War) focused mainly on monitoring ceasefires between states, the UN’s failures to prevent the massacres in Srebrenica (1995) and the genocide in Rwanda (1994) led to profound reflection and reforms. In both cases the Blue Helmets failed to protect the civilian population, even though Srebrenica had been declared a UN “safe area” guarded by a Dutch battalion, and in Rwanda a UNAMIR mission was present. The result was horrifying atrocities: in Srebrenica over 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys were killed over just a few days in July 1995 – the worst mass murder in Europe since World War II (Smith, 2025) – and in Rwanda hundreds of thousands of civilians (predominantly Tutsi and moderate Hutu) were slaughtered with shocking speed, while the UN failed to reinforce its contingent in time or to authorize a more robust mandate.

3.1. Lessons of the 1990s: These failures generated a consensus that peacekeeping forces must be given a clear mandate and capability to protect civilians from imminent threat. In its landmark 2000 report (the so-called Brahimi Report), the UN’s expert panel explicitly stated that “peacekeepers – troops or police – who witness violence against civilians should be presumed to be authorized to stop it, within their means, in support of basic United Nations principles and, as stated in the report of the Independent Inquiry on Rwanda, consistent with “the perception and the expectation of protection created by [an operation’s] very presence” (United Nations, 2000,

p. 11). This represented an important turning point: instead of a strictly neutral posture, the UN acknowledged that in situations of mass atrocities neutrality is equivalent to inaction, and inaction can render Blue Helmets passive witnesses to crimes against humanity (United Nations, 2005). Subsequent Security Council resolutions began routinely including a mandate to protect the civilian population (Protection of Civilians – PoC) as a central element of missions. For example, missions such as UNMIS/UNMISS in South Sudan, MONUC/MONUSCO in the DR Congo, MINUSCA in the Central African Republic, etc., have an explicit duty to take action to shield civilians from mass atrocities.

3.2. Examples of intervention and prevention: Since 2000, there have been cases in which more decisive peacekeeping actions succeeded in curbing violence. In Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL, 2000) and Liberia (UNMIL, 2003), the deployment of more robust forces, backed by a willingness to use force, helped restrain warring factions and protect civilians who had suffered past atrocities (for example, the mass amputations and killings by the RUF rebel group in Sierra Leone). In South Sudan in December 2013, when civil war broke out accompanied by ethnic massacres, peacekeepers from UNMISS made the unprecedented decision to open their bases to fleeing civilians. In this way, thousands of people from the Dinka and Nuer communities found refuge in so-called “Protection of Civilians” sites on UN bases – a measure that likely saved many lives in the first days of the conflict, preventing a repeat of Rwanda-like scenarios at the local level. Another example is Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI), where in 2011 the UN and French forces intervened militarily to protect civilians in Abidjan and other areas after post-election violence escalated – an operation credited with preventing much larger atrocities.

3.3. Challenges for peacekeeping. Despite these examples, peacekeepers often operate in extremely complex environments and cannot be everywhere at once. Atrocities such as mass rapes and massacres continue to occur even in the presence of UN missions in some cases – for example, in the eastern DR Congo, rebel and militia groups inflicted grievous harm on the civilian population (including mass rapes in Luvungi in 2010) despite the long-standing presence of MONUSCO. This undermines trust in the UN and leads to protests by local communities, who accuse the Blue Helmets of passivity. Major limitations include resource shortages, a cumbersome decision-making process (mandates are determined by the Security Council, where consensus is often lacking), and the politics of sovereignty – governments sometimes impede more forceful intervention out of fear of interference in their internal affairs (Evans, 2023). This was evident in Syria, which had no traditional peacekeeping mission – UN efforts were limited to a small observer mission (UNSMIS) in 2012 and mainly to humanitarian operations and diplomatic initiatives, while major atrocities (such as mass

torture and executions in prisons, the use of chemical weapons, and the besieging and bombing of civilian areas) went without a direct peacekeeping response due to geopolitical divisions in the Security Council.

3.4. Atrocity sites in mission mandates: The UN is increasingly recognizing the importance of preserving evidence of atrocities as part of peace processes. In recent years the Security Council has established special mechanisms – such as UNITAD (an investigative team for ISIS crimes in Iraq) and the Commission for Syria (IIM) – whose task is precisely to secure key atrocity sites and preserve information for future justice. Although these are not exactly "peacekeeping operations," they often work in parallel with them. Peacekeeping missions themselves are more and more frequently deploying human rights advisers and criminal investigation specialists to help document atrocities immediately after peace agreements – as was the case in Mali (MINUSMA) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), where peacekeepers assisted local and international experts in investigating mass graves and scenes of violence.

3.5. The peacekeepers' own transgressions. For completeness it must be noted that sometimes UN personnel themselves are accused of abuses against civilians – though not systematic in the way war crimes are, incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers (for example in DR Congo, Haiti, and CAR) have also compromised the UN's image and pose ethical dilemmas. The UN has adopted a zero-tolerance policy toward such acts, since they are not only crimes in themselves but also undermine the trust of the local population and the moral authority of the mission (Human Rights Watch, 2002). This is an indirect factor affecting the UN's ability to protect witnesses of atrocities – if the local population does not trust the peacekeepers, they are less likely to share information or seek protection.

In conclusion to this section, the UN and peacekeeping operations play a vital role in the context of atrocity sites – from prevention and real-time response (stopping ongoing atrocities, protecting threatened groups) to post-conflict support (gathering evidence, delivering justice, and fostering remembrance). While they do not always manage to prevent every tragedy, the trend is that the international community is learning from mistakes and gradually building a stronger framework in which mass atrocities will not remain invisible or unpunished, and the sites where they occurred will be treated as keys to lasting peace.

4. EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE: SYRIA, UKRAINE, ETHIOPIA

This section examines specific case studies of atrocity sites from contemporary conflicts, in order to illustrate both the manifestation of the phenomenon and the international community's response.

4.1. Syria (2011–present). The civil war in Syria offers numerous examples of atrocities and corresponding “atrocious sites.” One of the most notorious cases is the Saydnaya military prison near Damascus – a place that gained infamy as a “human slaughterhouse.” According to an investigation by Amnesty International, between 2011 and 2015 the Syrian authorities executed approximately 13,000 prisoners by hanging at Saydnaya without fair trials (Amnesty International, 2017, p. 6). Former prisoners testify to systematic torture, starvation, and inhumane conditions that led to mass death among those detained (Amnesty International, 2017). Saydnaya ranks among the sites documented as crimes against humanity by several investigative bodies – the UN (through the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria) as well as human rights organizations. Other similar places include the government detention center in Aleppo known as “Branch 215,” where deadly torture has also been recorded.

Aside from detention facilities, in Syria there are entire towns and neighborhoods that have become emblematic of atrocities. For example, the town of Houla (Homs province) became known for a mass slaughter in May 2012, when pro-government militias killed over 100 civilians, including many children, in their homes. Eastern Ghouta – a suburb of Damascus – was the site where in August 2013 chemical weapons (sarin) were used, killing hundreds of civilians; the very location of the attack (media showed images of dozens of bodies in improvised morgues) became a symbol of the “red line” that was crossed and the failure to prevent an atrocity involving a weapon of mass destruction. The international community, paralyzed by division in the UN Security Council, did not send peacekeepers, but later negotiated the removal of the chemical arsenal. Even so, those responsible for the attack remained unpunished, which many believe undermined global norms against such atrocities.

The reaction and significance of the atrocity sites in Syria still await full reckoning before justice. Since the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction (due to Syria not being a state party and the lack of a Security Council referral), some countries (Germany, France, Spain) have pursued cases on the basis of universal jurisdiction against former Syrian military and intelligence officers – including for the torture in the notorious prisons. In 2022, a German court convicted a former Syrian colonel for crimes against humanity committed at the al-Khatib prison in Damascus – the first verdict in the world against a regime official for the atrocities. This demonstrates that, albeit slowly, atrocity sites – through surviving witnesses and documented evidence (including the famous “Caesar files” photographs of prisoners tortured to death) – are finding a path to the courtroom. From the perspective of peace, the absence of a comprehensive international tribunal for Syria and the ongoing conflict mean that the memory of these sites remains fragmented and politicized: different sides present different

narratives (the government denies the scale or its culpability, the opposition speaks of a genocide against Sunnis, etc.), which will complicate future reconciliation.

4.2. Ukraine (2022–present). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 once again brought to the fore the notion of mass atrocities on European soil. In the first months, numerous sites of war crimes were uncovered: the most famous became the town of Bucha near Kyiv. After the withdrawal of Russian troops from Bucha (March 2022), Ukrainian authorities discovered in the streets and in mass graves the bodies of hundreds of civilians. According to the Kyiv regional police, over 900 civilians' bodies were found in the region, the highest number in Bucha itself – over 350 victims, 95% of whom had been shot (Associated Press, 2022). Photographs of corpses with bound hands scattered in the streets quickly spread worldwide, turning “Bucha” into a synonym for atrocity. An investigation by Human Rights Watch documented executions, torture, and abuses in at least 17 villages and small towns around Kyiv and Chernihiv during the Russian occupation, describing 22 cases of extrajudicial executions, numerous rapes, and enforced disappearances (Human Rights Watch, 2022b). Among other locations that emerged in the news were Borodianka, Irpin, Yahidne – each with its own tragedies (for example, in Yahidne dozens of residents were held hostage in a school basement for weeks, during which 10 people died due to inhumane conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2022b)). In eastern Ukraine, after Russian forces withdrew from Kharkiv province (Sept. 2022), a mass grave was uncovered near the city of Iziium containing over 440 bodies, many showing signs of torture – this site became the object of an international investigation.

The reaction and significance of the atrocity sites in Ukraine lie in the massive effort by Ukrainian authorities – supported by numerous countries and the International Criminal Court – to document war crimes. The atrocity sites such as Bucha, Iziium, Mariupol (where the bombing of the Drama Theater killed dozens, perhaps hundreds of sheltering civilians) were visited by international investigators and became part of Ukraine’s legal case against Russia in international courts. There have also been symbolic acts of accountability: in March 2023, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin in connection with the deportation of Ukrainian children (classified as a war crime). Nationally, Ukrainian courts have begun convicting captured Russian soldiers for the killings of civilians. In terms of memory, Ukrainian society has shown determination to preserve the memory of these atrocities – remembrance days are observed, photo exhibitions with images from Bucha have toured globally, and the term “Bucha” is already used as a shorthand symbol of the charges against Russian forces. Internationally, the atrocities in Ukraine have revived the debate about establishing a tribunal for the crime of aggression and for the atrocities, since

the ICC can prosecute war crimes but not the act of aggression without a Security Council decision that Russia would veto. Regardless of the legal technicalities, it is clear that the names of the Ukrainian towns that suffered will remain iconic “atrocities sites” of the 21st century, shaping the understanding of the need for international community response.

4.3. Ethiopia (Tigray conflict, 2020-2022). The civil conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region led to a series of atrocities committed by both the Ethiopian government and its allied Eritrean forces, as well as by the rebel Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). One of the worst and best-documented atrocity sites is the ancient city of Axum. In late November 2020, after a battle for control of Axum, Eritrean troops (supporting the Ethiopian government) carried out a mass killing of civilians in the city. According to Amnesty International, over the course of two days (28-29 November 2020) hundreds of unarmed civilians were killed in Axum – the Eritrean forces went through the city, shooting at people who were running away and pulling men from their homes for execution (Amnesty International, 2021). Witnesses recount that “all we could see on the streets were dead bodies and people crying” after the massacre, which Amnesty International characterized as possibly amounting to a crime against humanity (Amnesty International, 2021). This atrocity plunged Axum – a sacred city for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church – into mourning right before the annual religious festival of Tsion Mariam on 30 November, which amplified the shock among the local population (Amnesty International, 2021). Aside from Axum, other locations in Tigray also became scenes of mass killings, e.g. the town of Mai Kadra, where at the beginning of the conflict (November 2020) dozens or even hundreds of Amhara civilians were massacred by retreating forces loyal to the TPLF (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2022a).

In an environment of information blackout, non-governmental organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, through satellite imagery and interviews with witnesses (including refugees in Sudan), managed to bring these atrocities to light internationally. The international pressure contributed to Ethiopia eventually acknowledging the presence of the Eritrean army and vowing investigations. The UN in December 2021 created an International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia to investigate the violations – including those in Axum. Reports by this commission and by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights confirmed numerous atrocities by all sides and warned that future such crimes are likely if there is no accountability. In November 2022 the Tigray conflict ended with a peace agreement. While this ends the immediate violence, the pursuit of accountability remains a challenge. Fragile promises of transitional justice have been made – the government speaks of creating truth and reconciliation mechanisms. For the victims, however, it is crucial

that places like Axum be acknowledged and memorialized, and the perpetrators punished. Otherwise, as observers warn, the wounds from these sites could fuel ethnic hatred and threaten the fragile peace in multi-ethnic Ethiopia. From a geopolitical perspective, the Tigray conflict and the atrocities associated with it were also a test for the African Union – the organization actively mediated the truce, but hesitated to publicly condemn specific atrocities, likely to preserve neutrality. This raises the question: does silence about certain “atrocities sites” (due to political considerations) risk sacrificing the sanctity of human life and memory for the sake of short-term political expediency?

In summary, these case studies demonstrate that regardless of region or conflict, atrocity sites share common features – immense human suffering, the need to bring the truth to light, and a moral duty of remembrance – but also that each site has its own specifics requiring a contextual approach. In Syria we see a protracted conflict with no end in sight, where atrocity sites continue to accumulate; in Ukraine – a sharp international reaction and efforts at prompt accountability; in Ethiopia – a conflict now halted, but with an open question of justice. These examples affirm the importance of the working hypothesis: how atrocity sites are dealt with (whether through truth and reconciliation or through denial and impunity) will directly influence the prospects for sustainable peace.

5. DEBATES AND DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON ATROCITY SITES

In academic literature and among policymakers, there are some divergent approaches to atrocity sites that merit attention. Below we outline several key debates, together with a comparative analysis of the viewpoints:

1. Justice vs. Peace – dilemma or synergy? – One classic discussion is whether insisting on criminal justice for perpetrators of atrocities aids or hinders peace. One school (sometimes termed “peace at any price”) argues that in certain cases an excessive focus on prosecution can sabotage negotiations to end a conflict. This argument surfaced, for example, when the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir in 2009 – some African leaders claimed this complicated peace efforts in Darfur, because Bashir would have no incentive to step down if he knows he will be prosecuted. Other examples: in Northern Uganda, to coax the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) into peace, amnesties were discussed, which sparked debate over whether it is morally acceptable for leaders responsible for abductions and massacres to escape punishment in the name of peace.

The other school (supported by many human rights advocates and transitional justice experts) counters that this is a false dilemma – durable peace cannot exist without justice. As noted earlier, proponents of this

position – for example, the International Center for Transitional Justice – argue that unpunished crimes leave “ticking time bombs” in society (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2022). They point to successful cases where justice and peace have proceeded hand in hand: the Special Court for Sierra Leone continued operating during the peace transition and convicted key perpetrators without reigniting the conflict; the tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, though set up after the fighting stopped, are regarded as an important factor that helped those societies gradually move forward, knowing that at least partial justice was served. In a quote from Kofi Annan, often cited by this school, “Without accountability there is no reconciliation, and without reconciliation there is no sustainable peace.” (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2022).

In reality, as is often the case, both perspectives have validity in different contexts. The difference often comes down to the time horizon: compromises (such as amnesties) may be effective for the immediate cessation of bloodshed, but are a poor recipe for long-term stability if victims are left with a sense of total injustice. Contemporary international law today limits such compromises – mass atrocities are considered imprescriptible (not subject to statutes of limitation) and non-amnestiable under international standards. More and more peace agreements include some form of transitional justice (truth commissions, hybrid courts), which is an attempt to balance between the camps. In other words, the consensus is shifting toward pursuing peace and justice simultaneously, albeit sometimes with different sequencing and format.

2. Memorialization vs. forgetting – how should we remember? – Another area of debate is what to do with atrocity sites after a conflict: whether to preserve them as memorials/museums or to remove/erase them so that the society is not weighed down by a traumatic past. One viewpoint emphasizes the importance of memory: its advocates believe that victims have the right for their voices to be heard and their suffering remembered. Memorials at atrocity sites play an educational role for younger generations and can provide catharsis for survivors (UNESCO, 2017; ICTJ, 2009; Naidu, Gabriel, & Hoque, 2012). This approach is illustrated by the “Sites of Conscience” network – a global coalition that helps turn former prisons, camps, and other zones of repression into spaces for public dialogue and education. Examples include: the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in Poland, the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda – all of which are atrocity sites transformed into places that now serve as warnings of “Never again.” Similarly, as we saw, UNESCO supports this approach by declaring some such sites World Heritage specifically because of their significance as lessons of history (UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025).

An alternative viewpoint, however, warns of the risk of fetishizing trauma or perpetuating open wounds. Some leaders have preferred to quickly remove the physical traces of atrocities in order to steer society towards the future rather than the painful past. This was the case, for example, with Rwanda's emphasis on a narrative of national unity after the genocide – the government promotes a strong unity discourse, but at the same time tightly controls memory through official memorials. Critics worry that if memory is instrumentalized (for instance, by assigning blame to an entire group), it can cement divisions. Another concern is the phenomenon of “atrocities tourism” – i.e. turning atrocity sites into tourist attractions, which if not handled sensitively can be seen as a desecration of the victims' memory.

A key difference between these views is who controls the narrative in memorialization. When survivors and victims are involved in shaping the memorial, the risk of misuse is reduced and the site genuinely contributes to reconciliation (as is the case in many local memorials in Bosnia, Kosovo, etc., built by the communities themselves). However, when the victors write the history, memorials can become one-sided propaganda. Hence the skepticism of some analysts. Nevertheless, on a global scale, the trend favors inclusive memory: more and more countries are willing to acknowledge even uncomfortable truths (e.g. Germany with its Holocaust memorials and museums, the United States with the National Memorial for Peace and Justice – the lynching memorial – in Alabama, etc.), believing that truth is healing, even if painful.

3. International intervention – humanitarian responsibility or neo-colonialism? – A debate related to atrocity sites is the extent to which the international community has a right or duty to intervene in the internal affairs of states to prevent or halt atrocities. The pro-intervention position draws on the R2P concept, which, as noted, considers sovereignty not a privilege but a responsibility. From this perspective, when atrocity sites emerge – for example, mass killings of civilians – sovereignty should not serve as a shield for perpetrators. Proponents cite cases like Kosovo (1999), where NATO undertook an air campaign without UN authorization to stop ethnic cleansing – despite the intervention's contested legality, many justify it morally because it prevented further genocide.

The opposing position warns that R2P could be misused as a pretext for geopolitical interests – critics often mention the intervention in Libya (2011). There, R2P was initially invoked (to protect civilians in Benghazi), but the operation escalated into regime change and descended into chaos. Countries like Russia and China advocate a strict interpretation: intervention only with the consent of the affected state or by Security Council authorization, so that it does not degenerate into neo-colonialism. They argue that the frequent focus on certain “atrocity sites” (usually in weaker states) and the ignoring

of others (when powerful states are involved) shows a double standard, which erodes trust in humanitarian interventions.

Here the divergence arises from mutual mistrust among different global actors. It is a fact that the UN Security Council does not always act consistently: politics influence which crises are treated as threats to international peace. In an ideal scenario, all major powers would place humanity above interests, but in practice that is rarely so. The consequence is that international reactions to atrocity sites remain selective (Evans, 2023). The solution, according to some scholars, is to strengthen international institutions (like the ICC) and regional mechanisms so that they can respond more automatically to signs of mass atrocities – i.e. not to depend so much on political will each time. This process is slow, but observable: today there are more monitoring and preventive efforts than ever before (e.g. special UN advisers, commissions of inquiry, sanctions against perpetrators, etc.).

4. Universal standards vs. cultural specificity. Some researchers emphasize that the approach to atrocity sites should take cultural context into account. The universalist view argues that whether in Europe, Africa or Asia, victims of atrocities have similar needs – truth, justice, reparations – and therefore similar solutions can be applied (international courts, truth commissions, etc.). The cultural-relativist view, for its part, notes that traditional mechanisms in some societies (for example, the *gacaca* community courts in Rwanda, or local customs of forgiveness and compensation like *mato oput*¹ in Northern Uganda) can be more effective at achieving reconciliation than Western models of criminal justice.

In practice, the two approaches can complement each other. In many cases a hybrid model is used: for instance, after the civil war in Sierra Leone, both the Special Court (an international hybrid tribunal) and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (which was based more on local notions of acknowledgment and forgiveness) operated concurrently. In this way, some atrocity sites – especially involving the “big fish” perpetrators – were addressed via a court, and others via storytelling and forgiveness. Thus, both imperatives were fulfilled: accountability and the revival of the social fabric.

Summarizing the different perspectives, we can point out that:

• **All authors and practitioners agree** that atrocities are intolerable and that impunity should not be allowed. The differences are more about the approach to achieving justice and peace.

¹ *Mato oput* is a traditional ritual of reconciliation and community building among the Acholi people of Northern Uganda. The word comes from the Acholi language and literally means “to drink the bitter sap of the oput (tree)”. *Mato oput* is a process by which two feuding families or clans reconcile after a serious crime, usually murder. It involves: an admission of guilt, a sincere apology, compensation (usually livestock), and the drinking of the bitter oput drink together, symbolizing leaving hatred behind. *Mato oput* is also used in Uganda as part of traditional justice and post-conflict recovery processes, including atrocities committed by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

- **The differences in opinion** often stem from a different priority in time or a different scale of focus. Politicians seeking a quick resolution may sacrifice some justice (e.g. offering a dictator asylum in exile). Human rights defenders and survivors, however, think in terms of generations and insist that every crime must receive an answer, otherwise history will repeat itself.

- **Convergence to the common framework:** In the past 20 years we observe a convergence. Concepts like transitional justice, R2P, victims' rights – all have entered the vocabulary of the UN and regional organizations. Even states that previously categorically rejected intervention now occasionally accept peacekeepers (for example, South Sudan requested an extension of UNMISS, acknowledging the need to protect civilians). So, one can speak of a growing common framework that is applied as needed in each case.

- **Atrocity sites as a unifying call:** Paradoxically, it is often the shock from a particular place – seeing the photographs from Bucha, or visiting the Srebrenica memorial – that causes even normally discordant actors to take a common stance, at least at the declarative level. The moral power of these sites is difficult to completely ignore.

CONCLUSION

The examination of “atrocity sites” – their definition, types, and impacts – shows that these dark points on the map of the world are of key importance for understanding and building a more peaceful and secure international order. The main findings of the article can be summarized as follows:

1. **Acknowledgment as a first step:** Defining and recognizing atrocity sites is a fundamental step toward dealing with the past. Giving a name to and pinpointing the locations of the atrocities (be it Saydnaya, Bucha, Axum or elsewhere) is an act of homage to the victims and at the same time a starting point for seeking accountability. Atrocity sites that remain in the shadows or are denied become ulcers in the collective memory that sooner or later fester in the form of revanchism, denial of historical facts, or the glorification of perpetrators. Therefore, international instruments increasingly insist on the right to truth – for affected communities to learn the fate of their loved ones and for society to know what happened at these places (Naidu, Gabriel, & Hoque, 2012).

2. **Proper handling as a factor for peace:** Appropriately managing atrocity sites (through preserving evidence, punishing the guilty, and memorialization) has proven to be a decisive factor for sustainable peace. The working hypothesis of this article was that only by integrating justice and memory can lasting reconciliation be achieved – the analysis confirmed this. In each example considered, we see that where there were more active efforts at justice (national or international) – e.g. in Bosnia through the Hague Tribunal, in Sierra Leone through the Special Court – society received

at least a partial salve on the wound and a new cycle of mass violence was averted. Conversely, unresolved cases like Syria remain unstable to this day, with traumas still raw. Impunity is the opposite of security: it sends the signal that the rules do not apply, that atrocities are an acceptable means to an end. This undermines the very foundations of international peace and security.

3. Improved international mechanisms: Third, the UN and the international community as a whole have learned hard lessons from past failures and are gradually developing better mechanisms for response. While we are still far from a world without atrocities, today we have (i) a clearer normative framework – the R2P concept and a number of Security Council resolutions (e.g. Res. 1674 (2006) on protection of civilians) that declare mass atrocities not to be an internal affair of the state but a common concern; (ii) more effective tools – peacekeeping missions with PoC mandates, international criminal justice (the ICC and ad hoc tribunals), investigative commissions, sanctions regimes against perpetrators, compensation programs for victims, etc.; (iii) a network of civil society and media that monitor and immediately expose atrocities, even when governments try to conceal them. In other words, a global vigilance is taking shape: as never before in history, today it is difficult to carry out a genocide or mass killing without the world learning of it and without there being consequences (diplomatic, legal, or at least reputational) for the perpetrators.

4. Lessons and prevention: Fourth, the role of atrocity sites as a lesson and as prevention should not be underestimated. As grim as these places are, they can become a foundation for educating future generations in the spirit of peace and humanity. By visiting a memorial in Cambodia or a Holocaust Museum, people around the world gain an awareness of the value of human life and the fragility of our civilizational norms. This is why it is recommended that the UN, UNESCO, and governments continue to support projects for memorialization, educational programs on the history of genocides, and exchanges among youth from different countries to learn about these difficult topics. As UNESCO stated when inscribing sites like Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, from the “darkest chapters” we must draw lessons that strengthen peace (Cheang, 2025; UNESCO World Heritage Committee, 2025).

5. No one-size-fits-all model: Fifth, an important conclusion is that there is no single model for dealing with the legacy of atrocity sites – the approach needs to be comprehensive (combining justice, truth, institutional reforms, reparations) and tailored to the context of each country. This means encouraging both international solidarity and local engagement. For example, in Ukraine – which has well-functioning institutions – national courts with external support can achieve a great deal. In countries with weaker systems – as in the South Sudan case – strong international involvement is necessary.

In closing, we can say that understanding atrocity sites is not just an academic exercise, but a moral and practical imperative. In a world where conflicts still exist, awareness of these tragedies reminds us why international rules for the protection of humanity are so crucial. Atrocity sites – from the past and present – call on us to act: to remember, to deliver justice, and above all to work so that no new points are added to this sorrowful map. Only by doing so would we fulfill the promise of “Never again” – through collective vigilance and cooperation to ensure that wherever peace is threatened by cruelty, the world will not remain indifferent.

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