

Review of East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity

Author: Phillipe Sands

Published: 2017

As a lazy reader who largely exists on a diet of crime fiction, I joined the history book group with the belief that this was something I needed to do to redeem my sorry literary soul. I fully expected to be a little bored but with the payoff that I would feel satisfactorily smug. I was therefore taken aback to find that I was completely engrossed by our most recent read: *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*. Written by human rights lawyer, Philippe Sands, the book centres on the first international court, the Nuremberg trials of 1945. In particular, the book explores the first time that the concepts of 'crimes against humanity' and 'genocide' were used in a courtroom.

Sands intersperses his exploration of complex legal issues with biographies of some of the key individuals involved – two Jewish lawyers on whom the Holocaust had impacted directly and who developed the concepts, and one of the accused, Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland. The author adds a further dimension by including the story of his grandparents – both Central European Jews.

Sands is further intrigued by the unexpected connections between all these individuals and the city of what is now known as Lviv, Ukraine – formerly part of Poland and occupied by the Germans from 1941- 44. He is astounded to find that Hersch Lauterpracht, advocate of the concept of 'crimes against humanity', was raised close to the home of Sands's own extended family in Lviv before moving to England in 1925. Sands further discovers that Raphael Lemkin, advocate of the concept of 'genocide' also studied at the law faculty in Lviv, later fleeing the occupying forces and travelling to the US. The author examines the stories of these individuals, including the tragic outcomes for those of their extended families who remained behind.

Sands also provides an account of how he pieced together his own family's story. He became particularly puzzled by why his grandmother had remained in Vienna for some considerable time after, firstly her husband,

and subsequently her infant child, left for Paris. His detective work on this and other unanswered questions adds yet another fascinating strand to this book.

A further layer is that of Sands's growing friendship with Frank's son, Niklas. Niklas, along with Horst, the son of Otto Von Wächter, the man immediately in charge of the destruction of Jews in Lviv, is the subject of Sands's enthralling film, *'My Nazi Legacy'*.

Throughout his narrative, Sands intertwines the many personal stories by reporting on the tensions and debates that took place on including 'genocide' - now seen as the crime of crimes – in the lexicon of charges at Nuremberg. He highlights the fear of some nations and individuals that this might result in a critical light being shone at some future point on their own actions. However, he also concludes by suggesting that recent genocide hearings indicate that the concept may have unintended consequences, making political reconciliation between groups all but impossible. It is exceptional to come across a book that manages to raise fundamental questions about the most serious issues of the day in such an immensely readable way.

Irene Scullion