

Essay Proposal on

'Never again', and the politics of selective memory

Tania Ferdous
Genocide in the 20th century 5110_01
TRU ID: T00759715
November 12, 2025

Instructors: Dr. Jeff McLaughlin
&
Dr. Rick McCutcheon

1. Title

‘Never again’, and the politics of selective memory

2. Introduction

The phrase ‘Never Again’ was introduced after the Holocaust as a moral promise to protect humanity from future genocide (Wiesel. E., 2006). Yet, over time, its meaning has been transformed and interpreted by states to gain political and nationalist agendas. This paper evaluates how the moral intention of ‘Never Again’ has been reshaped into a selective political tool that is often used to justify violence instead of preventing it. This study examines how memory operates within a power structure and evaluates the current scenario of Israel-Palestine, Rwanda as well as compares how do these function in this context.

3. Problem Statement

The core problem this proposal investigates is the moral failure of ‘Never Again’. Instead of remaining a universal warning, it has become a political tool to justify new forms of aggression. This raises a critical question: how does a moral memory become politicized, and why do states or societies use remembrance to justify power and their actions instead of promoting empathy? Through examples of Israel-Palestine, Rwanda, this research will evaluate how governments manipulate collective memories to serve their political agenda.

4. Significance:

This topic is relevant for present time and deeply meaningful in the context of Human Rights and Social Justice. The slogan 'Never Again' has a powerful message for preventing genocide. However, it has transformed into a dangerous tool for some states who justify their wrongdoing by using it (Jones. A, 2024). The distortion of 'Never Again' thus exposes a serious ethical dilemma. It is crucial to analyze this matter because it challenges how states project their version of justice after mass violence. By evaluating how societies use memory as a weapon for political interest, this research focuses on factors such as remembrance, nationalism, and moral integrity. Personally, I want to do this research because I realize that to prevent future genocide, it is important awaken people's conscience. As a Bangladeshi, I also experienced the same in my own country. After our genocide in 1971, Bangladesh's previous government used the memory of the liberation war and Bangabandhu Sheikh Muzibur Rahman selectively to stay in power for a long time and to demolish opponents' views (Ruud, A. E., 2022). So, my personal experience also made me thoughtful to do this research.

5. Argument

Argument I: From Moral promise to political weapon: This proposal first argues that the moral foundation of 'Never Again', a vow born out of the Holocaust's suffering has gradually shifted from a universal ethical warning into a selective political instrument. Elie Wiesel's memoir 'Night', demonstrates this transformation through his reflection on the 'haunting look' in the mirror symbolizing the survivor's lifelong responsibility to remember and to defend shared humanity (Wiesel. E., 2006, p.115). What Wiesel intended as a

universal moral reminder has, over time, been reshaped by politics. Research by Vollhardt et al. shows that the lessons drawn from genocide differ dramatically. While some survivors interpret 'Never Again' as a call to protect all people, others understand it primarily as self-defense, sometimes even as justification for violence (Vollhardt et al., 2024, p. 1578). This narrowing of moral vision marks a critical shift, from empathy to exclusion. Adam Jones further contrasts post-genocide nations such as East Timor and Kosovo, which used remembrance to rebuild, with Israel's approach, where Holocaust memory is often invoked to justify state security policies and military action (Jones. A., 2024, P.300). Therefore, when remembrance is connected to power and politics, it loses the perspective of universal warning against genocide, rather becomes a tool to legitimize the state's actions instead of preventing atrocities.

Argument II: Selective memory and politics of remembrance: The second argument suggests that collective memory, when controlled by the state, often serves political stability instead of ethical reflection. Markiewicz and Sharvit (2021) reveal that Israeli political leaders frequently draw upon national victimhood to unify citizens and strengthen external support, particularly in times of manageable rather than existential threat (pp. 115-122). In this way, historical trauma becomes a strategic tool of national mobilization. Ghaddar, observes a similar pattern in the destruction of Gaza's cultural institutions, archives, museums, and libraries. The author interprets this act not only as military aggression but as attempts to erase Palestinian identity (Ghaddar, 2025). This demonstrates how memory can be weaponized to suppress another people's narrative. A related dynamic can be found in Rwanda's post genocide remembrance. According to Sodaro, while the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre projects a message of peace, it

simultaneously strengthens government authority and discourages alternative accounts of the past (Sodaro, 2018, p.87). Across these cases, states transform moral remembrance into an apparatus of control. Margalit warns against this distortion, urging that memory must act as an ethical bridge between individuals and all of humanity. Reclaiming such moral memory, rooted in empathy is essential (Margalit. A., 2002).

6. Source:

This proposal is written based on a range of testimonial and scholarly sources to evaluate how the idea of 'Never again' has shifted from moral responsibility to political practice. Elie Wiesel's memoir 'Night' provides a first-hand moral perspective on survival and the obligation to remember (Wiesel. E., 2006). Vollhardt et al. (2024) show that genocide survivors interpret 'Never Again' in contradictory ways. Some show compassion for others, and some see it as self-defense that may justify aggression (Vollhardt et al., 2024). Adam Jones compares global cases of remembrance, and Israel's post Holocaust politics and how it uses to validate state power (Jones, A., 2024). Markiewicz and Sharvit demonstrate how political leaders mobilize collective victimhood to unify citizens and attract international compassion (Markiewicz and Sharvit, 2021). Ghaddar, on the other hand, shows how Israel's destruction of Gaza's archives and libraries represents an attempt to erase cultural memory (Ghaddar, 2025). Sodaro show that Rwanda's official memorial center was built as great sign of peace and education, however, it eventually also failed (Sodaro, 2018). Finally, Margalit provides a psychological lens where he imposes the importance of moral memory and urges that remembrance should be for the universal and for all. Making it as a political weapon is like betraying its original concept,

and thus recovering the original message of remembrance is essential for the prevention of genocide in the future (Margalit. A., 2002).

Reference

1. Ghaddar, J.J. (2025), Palestine as provenance: Archiving against genocide from Gaza to South Lebanon (Jabal Amil). *Archival Science*.
2. Jones, A. (2024). *Genocide: A comprehensive introduction* (4th ed.). Routledge.
3. Margalit, A. (2002), The ethics of memory, Harvard University Press.
4. Markiewicz, T., & Sharvit, K. (2021). When victimhood goes to war? Israel and victim claims. *Political Psychology*, 42(1), 89–107.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12690>
5. Ruud, A. E. (2022), Bangabandhu as the eternal sovereign: On the construction of a civil religion. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 50(1-2), 55-78.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-bja10045>
6. Sodaro, A. (2018). The Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre: Building a “lasting peace.” In *Exhibiting atrocity: Memorial museums and the politics of past violence* (pp. 183–199). Rutgers University Press.
7. Vollhardt, J.R., Konushevci, T., Macedonci, A., & Lee, H. (2024), Never again: Lessons of genocide in survivor testimonies from the Holocaust, Nanjing Massacre and Rwandan Genocide. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 54(9), 1577-1592.
8. Wiesel, E. (2006), *Night* (M. Wiesel, Trans). Hill and Wang (Original work published 1958).