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978-0-521-70071-9 - Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Manus I. Midlarsky

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ORIGINS OF POLITICAL EXTREMISM

Political extremism is one of the most pernicious, destructive, and nihilistic forms of human expression. During the twentieth century, in excess of 100 million people had their lives taken from them as the result of extremist violence. In this wide-ranging book Manus I. Midlarsky suggests that ephemeral gains, together with mortality salience, form basic explanations for the origins of political extremism and constitute a theoretical framework that also explains later mass violence. Midlarsky applies his framework to multiple forms of political extremism, including the rise of Italian, Hungarian and Romanian fascism, Nazism, radical Islamism, and Soviet, Chinese, and Cambodian communism. Other applications include a rampaging military (Japan, Pakistan, Indonesia) and extreme nationalism in Serbia, Croatia, the Ottoman Empire, and Rwanda. Polish anti-Semitism after World War II and the rise of separatist violence in Sri Lanka are also examined.

MANUS I. MIDLARSKY is the Moses and Annuta Back Professor of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He is the author of *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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[More information](#)

For Liz, as ever, a source of knowledge, love, and great comfort.
And for Aryeh, may he flourish.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, and then it's night once more.

– Pozzo, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

The ultimate evil in the world is not war itself, but aggression.

– Amos Oz, accepting the Goethe Prize, Frankfurt, 2005

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Manus I. Midlarsky

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>		xi
Introduction		1
PART I Theory and Empirics		23
1 The Ephemeral Gain: Intimations of the Politically Finite		25
2 Mortality Salience: Intimations of the Corporeally Finite		55
3 Cases		69
PART II The Secular “Isms”		83
4 Fascism		85
5 Communism		115
PART III An Ostensibly Sacred “Ism”		141
6 Radical Islamism: Foundations		143
7 Contemporary Radical Islamist Movements		161
8 Muslims in India		186
PART IV Extreme Nationalism		197
9 Sri Lankan Tamils		199
10 Poland		208
11 The Balkans		219
12 The Rampaging Military		243
13 Variations in Genocidal Behavior		271

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70071-9 - Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Manus I. Midlarsky

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

CONTENTS

	PART V Conclusion	305
14	Pathways to Extremism	307
15	Ethics and Morality: The Rejection of Traditional Moral Restraints	337
16	War, Peace, and the Decline of Extremism	360
	<i>References</i>	377
	<i>Index</i>	407

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70071-9 - Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Manus I. Midlarsky

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

1.1	Trajectory yielding the onset of extremism	page 28
2.1	The model	67
4.1	Changes in Italian authority space over time	97
4.2	Changes in German authority space over time	108
5.1	Changes in Georgian-Russian (Soviet) authority space over time	116
6.1	Changes in Egyptian authority space over time	156
7.1	Changes in authority space of the <i>'umma</i> over time	171
7.2	Changes in al-Muhajiroun authority space over time	173
7.3	Changes in Chechen authority space over time	184
8.1	Changes in authority space of Indian Muslims over time	189
9.1	Changes in Jaffna Tamil authority space over time	205
10.1	Changes in Polish authority space over time	218
11.1	Changes in Serbian authority space over time	229
11.2	Changes in Croatian authority space over time	233
11.3	Changes in Greek authority space over time	238
12.1	Changes in Japanese authority space over time	251
12.2	Changes in Pakistani authority space over time	259
12.3	Changes in Indonesian authority space over time	266
13.1	Changes in Ottoman authority space over time	275
13.2	Changes in Rwandan Hutu authority space over time	280
13.3	Changes in German authority space over time: extended	284
13.4	Changes in German authority space over time: Alsace-Lorraine	290
13.5	Changes in German authority space over time: Malmedy	293

Tables

3.1	Countries experiencing two or more interstate wars involving territorial loss, 1894–1997	71
3.2	Gains and losses of extremist cases in Europe and apparent exceptions	80–81

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70071-9 - Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Manus I. Midlarsky

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

- | | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 13.1 | Nazi war criminals: loss, gain, and subordination | 286 |
| 13.2 | Percentages of estimated ethnic Romanian vote for the combined Legion and PNC in elections to the Assembly of 1937 in four Romanian provinces | 299 |
| 14.1 | Pathways to extremism | 331 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70071-9 - Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Manus I. Midlarsky

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

Doing the research for and writing this book has been an adventure. Never did I suspect that I would be exploring in detail the early years of Stalin in Georgia and elsewhere in the Caucasus. Nor that I would find similarities between the attitudes toward Islam of an old Abkhazian Muslim in Batum (then in Russia on the Turkish border) who sheltered the young Stalin and certain Indian Muslim thinkers. Nor that data on Nazi perpetrators of genocide, or Romanian electoral data during the interwar period would prove to be so helpful. Nor that the outcome of the Crimean War and the experience of Turkish officers in Adrianople (today's Edirne) at the end of the Second Balkan War would help explain later extremist behavior towards the Armenians. Little-understood (at least in the West) events can be crucial in predicting later vastly disproportional consequences. And in one instance at least, these events led me to veer from my early confident treatment of communism as a separate path of extremism, quite distinct from fascism, to a realization that, despite differences detailed in this book, there exists a common etiological core.

At a more personal level, I was surprised to have two anomalies clarified, one of a more general nature, the other quite specific. First, after doing the research and writing it became clear to me why the Bible, despite its antiquity and fabular nature, is still, to my knowledge, the best-selling book in the world. Although the ephemeral gain was initially theorized entirely from secular sources, the more recent discovery that it had a sacral biblical counterpart in the story of Adam and Eve (Chapter 15) was a revelation. This fable of kindergarten lore actually is a metaphor for basic elements of the human condition that the compilers of the Hebrew Bible saw with great clarity.

The second anomaly concerns my surprise at the behavior of an otherwise very well-liked professor of mine years ago. Ivo Duchacek was a parliamentary member of a centrist party in Czechoslovakia before the war, escaping to England just before the Nazi occupation in 1939. Upon returning to Czechoslovakia immediately after the war, he was tasked with the responsibility of fairly applying criteria for the selection of citizens born of intermarriage within the Sudeten German community who could remain in the country and those who would be forced to leave. I recall (perhaps imperfectly) that a Czech patronymic would allow a person from mixed heritage to stay, while a German one would yield expulsion. Ivo,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70071-9 - Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Manus I. Midlarsky

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

PREFACE

whom I later befriended, described to the class his anguish at having to apply such a uniform standard to cases that often defied simple categorization.

At the time, I was nonplussed first that a Czech who had seen his country suffer greatly at the hands of the Germans could be so concerned about the fate of the betraying Sudeten Germans, and second that he, a Christian, could, not very long after the Holocaust, describe the difficulties of such a procedure to a likely hostile group of students, most of whom were Jewish. However, the finding in Chapter 13 that the Sudetens were the Germans *least* likely to perpetrate war crimes was fully in keeping with Ivo's reaction to his extraordinarily difficult task. Actually partaking in the process of selection must have yielded the gut feeling that, at bottom, the vast majority of these people were fundamentally decent, and did not deserve the painful expulsion that followed.

I am very grateful for the insightful comments of Sheri Berman, Margit Bussmann, Giovanni Capoccia, Claudio Cioffi-Revilla, Charles Doran, Daniel Geller, Ron Hassner, Patrick James, Jan Kubik, Yosef Lapid, Rose McDermott, Jens Meierhenrich, Cas Mudde, Irfan Nooruddin, Alexander Ochs, Robert Pape, Michael Rossi, Ionas Rus, and Ekkart Zimmermann.

As always, my editor at Cambridge University Press, John Haslam, has been a delight to work with. I am also grateful for the steadfast and extremely competent efforts over time of my secretaries, Shwetha Kashi, Sara Kasman, and Sara Tofiqbakhsh. Needless to say, I am greatly indebted to the Back family for funding the Moses and Annuta Back Chair in international peace and conflict resolution at Rutgers, New Brunswick.