

A MINORITY. A LANGUAGE WITHOUT AN ARMY

“Tolerance does not mean equality. Tolerance does not make anyone well-liked, just tolerated. You tolerate what you dislike, and no one wants to belong to a group that is (only) tolerated.”

Historian David Gaunt bases this observation on decades of experience in a field that might be summarized as minority research: the study of population groups that do not conform with the nation-states' strictest definitions of citizens, of minority groups that are subjected to the most extreme consequence of intolerance: genocide.

However, when he begins his research career, Gaunt is no specialist in minority issues. The year is 1968, a symbolic year in the political, even revolutionary sense.

At this time, Gaunt defines himself as anti-political, an anarchist. He comes to Sweden from the US, where he has studied at Kenyon College, which future prime minister Olof Palme attended, and at Washington University, where he won a Woodrow Wilson scholarship. It is his intention to study Swedish history.

But, “from day one”, he is confronted with the Swedish bureaucracy, which awakens his interest – both as a private individual and as a researcher – in the Swedish bureaucratic system, which is also associated with the minority issue.

Arriving in Sweden in 1968 meant obligatory registration at the police's immigration department. While waiting in line, Gaunt met Jews who had fled outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Poland, only to be told by Swedish immigration authorities that they must go to the Polish embassy in Stockholm to get their papers processed. Gaunt asked himself how a bureaucracy could manifest itself in this manner, why it had developed such an, at best, unimaginative way of handling people.

At Uppsala University he conducted research on the history of Swedish bureaucracy and, later, on family patterns.

By 1978, Gaunt had left Uppsala University to fill a position at Umeå University in northern Sweden. During his years in Umeå, he was to integrate the disciplines of anthropology and history. Together with one of his postgraduate students, Lennart Lundmark, Gaunt traveled “through the entire Arctic area of Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula” in order to study the history of the Sami. Gaunt had thus entered the field of minority research. At the same time, he continued his research on the family, which could be combined with his focus on minorities. As, for example, Gaunt did when he led a research project for the municipality of Stockholm in “applied ethnography”, investigating what it was like for Iranians, Kurds, Finns, and Greeks to grow old in Sweden. “Elderly immigrants stay in this country, the majority does *not* go home.”



Prof. David Gaunt's work on Turkey's Christian population has received attention even outside of academia.

“When I found out that Södertörn was to focus on multicultural studies, I decided that Södertörn would be a good place for me as a historian.”

Gaunt's years at Södertörn University have indeed confirmed his reputation as a minority researcher. His work on Turkey's Christian population – on how Turks and Kurdish tribes have massacred Assyrians, Syrians and Armenians – has received attention even outside of academia. In 2006, he published the book *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I*.

Minority research inevitably includes what Gaunt calls the morphology of genocide: the pattern followed when minorities are repressed. If genocide is to take place, certain preconditions must be fulfilled. One such precondition is the existence of a nation-state. The radical nationalism that emerged in the late 1800s points towards the future persecution of those who were not included in the national community and who therefore are identified as a problem, as a deviation from the pure norm.

Gaunt reminds us of the proverb: “A nation is a language with an army, a minority is a language without an army.”

Compared to nation-states, empires more easily include and tolerate minorities. They always comprise several language groups. Empire builders realize the advantage of encouraging and maintaining differences, of following the old device: divide and rule. This made itself felt within the Soviet army, where Estonian soldiers were placed in the Caucasus, Chechens in Lithuania, Belarusians in Chechnya. The only loyalties to be cultivated were those to the army and, of course, to the Soviet state.

The majority population may be suspicious and contemptuous of the minority, but that does not suffice to bring about persecution and genocide. For that to happen, the government and other authorities must kindle the majority's suspicion and hostility. As an evil and effective strategy, those in authority may describe

themselves (and the majority population) as victims of the minority, while they describe the minority as perpetrators, or as illegitimate holders of privileges, money, land, and positions.

This model does not apply to the persecution of the Romani, however. “Anti-Gypsism is not the same as anti-Semitism”, says Gaunt. Anti-Gypsism is directed against a people which is considered pathetic, inferior, under-privileged. Even though this is the perception of the Romani people, they have nonetheless been persecuted, repressed and subjected to extermination campaigns – that is, to an extreme kind of collective punishment. One possible explanation for this type of persecution of minorities is that the surrounding society wishes to eliminate not only what it experiences as a threat but also what is considered shameful, and therefore unbearable.

When the preconditions are in place, one must also learn to kill the others, those who are threatening, shameful.

Gaunt discusses his current research on the Holocaust that took place in the Baltic States – a subject on which relatively little research has been done.

“Most researchers are fixated on Auschwitz.”

The Holocaust started much earlier in the Baltic States than in Auschwitz, and it clearly shows genocide's tendency to expand. Around midsummer 1941, Jewish men capable of bearing arms were shot, in August it was the women and the children's turn to learn about death literally and palpably. Here, the Holocaust was far from being superior technologically. One shot one's (Jewish) neighbor with firearms, face-to-face.

Persecution is never a remote possibility. It is, rather, a latent force, easily mobilized, and objects of persecution are exchangeable. As Michel Foucault points out: when the leprosy colonies disappeared, the insane became the “problem”.

Gaunt knows more about minorities and genocide than most; this does not mean that he finds it comprehensible.

“The history of genocide is so *unnatural*; one can understand that there are conflicts, religious and ethnic, but it is impossible to understand those collective punishments.”

The after-effects of genocide make themselves felt within the affected families and in society as a whole for generations to come.

“It is only after a few generations that one can bring it up, and protest against the assault. The one who is subjected to it cannot, the second generation must relate to the first generation's suffering, it is in the third generation that it can happen.” ≈

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