

Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019, 198 pp.

Reviewed by Asya Darbinyan, PhD, Visiting Scholar, Clark University

---

How did genocide, from a cultural point of view, become differentiated in the public mind from other forms of violence? How did we come to understand the kind of suffering that genocide entails? Emerging in the interwar period, the “moral witness,” according to Carolyn Dean, made the crime of genocide legible (2). In her book, Dean analyzes the genealogy of the witness figure over the last one hundred years and claims that “the icon of the witness to genocide is one key to the development of contemporary Western moral culture” (25).

*The Moral Witness* investigates five trials in the interwar and postwar periods that shaped the narrative about witnessing and then examines the shift in this narrative in the postcolonial era, “when witnessing became the obligation of all responsible citizens” (7). Dean suggests four iterations of a “moral witness” or the witness to genocide, presenting them chronologically: the “righteous avenger” (1921-1950), the “concentration camp survivor” (1950-1961), “the Holocaust survivor” in the 1960s-1970s, and the “global victim and the counterwitness” from the 1990s to the present (6, 176-177).

As Dean explains in the Introduction, when no international courts existed to try the perpetrators of such crimes as crimes against humanity and genocide, the trials discussed in this book led to the recognition of victims of mass atrocities in court. Chapter 1, “The Righteous Avengers,” focuses on the trials of Soghomon Tehlirian and Scholem Schwarzbard, “the first major trials in Western Europe featuring victims of interethnic violence and state-sponsored mass atrocities seeking justice” (28). Tehlirian had assassinated Talaat Pasha in 1921 in Berlin for his responsibility in orchestrating the Armenian Genocide; Schwarzbard shot and killed Simon Petliura in Paris in 1926 for commandeering Ukrainian pogroms against Jews (1918-1921). Despite clear evidence of their culpability as assassins, Tehlirian and Schwarzbard were acquitted of murder since they established themselves as witnesses to unfathomable crimes committed against Armenians and Jews. According to Dean, these trials formulated the archetype of the “moral witness” as a “righteous man of honor, a humanitarian,” and “a locus of human conscience” (39). They “imagined a new kind of crime,” and formed a novel witness figure, one “who demands not pity or empathy, but justice” (60).

In chapter 2, Dean recounts the two public libel trials of the late 1940s and early 1950s in France by Victor Kravchenko, a Ukrainian émigré, and David Rousset, French Resistance member and a writer. Kravchenko and Rousset brought suits against the French Communist literary magazine *Les Lettres françaises* over the existence of the Soviet or Gulag camps. Both used the public trials to call former Gulag detainees to testify about their experiences in the concentration camps and condemn their existence in the Soviet Union.

While Kravchenko “won his battle” (70), it was Rousset’s trial that not only proved the camp survivors to be “credible,” but also “above all partisanship” (63). In Dean’s words, “Rousset’s trial stressed the distinctiveness of Nazi and Stalinist camps from all other experiences of atrocity” (88) and “made the concentration camp survivor an authoritative source of knowledge about an ostensibly new form of inhumanity” (90).

Analyzing these trials and their outcomes, Dean emphasizes that they had no significant impact on the existing legal system and the international criminal law. Moreover, the vocabulary of all the trials was highly politicized. For instance, Tehlirian’s trial lasted only two days, since German foreign office was profoundly concerned about the evidence that could have been presented to the court, exposing the extent of German complicity in the Armenian Genocide (40). And yet, during these trials the “witnesses’ suffering took central stage” (8), and the crimes that had no name and had not been distinguished from other forms of violence and atrocity were acknowledged and condemned as such.

Dean focuses on “the Holocaust witness” in chapter 3, examining the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. Her analysis aims to understand how in the 1960s and 1970s Jewish Holocaust survivors “became Western stand-ins for all of human suffering” (21) and “quintessential witnesses to genocide” (98). Focusing on the survivor testimonies that did not involve the defendant directly, Dean shows how survivors were treated as “oracles from another world” (16), bearer of “dark knowledge,” (99) and “symbols of human conscience” (131). The Eichmann trial “refocused public attention on the Jewish dimension of the Holocaust” (93) and “victim testimony led to increased empathy” for the survivors (106). Dean asserts that Jewish witnesses of the Nazi crimes became “a reminder of Western murderousness and at the same time an image of Western soul-searching” (130). They were no longer condemned as passive victims or collaborators and, according to Dean, they demonstrated the need to dignify the weak.

Chapter 4 analyses the shift in the meaning of witnessing that, according to Dean, transpired in the late 1990s, after the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC), when the unimaginable and unfathomable crime of genocide had become part of our geopolitical landscape. Dean discusses the figures of the “global victim and the counterwitness” explaining that “the global stands in for victims of genocidal crimes but is no longer attached to specific victims and the experience they had undergone” (177). She argues that “the global victim is a rhetorical figure with no distinctive features, characterized by a generic helplessness” (177). And even though the chapter focuses on the period when the institutionalization of humanitarianism and the prosecution of genocide have become a reality, Dean considers it necessary to “move out of the courtroom in order to address the cultural role accorded to victim testimony” (135). Reflecting on debates around and the critique of the ICC, the humanitarian government, and atrocity photography, Dean holds that the failures of these new institutions and systems gave rise to “the counterwitness” as “a symbol of frustration with uneven global justice” (137).

Investigating the transformation of the “moral witness” from the 1920s to the present, Dean seems to indicate certain gendered aspects of witnessing without, however, expanding or elaborating on those further. Tehlirian and Schwarzbard “were recast as righteous aveng-

ers and humanitarian warriors” (58), the “camp survivor” was a “combatant” since survival was conceived “as a form of heroism shared by an international and exclusive ‘brotherhood’ who continue their work as soldiers by other means” (87). The trial of Adolf Eichmann “revised such constructions of heroism” (108) and led to emergence of non-conventional, more “feminized forms” (107) of heroism or the “new heroism” (127). The discourse on heroism, masculinity and agency is also present in Dean’s analysis of Didier Fassin’s “portrayal of dignified victims” and “the counterwitness” (152). Hence, *The Moral Witness* not only offers a thorough examination of the genealogy of the witness to genocide in the 20th century, but it also invites future studies on rhetoric of masculinity and heroism that have accompanied witnessing throughout the time.