

BOOK REVIEW

*CITIZENSHIP AND GENOCIDE CARDS: IDS,
STATELESSNESS AND ROHINGYA RESISTANCE IN
MYANMAR* BY NATALIE BRINHAM (ROUTLEDGE
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Statelessness, also referred to as citizenship stripping, does not solely occur through accident or neglect; it is often used as a tool of exclusion orchestrated by the state.¹ Such is the case for the Rohingya. Since the military coup d'état in 1962, the Rohingya have systematically been stripped of their rights and rendered stateless.² Targeted killings and the burning of villages has resulted in mass displacement and forced migration. Coupled with laws and policies targeting the reproductive rights of Rohingya women, the restrictions on Rohingyas' cultural identity and practices have led to Myanmar being brought before the International Court of Justice ('ICJ') for genocide.³ Currently, there are more Rohingya living outside of Myanmar than within the country.⁴ The majority of those still in the country have been internally displaced and many are in detention camps.⁵ This is an ongoing situation, complicated by geopolitics in the region and a second coup d'état in 2021, resulting in civil unrest and conflict throughout the nation. The state violence against the Rohingya is complex in nature, partly due to its lengthy duration spanning over eight decades. Targeted violence in 2017 forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.⁶ This event sparked scholarly enquiry

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- ¹ Neha Jain, 'Manufacturing Statelessness' (2022) 116(2) *American Journal of International Law* 237.
- ² Nick Cheesman, 'How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya'. (2017) 47(3) *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 461, 473.
- ³ Melanie O'Brien and Gerhard Hoffstaedter, 'There We Are Nothing, Here We Are Nothing!'—The Enduring Effects of the Rohingya Genocide' (2020) 9(11) *Social Sciences* 209, 221.
- ⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ('UNHCR'), 'Myanmar Situation' *Operational Data Portal* (Database, 2026) <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar>>, archived at <perma.cc/LW3W-N83F>.
- ⁵ Antje Missbach, 'Stuck in camps, at sea and in illegality: dimensions of stuckedness endured by Rohingya refugees' in Ilse van Liempt, Joris Schapendonk, Amalia Campos-Delgado (eds), *Research Handbook on Irregular Migration* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2023) 168, 168.
- ⁶ 'Bangladesh', *UNHCR* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/bangladesh>>, archived at <perma.cc/2GXY-TLXV>.

and empirical research on the Rohingya, primarily based on the experiences of Rohingya refugees in the Bangladesh camps. The Rohingyas' experience as the world's largest stateless group⁷ and third largest refugee population requires careful examination and analysis to understand the complexities of statelessness.

The publication at the centre of this book review considers the historic and current situation in Myanmar for the Rohingya, and the ways in which state-led identity categorisation and bureaucracy is used as a form of oppression. The book, *Citizenship and Genocide Cards: IDs, Statelessness and Rohingya Resistance in Myanmar* by Natalie Brinham,⁸ focuses on state generated identity documents, statelessness and the Rohingya experience. Brinham considers the removal and issuing of identity cards and how this seemingly simple act of bureaucratic organising of populations has contributed to the categorisation, oppression and exclusion of the Rohingya. This is a current and important book, contributing to Rohingya resistance against state crimes and genocide against them. The evidence collected includes historical, geopolitical and lived-experience perspectives, and presents an argument critical of the Myanmar State. Additionally, Brinham presents an argument equally critical of the international human rights system, most notably the United Nations ('UN') for their 'wilful blindness'⁹ to the blatant oppression of the Rohingya by the Myanmar military government.

This book is one within the collection, 'Crimes of the Powerful', edited by Gregg Barak, Penny Green and Tony Ward. Brinham starts with the definition of genocide from the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* ('*Genocide Convention*').¹⁰ From the outset, Brinham presents this text as a collection of evidence supporting the claim that the Myanmar military government has treated the Rohingya with genocidal intent. Chapter One provides a brief historical overview and snapshot of the current situation of the Rohingya on the international stage, including the ongoing case of genocide against Myanmar filed by The Gambia at the ICJ.¹¹ Brinham has written extensively on this subject and draws on previous work to provide context to her argument. The 'slow-burning genocide'¹² previously defined by Zarni and Brinham (under the alias of Cowley)¹³ is characterised by the attack on 'biological and physical elements of destruction that are contained in the legal definition of genocide, as well as the communal, cultural, religious, intellectual and economic elements on which all groups anchor their identities'.¹⁴ Brinham stresses the importance that in the context of the Rohingya, statelessness is a state crime, describing it as a

⁷ 'Rohingya Crisis', *United Nations Children's Fund ('UNICEF') Australia* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.unicef.org.au/rohingya-refugee-crisis>>, archived at <perma.cc/45SF-QG26>.

⁸ Natalie Brinham, *Citizenship and Genocide Cards: IDs, Statelessness and Rohingya Resistance in Myanmar* (Routledge 2024).

⁹ *ibid* 221.

¹⁰ *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, opened for signature 9 December 1948, 78 UNTS 277 (entered into force 12 January 1951) ('*Genocide Convention*').

¹¹ Brinham (n 8) 2. See also 'Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v Myanmar: 11 States intervening)', *International Court of Justice* (Web Page, 2026) <<https://www.icj-cij.org/case/178>>, archived at <perma.cc/85VJ-ZW3U>.

¹² Maung Zarni and Alice Cowley, 'The slow-burning genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya' (2014) 23(3) *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 681.

¹³ Brinham (n 8) 2 n 3.

¹⁴ *ibid* 2.

‘fault line between state sovereignty and human rights law’,¹⁵ with fault line referring to the opportunity for states to undermine the international human rights system through the action of citizenship stripping. The subject of the book is identity documents, the importance of which extends across proof of connection to land, proof of identity, historical records and access to rights.

In Chapter Two, Brinham describes her research process with the Rohingya and the importance of including Rohingya voices. Brinham conducted interviews, focus groups and participant observations across Malaysia, Bangladesh and India over several years,¹⁶ ranging from 2010–15,¹⁷ with further analysis conducted until 2024. Brinham’s methodological approach incorporated historical and legal analysis of ‘UN, Government and [International Non-Government Organisation documents] and observations of advocacy and policy-related forums and discussions’,¹⁸ as well as qualitative and ethnographic research and the collection of oral histories. This is an important contribution to the research as it places equal weight upon the lived-experience perspectives with that on desk-based analysis.

Chapter Three starts with the history of statelessness defined in international law and the varying approaches to understanding how statelessness occurs. Brinham does not delve into legal definitions of statelessness as *de jure* or *de facto*, nor does she describe how nationality and citizenship are typically allocated. Rather, Brinham considers how statelessness is produced through the misuse of state powers, while simultaneously threatening state powers. Brinham considers the state practice of counting, identifying, categorising and documenting individuals and groups as key technologies used to legitimate state power, and subsequently either render someone visible and embraced in the national identity, or rendered invisible and therefore excluded.¹⁹ Brinham also considers the tactic of hypervisibility, targeting groups particularly in oppressive contexts.²⁰ In the context of immigration, statelessness creates a bordering issue. Brinham identifies the ‘un-removability’ of stateless persons like the Rohingya,²¹ suggesting there is no ‘return to sender’ option for the receiving state and thus threatens a state’s sovereignty and its power to legally deport unwanted migrants.²²

One of the central arguments in this book is a critique of the UN’s approach to statelessness. Chapter Three provides an overview of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (‘UNHCR’) publicity campaigns designed to bring mainstream attention to statelessness globally, including the *#I Belong Campaign* and UNHCR’s 10-point *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness (2014–24)*.²³ Brinham is critical of the UN’s homogenous archetypal approach to statelessness, asserting that it neglects to differentiate between statelessness resulting from error or absence and statelessness as violence from the state, the latter being an intentional act amounting to state crime.²⁴ Brinham considers how registration and identity document systems enforce state power. Identity documents are the

15 *ibid* 7.

16 *ibid* 27.

17 *ibid* 4.

18 *ibid* 8.

19 *ibid* 47.

20 *ibid* 48.

21 *ibid* 44.

22 *ibid*.

23 See *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness 2014–2024* (Report, UNHCR, 2014).

24 Brinham (n 8) 39, 52.

organising concept for citizenship, transforming it from imaginary to physical, while also contributing to the ‘physical and symbolic destruction of Rohingya group identity’.²⁵

Chapter Four provides a historical overview of the Rohingya, beginning with British colonisation of Myanmar (1823–1948). Colonisation has left a legacy of empowered ethnic and class hierarchies influencing modern-day Myanmar and the contemporary identity document system.²⁶ Brinham draws on several historic sources and oral histories from the Rohingya in this chapter, and provides comprehensive analysis of the 1982 *Citizenship Act* — which specified citizenship as given to ethnic groups who were permanently within the state from 1185BE to 1823AD (pre-colonisation) — as well as the 1947 *Constitution of Myanmar*.²⁷ The application of this definition has been used to exclude the Rohingya, with the contentious claim that the Rohingya were not permanently within the state of Burma (Myanmar) during pre-colonisation, and thus forms the legal justification for Rohingyas’ statelessness. The Rohingya oppose this claim and in contrast identify themselves as indigenous to Rakhine (Arakan) state.²⁸

Chapter Five continues with the historical overview, focusing on independence in 1948 and the allocation of identity documents. Brinham describes the post-Independence period as being inclusive of the Rohingya, who were given identity documents proving citizenship and associated rights, including the right to vote.²⁹ Brinham then maps a timeline of violence and forced expulsions following the military coup d’état in 1962. One of the key intentions of this chapter is to provide evidence that the Rohingya were citizens and held the required citizenship documents demonstrating this.³⁰ Brinham presents this to debunk the claim that the Rohingya were never citizens. Brinham then details the systemic ways Rohingya ID documents were confiscated, stolen and destroyed.³¹ Brinham hints at resistance throughout the chapter but does not clearly describe acts of resistance until she touches on instances where people managed to keep, treasure and preserve these documents. Such acts Brinham describes as resistance to identity destruction and erasure.³²

Chapter Six places statelessness, citizenship stripping and identity card removal practices within the broader concept of genocide and the State’s intention to destroy the Rohingya. Brinham highlights that ID cards and documents enable targeted ‘persecution and enabled systems of segregation and institutionalised discrimination’.³³ This chapter presents this argument within the context of several genocide definitions, specifically art 2 of the *Genocide Convention*,³⁴

25 *ibid* 57.

26 *ibid* 68.

27 *ibid* 70–3, citing *Burma Citizenship Law 1982*, s 3 (Myanmar); *ibid* 88, citing *Constitution of Myanmar 1947* (Myanmar).

28 *ibid* 76.

29 *ibid* 99–100.

30 *ibid* 98.

31 *ibid* 109–11.

32 *ibid* 123.

33 *ibid* 133.

34 *ibid* 136, citing *Genocide Convention* (n 10) art 2.

Lemkin's 1944 definition,³⁵ Stanton's 2017 ten stages of genocide,³⁶ and Feierstein's 2014 six stages of genocide.³⁷ Brinham states that 'ID and registration schemes and practices that both precede and follow mass violence, can simultaneously function within the stigmatisation, symbolic enactment, and other stages of genocide', such as those argued by Feierstein.³⁸ Resistance is once again touched on in this chapter as Brinham described the current State-led identification process of the Rohingya, dubbed as 'genocide cards',³⁹ and how Rohingya residing in Myanmar are refusing to register or accept these cards as an act of resistance.⁴⁰

Chapter Seven focuses on the 'genocide cards', the current form of identity card given to the Rohingya. The National Verification Card ('NVC') have been issued since 2015 and are critiqued as a tool to make the Rohingya hyper visible and enact further oppression towards them.⁴¹ Brinham also details the Family List, issued to each Rohingya household and used as a mechanism of monitoring, surveillance and control.⁴² In this chapter, Brinham showcases Rohingya narratives that reveal the collection of intrinsic symbolic and physical destruction of their group, including being called 'Bengali'⁴³ as well as forced assimilation.⁴⁴

Chapter Eight starts with recapping the previous seven chapters, as Brinham weaves together a tapestry of identity documents, oppressive systemic technologies, state perceptions, historical relevancies, Rohingya narratives, and international approaches. Brinham shares Rohingya perspectives that criticise the UN and UNHCR. Some Rohingya engaged in Brinham's work criticise these organisations for contributing to their citizenship stripping and statelessness, such as supporting and enabling the implementation of ID cards labelling the Rohingya as 'other',⁴⁵ and using the terminology and categorisation of 'stateless' to describe the Rohingya.⁴⁶ Some Rohingya oppose being referred to as stateless by the UN and UNHCR because they claim their right to nationality and their indigeneity to the Rakhine state of Myanmar.⁴⁷ By categorising the Rohingya as stateless, it is believed it legitimises Myanmar's claim that the Rohingya are not entitled to citizenship and undermines the Rohingya claim to sovereignty and nationality. Brinham takes this criticism further, highlighting the UN's avoidance of using the term 'Rohingya' in meetings with Myanmar government officials.⁴⁸ This chapter also considers the digitisation of identity cards. Brinham raises the issue of digital

³⁵ *ibid* 135, citing Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Law of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of International Law 1944) ix.

³⁶ *ibid* 139, citing Gregory H Stanton, 'The Ten Stages of Genocide', *Genocide Watch* (Web Page, 2017) <<https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages>>, archived at <perma.cc/SHV6-A564>.

³⁷ *ibid* 140, citing Daniel Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas* (Rutgers University Press 2014).

³⁸ *ibid* 142.

³⁹ *ibid* 155.

⁴⁰ *ibid* 148.

⁴¹ *ibid* 156.

⁴² *ibid* 158–61.

⁴³ *ibid* 177.

⁴⁴ *ibid*.

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

⁴⁶ *ibid* 190.

⁴⁷ *ibid* 192.

⁴⁸ *ibid* 195.

IDs, echoing stateless scholars who caution that digital identity ‘could “lock in” statelessness and “lock out” non[-]citizens’ from human rights and government systems.⁴⁹ Perhaps the slow introduction of this chapter signposts a hesitancy to the argument — an effort to respect and acknowledge the critique of the international systems from the Rohingya perspective, while simultaneously acknowledging the complexities of diplomacy and international relations in this context as a melting pot of geopolitics and hostility, where the rule of law and rules-based order is challenged on a daily basis, particularly since the 2021 coup d’état.

Chapter Nine provides a comprehensive conclusion to the book’s argument and clearly articulates a critique of the international system’s ‘wilful blindness’ in its failure to address the causes of statelessness for the Rohingya.⁵⁰ Brinham summarises her argument that identity documents and cards are used against the Rohingya to categorise and exclude them from accessing human rights, while also making the Rohingya hyper visible for oppressive and destructive means. Brinham concludes by touching on the importance of broadening critical statelessness studies from a law-based scholarship into a multidisciplinary approach, which is necessary to avoid intellectual siloing and succeed in breaking down the dominant narratives and assumptions relating to statelessness.

Overall, Brinham’s book is an important addition to the discourse relating to Rohingya oppression and genocide. The decades of systematic mistreatment of the Rohingya, including mass murder, dispossession and forced migration, have compromised the group’s interconnection as millions now live in displacement contexts. The attempted genocide of the Rohingya is happening in real time, with no justice or accountability. Brinham has incorporated the lived-experience perspectives that many of her colleagues often avoid or neglect to include. The inclusion of lived-experience perspectives, this expert-by-experience analysis from the Rohingya themselves, is to be celebrated and encouraged.

Brinham provides a comprehensive analysis of the use of identity cards and other documents to control, dehumanise and segregate the Rohingya — perhaps this narrow focus is the book’s limitation. It would have been beneficial to consider the impact of identity cards through an intersectional lens, to understand how age, gender and other diversity factors such as disability, socio-economic status and sexuality do or do not impact statelessness and ID cards. Perhaps this is a future avenue of inquiry for Brinham or an opportunity for other scholars to build on Brinham’s solid foundation. Another reflection I had relates to ‘resistance’, whose prominence in the title of the book created an expectation for prominence in the body of text. However, upon further reflection, it is likely best that methods of resistance are not described in detail because of the real-time nature of the attempted genocide of the Rohingya. Doing so would potentially cause harm to the Rohingya and stifle resistance efforts.

Brinham’s book is a beneficial addition to the libraries of scholars, researchers, policymakers, practitioners, the Rohingya community and the broader public.

⁴⁹ *ibid* 199, citing Bronwen Manby, ““Legal Identity” and Biometric Registration in Africa (2018) 6(2) *Newsletter of the American Political Science Association’s Organised Section on Migration and Citizenship* 54; Natalie Brinham and Anubhav Dutt Tiwari et al, ‘Locked In and Locked Out: The Impact of Digital Identity Systems on Rohingya Populations’ (Briefing Paper, Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion and United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, November 2020).

⁵⁰ *ibid* 221.

Citizenship and Genocide Cards

Brinham's writing style is accessible and the text is logically ordered. The attempted erasure of the Rohingya is threatened by texts like these. This book contributes to the record that the Rohingya exist, they have claims to their land and they deserve justice for the human rights abuses and genocidal acts inflicted upon them.