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Trends in Genocide

Introduction

Genocide, as the targeted destruction of one group by another, has likely been around for as long as society itself. However, its recognition did not come about until Post-WW2, around the same time as other human rights began to be recognized internationally, although later than these rights began to be recognized by individual states. With this recognition, the international community hoped to decrease the prevalence of these atrocious events. However, the research into this area is severely limited. This paper asks the question: what is the current trend in genocide and do we see any significant change? While there appears to be some downward trend in recent years, the overall picture is much more complex.

Literature Review

Genocide is legally defined by the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnical, racial, or religious group” including five processes as to how this may occur. However, researchers have a number of qualms with this definition.

One such problem, that has been repeatedly acknowledged, is the exclusion of political groups (Harff 2003, 58; Fein 1993, 80). When Raphael Lemkin originally coined the term, it included political motivations. In fact, in his chapter on Genocide in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Lemkin discussed political reasons before social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, or religious (Lemkin 1944). It was only later that Lemkin proposed excluding political

groups to get the convention to pass, stating that political groups “lacked the cohesion or permanence of other groups” (Feierstein 2014, 16). This change was made to accommodate the USSR who dismissed the first draft of the Genocide Convention (Le Blanc 1988). However, despite this political reason for excluding political groups, politicide is often studied alongside genocide by researchers. In fact, many researchers simply adopt a broader definition of genocide to include politicide (Harff 2003; Fein 1993).

Second, besides the exclusion of political groups, the grouping of individuals may pose other issues. For one, there can be some overlap between different types of groups, making it difficult to ascertain if the targeted group is protected. On the other hand, the fact that the one defining the targeted group is the perpetrators can pose problems. This means that self-identification becomes unimportant. This may cause some confusion as the identity of the victim cannot be agreed upon. Finally, in events where genocides are well hidden and unrecorded, it can be effectively impossible to identify the targeted group afterward. This is because many genocides are committed based on identifications that cannot be determined post-mortem.

Third, the inclusion of “intent” leaves room for interpretation. On occasion, perpetrators will very clearly outline the targeted group and the policy of genocide towards them such as the case in Rwanda or the Holocaust. However, this is typically the exception rather than the rule. Although Hitler outlines aspects of his anti-semitism in *Mein Kampf*, he also did not publically announce the treatment of Jews to the entire world. In fact, a lot of work went into covering up the reality of concentration camps such as the propaganda film “*Theresienstadt*” (Margry 1992). As such, it can be difficult to define or measure intent.

Fourth, the subsections of genocide leave room for harm outside of the physical. These subsections include:

- (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. (UN 1948)

Harff, in particular, focuses on the inclusion of “mental harm” alongside the physical as an issue because it may allow for the inclusion of groups harmed by “social or economic change” (Harff 58). While Harff tries to stay away from this, it does raise a question about the mechanisms of genocide. The inclusion of this does suggest that genocide is broader than simply killing.

Fifth, the convention’s definition of genocide has no mention of the identity of the perpetrator. While most recognized genocides appear to be perpetuated by those in control, such as states, this may not always be the case. However, it is also possible that non-state groups, such as those competing for power in a civil war, commit genocide. While Harff specifies these two types of actors in her definition of genocide as “governing elites” or “contending authorities”, other research does not do so (Harff 2003). Under specific circumstances, beyond non-state actors in conflicts, it is possible for other non-state groups or even individuals to commit genocide. For example, a criminal organization or an individual, both of whom are not vying for governmental power may commit violence against protected groups. However, this may get into contentious ground as other, contending factors, are likely at play in their motivations. Nevertheless, in terms of a broader understanding of the issues of the definition, it is important to consider the type of actor as a potential expansion.

After it has been defined, the existing literature on genocide has been case study heavy. This is partially due to the fact that early research was focused on the Holocaust. However, research has since increased the number of works including, but not limited to, genocides in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Armenia, and those committed against indigenous populations (Greenfield 2008, Astourian 1990, MacDonald 2012).

Literature with a comparative focus began in the 1980s. This work was heavily based in pre-existing understandings of conflict, and built upon the connections between genocide and wars. Robert Melson builds on the connection between wars, the Holocaust, and the Armenian genocide (Melson 1992). Meanwhile, Fein includes the connection between war and genocide as one of her primary arguments (Fein 1993). Newer still are works that test hypotheses about genocide. While the list has increased from two in 2003, it remains limited.

Barbara Harff's work in this area is one of the most prominent. In her 2003 work, she created a model of six factors that could define genocide or non-genocides with 74% accuracy (Harff 2003, 68). These factors include political upheaval, prior genocide, elite ideology, regime type, ethnic and religious cleavages, and international interdependence (Harff 2003, 66-67). The first five factors are considered to contribute to the likelihood of future genocide. Meanwhile, the sixth, typically measured as some variation of trade openness, is considered to decrease the likelihood of future genocides. At the end of her work, Harff then applied this framework to a couple dozen countries to try to predict the likelihood of future genocide (Harff 2003, 71).

Similar works try to predict the causes or warning signs of genocide. The Atrocities Prevention Board (APB), is a group tasked with "risk assessment and early warning" that reportedly based its models on Harff's (Verdeja 2016, 25). Genocide Watch provides a "Ten Stages of Genocide" list including classification, symbolization, discrimination, dehumanization,

organization, polarization, preparation, persecution, extermination, and denial (Stanton 2016). Ernesto Verdeja studied many of these lists to put an even more comprehensive picture together that includes fifteen indicators (Verdeja 2016).

However, very little research exists trying to explain broader trends of genocide. While many of these contributing factors, such as trends in political upheaval are studied and tracked in political science, genocide is more often considered on a case-by-case basis. In many ways, this approach makes sense due to the fact that no two genocides will be identical. However, work like Harff's suggests that there are shared properties. While we can apply each of these to individual countries as a measure of prediction, it may also be possible to review these trends as a more broad prediction about the state of the globe. Certainly, the interest in genocide and preventing it has seen an increase since the 1950s as genocides have gained more publicity, but has that made any significant impact? International organizations such as the UN or ICC condone the practice, but has that mattered? Stated more clearly: is the prevalence of genocide changing?

Measuring Genocide

There were a few potential ways to measure the phenomenon of genocide for the purpose of this paper. These include measuring by absolute numbers of events, the number of deaths, or the number affected. Each of these has pros and cons in relation to accuracy in terms of data availability, and accuracy in terms of being true to the legal definition.

When considering the limited scope of current datasets on genocide, measuring by the number of events is one of the best options. This can be used when an event is recognized as fitting the definition of genocide, even if there are no accurate reports on how many were killed or affected. This is especially beneficial when looking into the past, as previous events can be analyzed under the definition going back centuries, to an extent even before building datasets

was common. However, this unit is also flawed because it does not provide a sense of scale. By measuring in this way, a large genocide where millions were killed over a period of years may become equal to a smaller one where hundreds died in a matter of months.

This transitions well into the second unit of measurement: the number of deaths. This provides that scale, allowing for a more accurate understanding of the overall impact. However, as pointed out above, this data may not be accurate or even exist for older cases. Even today, there may be a gap in data for cases that are isolated or under governments with high levels of control; such as North Korea.

Finally, the third unit of measurement: the number of individuals affected, has the potential to, theoretically, be the best. Not only would this measurement provide a sense of scale, but it also has the most room to be definitionally accurate. By the legal definition of genocide, while death or destruction is the goal, there are other forms such as “serious bodily or mental harm”, “preventing births” or “forcibly transferring children” (UN 1948). However, alongside missing data for older cases as mentioned above, this sort of measurement is currently impossible as no dataset exists.

With these considerations in mind, this paper will measure genocide in two ways. The first will be by the number of genocides occurring in a given year, and the second will be the number of deaths by year. The data will be coming from the “Targeted Mass Killings” dataset. This dataset covers 1946 to 2020. A targeted mass killing (TMK), with a threshold of 25 deaths, is defined as:

the direct killing of noncombatant members of a group by an organized armed force or collective with the intent of destroying the group, or intimidating the group by creating a

perception of imminent threat to its survival. A targeted group is defined in terms of political and/or ethnic and/or religious identity (Butcher 2020).

While very similar to the definition of genocide, it contains a few primary differences. For one, it specifies an actor for the perpetrator. While inclusive of both state and non-state actors, they must be organized and cannot be an individual. Additionally, to be recognized as a genocide or a politicide by the dataset, the event must have at least 1,000 and either stated or organizational intent. The dataset measures intent on an ordinal scale from 1-8. This scale combined the answers to five questions about the level of intent as well as a cut-off for a minimum number of deaths (Butcher 2019). With the expectation of 5, any score above 3 is considered genocide. While a five meets the criteria of intent, it falls between 25 and 1,000 deaths (Butcher 2019).

The definition of genocide for the purpose of this paper will align with the one outlined by the TMK dataset, including its 1,000 death threshold and measurement of intent.

Theory and Hypotheses

Based upon the definition of genocide determined above, this paper will propose the theory that trends in genocide have changed with international norms and trends.

H1 and H2 will evaluate any potential relationship between genocide and norms since 1946. International norms can be defined as “widely shared expectations about what constitutes appropriate behavior among governments and certain non-state actors at the international level” (national intelligence). The assumption is that nations follow norms to avoid international pressures or backlash. While some norms are codified under international law through treaties or conventions, norms do not have to be codified. Additionally, norms that are codified may have a broader reach than just the states who have signed on. However, partially due to a lack of codification, and partially due to the intrinsic issues within international law, norms are

imperfect. While action can be taken against violators, there are often issues with jurisdiction or getting enough players on board to punish in organizations such as the UN. Furthermore, certain punishments such as sanctions may be ineffective motivators for change.

H3 and H4 will evaluate any potential relationship between genocide and trends since 1983. International trends are general developments or changes that affect many countries. While there are numerous trends that could potentially impact genocide, this paper will focus on two trends from Harff's contributing factors.

H1: There has been a decrease in the number of ongoing genocides since 1946.

- a. As members sign onto the convention against genocide
- b. As the number of major human rights treaties increase

This hypothesis picks 1946 as the starting point for a couple of reasons. This choice is partially made due to constraints of existing data before this year. However, this cut-off also provides a solid point for when international norms toward genocide and human rights began to see a shift. This marks the first full year in which the UN was active. The UN would orchestrate the genocide convention and all other major human rights treaties.

This paper will measure international norms toward genocide in two ways. The first will be the most direct through a measurement of the number of countries that have signed onto the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. The proposed mechanism is that because the convention prohibits the act of genocide, as states sign on, the likelihood of them committing genocide, and the likelihood of genocide overall, will decrease. This data has been taken directly from the UN's reports on who and when states have signed on (UN convention).

The second measurement of international norms toward genocide will be measured through the number of major human rights treaties. These include ICERD, ICCPR, ICESCR,

CEDAW, CAT, CRC, ICMW, CPED, CRPD, and optional protocols (UN core). The mechanism behind this is that each of these treaties discourages and prohibits the mistreatment of civilians and protected groups as well as sets standards for basic rights. In general, these should prevent the targeting of an individual group by encouraging the tolerance of cleavages and discouraging elite ideology. As outlined by Harff, these factors would increase the likelihood of genocide.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that while this paper is measuring these treaties under their intended consequences, it may be conceivable to argue they do the opposite. For example, it is possible for certain treaties to increase cleavages, therefore working opposite to the mechanism outlined here. One such treaty would be the refugee convention. This convention encourages countries to bring in targeted individuals who may not fit seamlessly into the societies that are accepting them, therefore causing backlash.

H2: The intensity of genocide, as measured by the number of deaths, is in decline since 1946.

- a. As members sign onto the convention against genocide
- b. As the number of major human rights treaties increase

H2 is almost identical to H1 except for the unit of measurement for genocide. The inclusion of hypotheses using both absolute numbers, as well as the number of deaths will hopefully provide a better picture of any existing trends. However, the underlying mechanism remains that the convention and other existing treaties should discourage genocide mostly through peer pressure. This may happen directly or indirectly through discouraging contributing factors. Either way, the expected outcome would be fewer deaths.

H3: There has been a decrease in the number of ongoing genocides since 1983.

- a. As IGO membership increases
- b. As trade increases

c. As regime type changes

H3 picks 1983 as the starting point based on early analysis of the data. In early graphs, it became clear that there was a potential change in the trend around this point. This year is also generally associated with a change in international trends. Two important factors for this shift were the invention of the internet that year, as well as the impending collapse of the Soviet Union.

The first trend measured in comparison to genocide is interdependence. As suggested by Harff, an increase in interdependence should coincide with a decrease in genocide as states are held more accountable to each other. For example, IGOs directly encourage interaction and accountability between states. The number of IGOs will be one form of measurement for interdependence for the purposes of this paper. This data will come from the correlates of war project (COW) which defines an IGO as:

- (1) An IGO must consist of at least three members of the COW-defined state system;
 - (2) An IGO must hold regular plenary sessions at least once every ten years;
 - (3) An IGO must possess a permanent secretariat and corresponding headquarters”
- (Pevehouse 2019).

A secondary type of interdependence is economic interdependence. Similarly to IGOs states who trade must meet certain standards or risk alienating themselves from their partners and risk their own economy. A secondary mechanism may also be at work here. States that trade are likely to be better off, better able to support their population, and therefore likely to see less internal conflict preventing genocides. This data will also come from COW as a total of imports and exports in millions of current US dollars in a given year (Barbier 2016).

As a completely separate trend, this paper will consider regime type. As outlined by Harff, regimes that are more democratic are likely to better protect the rights of their population and see fewer genocides. This data was taken from Freedom House which measures countries on a scale of “Free” to “Not Free”. An increase in the percentage of “free” countries should coincide with a decrease in genocide (Freedom 2023).

H4: The intensity of genocide, as measured by the number of deaths, is in decline since 1983.

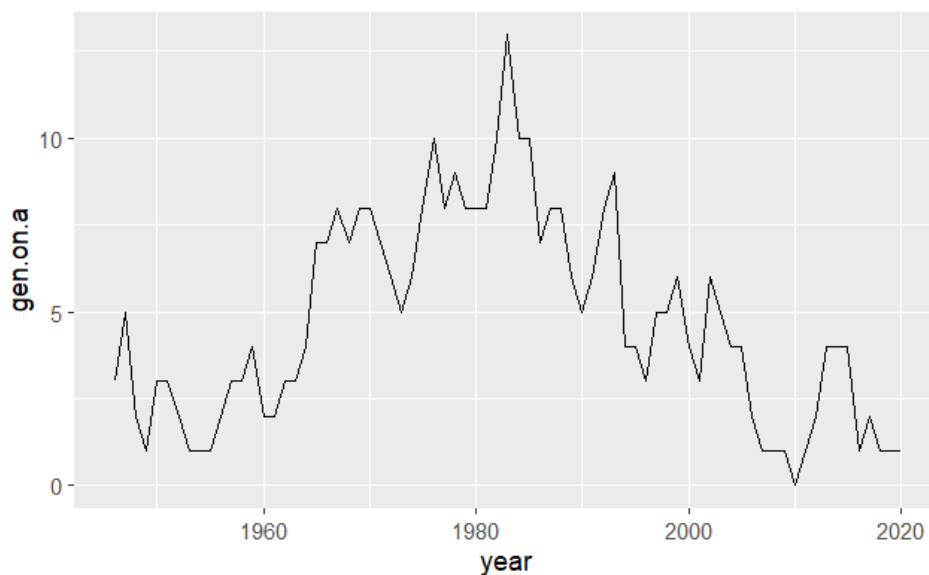
- a. As IGO membership increases
- b. As trade increases
- c. As regime type changes

Once again, H4 is almost identical to H3 except for the unit of measurement for genocide with the intention of capturing a better picture of any existing trends through either absolute numbers or the number of deaths. Despite the change in the unit of measurement, the mechanisms outlined above should still apply leading to a decline in the intensity of genocide.

Results

Figure 1 shows the annual ongoing genocide (gen.on.a) over time since 1946. There does not appear to be one consistent trend over the covered period, but rather two. Genocides appear to be increasing from 1946 until the early 1980s when the trend shifts into a decline.

Figure 1: Ongoing Genocides over Time:1946-2020



The visual trends from Figure 1 are tested and seemingly supported by Table 1. Looking at the total time period, there is no statistically significant trend. However, separated by 1983, there are statistically significant trends.

Table 1: Ongoing Genocide 1946-2020

	1946-2020:#	1946-1982:#	1983-2020:#
Correlation Coefficient	-0.11	0.85	-0.83
P-Value	0.36	<0.005	<0.005

The correlation between measured international norms and ongoing genocides is shown in Table 2. Unsurprisingly, due to the overall lack of one consistent trend since 1946, the correlations are weak and not significant.

Table 2: Ongoing Genocides and International Norms

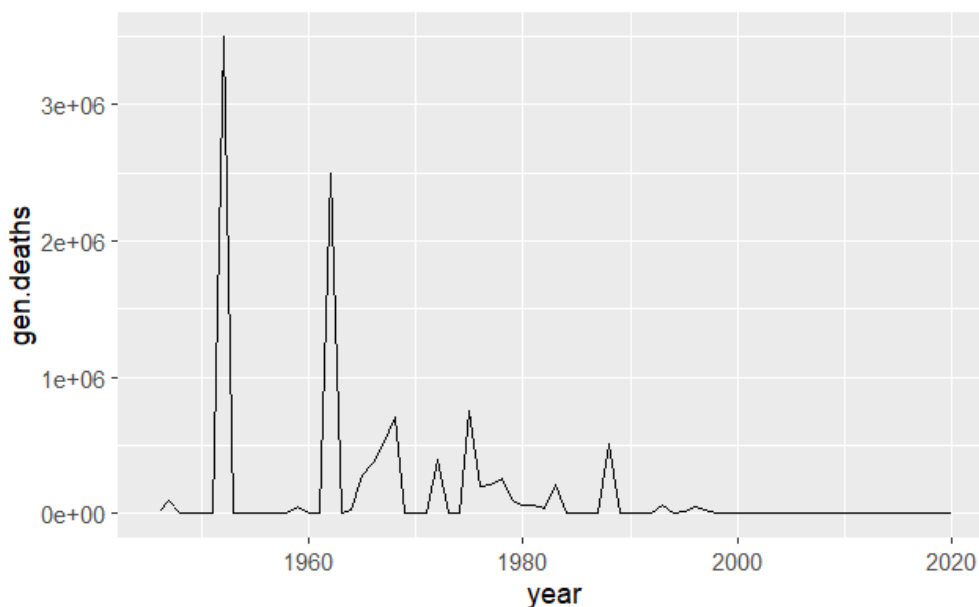
	Genocide Convention	Human Rights Treaties
Correlation Coefficient	-0.1	0.1

P-Value	0.36	0.43
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To account for the more narrow definition, and less available data, these analyses were also run using the entire TMK dataset. While these events had a lower level of intent and minimum death toll, they fit all other components. However, for H1 they did not lead to different results.

Figure 2 shows deaths attributed to genocides (gen.deaths) over time since 1946. It appears there may be a declining trend, although this may be due to outliers, and while they were not removed for this analysis, that may be important for taking this research further. It is also important to note that no population controls were applied. Finally, in comparison to the data used for H1 and H3, there were fewer data points because while certain events fit the definition of genocide and could be counted as such, they had no best estimate for the number of deaths and had to be excluded from the analysis of H2 and H4. These included genocides in areas such as Chad, Sudan, and North Korea, and were typically during the 1950-1970s.

Figure 2: Deaths in Genocide over Time: 1946-2020



The visual trends from Figure 2 are tested and partially supported by Table 3. Overall, there appears to be a decline in deaths from 1946, although small. This decline is also present, and slightly stronger when looking specifically at post 1983. However, there is not a significant decline when looking at the period from 1946-2020.

Table 3: Deaths in Genocide 1946-2020

	1946-2020:Death	1946-1982:Death	1983-2020:Death
Correlation Coefficient	-0.25	-0.07	-0.33
P-Value	0.03	0.67	0.04

The correlation between international norms and the number of genocide deaths is shown in Table 4. There is no significant correlation between human rights treaties and deaths in genocide. Meanwhile, there may be a weak negative correlation between the genocide convention and deaths. However, this relationship could use testing again when the data is better controlled for issues such as population or outliers.

Table 4

	Genocide Convention	Human Rights Treaties
Correlation Coefficient	-0.23	-0.05
P-Value	0.05	.64

Once again these same tests were run with the TMK's entire dataset. The correlation between the genocide convention and deaths became slightly stronger and more significant, but once again would need further research.

Figures 3-5 present the raw data for the IVs of H3 and H4. While these figures show the entire datasets gathered, the key point of interest begins in 1983. Each IV is increasing at this point. For IGOs and free states there appears to be some leveling out around 2000. Meanwhile, trade starts relatively level and begins to spike around the 1980s and does not appear to be stopping.

Figure 3: IGOs over Time

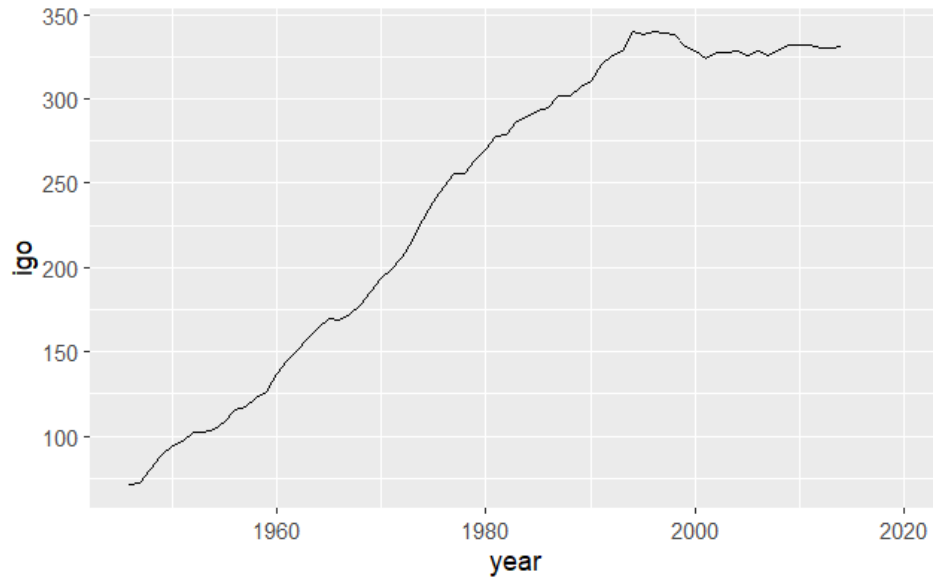


Figure 4: Trade over Time

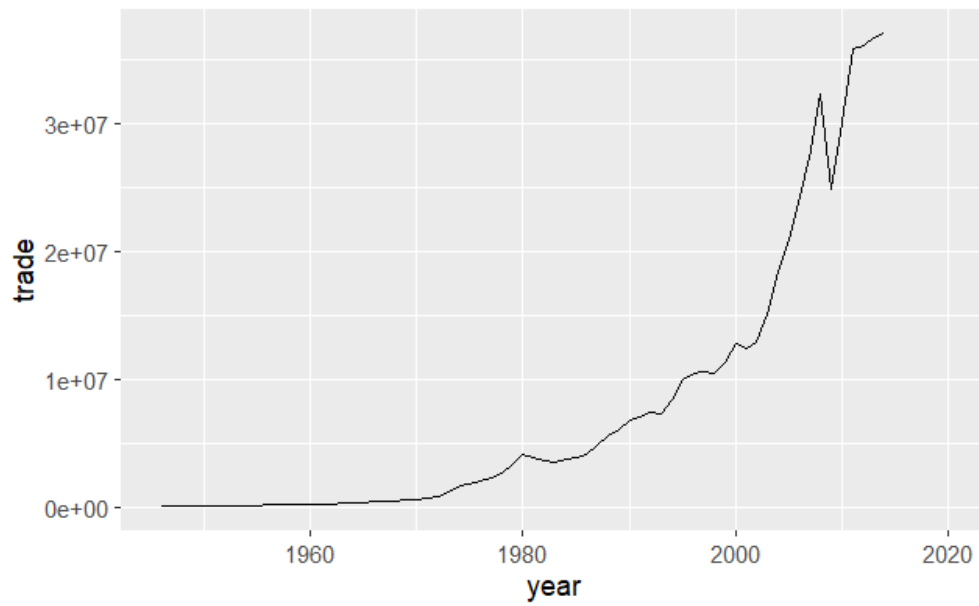


Figure 5: % of Free States over Time

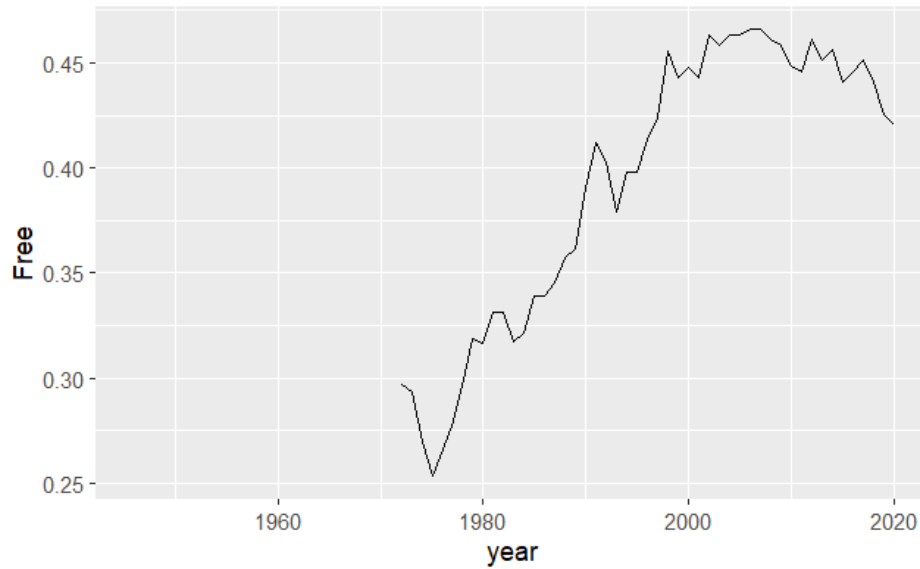


Table 5 shows the correlation between the IVs identified in H3 and H4 (number of IGOS, Trade as a total of global imports and exports, and regime type measured by the % of “free” states) and both DVs (number of ongoing genocides each year (event) and number of deaths. For the most part, the correlations are negative and significant. The only exception is the correlation between death and trade (H4b) which is insignificant. Additionally, while the results for IGO and regime for H4 are still significant, they are much weaker than the correlations found by H3.

Table 5

	IGO:Event	IGO:Death	Trade:Event	Trade:Death	Regime:Event	Regime:Death
Correlation Coefficient	-0.72	-0.35	-0.75	-0.26	-0.78	-0.38
P-Value	<0.005	0.05	<0.005	0.14	<0.005	0.02

Running these tests against the whole TMK dataset did not produce different results for trade or regime. However, the correlation between IGOs and TMKs, both by event and deaths, was weaker than for genocides specifically.

Discussion and Conclusion

Table 6: Results H1 + H2

	Trend	a. Genocide Convention	b. Human Rights
H1: There is a decline in ongoing genocides since 1946	No Support	No Support	No Support
H2: There is a decline in intensity of genocides since 1946	Negative and statistically significant	Negative and statistically significant	No Support

Table 7: Results H3 + H4

	Trend	a. IGO	b. Trade	c. Regime
H3: There is a decline in ongoing genocides since 1983	Negative and statistically significant	Negative and statistically significant	Negative and statistically significant	Negative and statistically significant
H4: There is a decline in intensity of genocides since 1983	Negative and statistically significant	Negative and statistically significant	No Support	Negative and statistically significant

While there may be some room where the genocide convention can be deemed successful, these results do not paint a good picture of the impacts of international norms on

genocide. On the other hand, in the post-83 period, things look a lot more hopeful. Increasing interdependence, both in trade and IGOs, and a greater percentage of “free” regimes are correlated with an improvement in genocide.

With these results must also come a heavy dose of skepticism. For one, the apparent decline in recent years may be due to a delay in data collection. While this dataset goes up to 2020 it is unlikely that all genocides up to that point have been revealed. Additionally, there is potential for genocides to shift style and therefore not be included within this dataset. Some modern events that could be considered genocide, but lack deaths, include the Chinese treatment of the Uyghur population, and the forced relocation of Ukrainian children.

In order to accurately measure genocide in the future, improvements must be made to current datasets. Ideally, datasets should go back further than 1946 as that is a relatively modern point in the history of genocide. Additionally, a more inclusive dataset that looks beyond just deaths would be ideal. With or without better datasets, there are other ways that this research may be expanded and improved. For one, as mentioned above, a more sophisticated analysis of the trend by number of deaths would be beneficial. As for the inclusion of IVs, there are many that are not considered here that could be interesting. For example, while unlikely to be in the immediate future, there is potential for climate change to impact genocide as different ethnic, religious, or other groups are pushed closer together. Future research may also look at whether we have seen any changes in the type of groups targeted over time. Finally, while this paper mainly focuses on indirect ways to discourage genocide, it would be important to consider more direct paths in prevention such as: does intervention work?

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