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Excerpt

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Part I

Psychological and cultural bases of genocide and other forms of group violence

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1 An introduction

A central issue of our times is the murder, torture, and mistreatment of whole groups of people. The widespread hope and belief that human beings had become increasingly “civilized” was shattered by the events of the Second World War, particularly the systematic, deliberate extermination of six million Jews by Hitler’s Third Reich. Millions of other noncombatants were also killed, systematically or randomly and carelessly.

The destruction of human groups has a long history. In many ancient wars inhabitants of cities were massacred, often with great brutality, and the cities razed to the ground. Many religious wars were extremely brutal, if not genocidal. Our own century has witnessed, in addition to two world wars, mass killings by colonial powers, the genocide of the Armenians, and the mass destruction of lives in the Soviet Union through repeated purges and deliberate starvation of peasants.

Genocides, mass killings, and other cruelties inflicted on groups of people have not ceased since the Second World War. Consider the millions killed by their own people in Cambodia and Indonesia, the killing of the Hutu in Burundi, the Ibo in Nigeria, the Ache Indians in Paraguay, and the Buddhists in Tibet, and the mass killings in Uganda. Dictatorial governments have recently tended to kill not only individuals but whole groups of people seen as actual or potential enemies. This trend is evident in the Argentine disappearances and the death squad killings in El Salvador and Guatemala.

How can human beings kill multitudes of men and women, children and old people? How does the motivation arise for this in the face of the powerful prohibition against murder that most of us are taught? We must

* On October 12, 1987, NBC news presented a program on the killing of children in our modern age. According to this program, “Once children just died in the crossfire, now they are targets.” While always among victims of genocide, in the last twenty years children have increasingly become direct targets, killed in order to terrorize communities into political passivity.

understand the psychological, cultural, and societal roots of genocide and mass killing if we are to stop such human destructiveness. As cultures, societies, and individual human beings we must learn how to live together in harmony and resist influences that turn us against each other. My analysis is intended as a contribution to these goals.

Genocide and war have much in common. In one, a society turns against a subgroup seen as an internal enemy; in the other, a society turns against a group seen as an external enemy. Identifying the origins of genocide and mass killing will also help to enlighten us about sources of war, torture, and lesser cruelties such as group discrimination that can be steps to mass killing or genocide.

Aggression, violence, torture, and the mistreatment of human beings are all around us. But kindness, helpfulness, generosity, and love also abound. Some Christians in Nazi-occupied Europe risked their lives to save Jews and other persecuted people. Many nations helped in response to starvation in Cambodia at the end of the 1970s and Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, the destruction wrought by earthquake in Soviet Armenia in 1988, and other tragedies.

This book presents a conception of how a subgroup of a society, whether historically established or newly created (such as the “new people” in Cambodia, the name the Khmer Rouge gave the inhabitants of cities they forced into the countryside), comes to be mistreated and destroyed by a more powerful group or a government. The conception is then applied to the analysis of four instances: in greatest depth to the Holocaust, the extermination of six million Jews in Nazi Germany; to the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey in 1915–16; the genocide in Cambodia in the late 1970s; and the disappearance and mass killing of people in Argentina during those same years.

The approach and content of the book

A brief preview. Certain characteristics of a culture and the structure of a society, combined with great difficulties or hardships of life and social disorganization, are the starting point for genocide or mass killing. The resulting material and psychological needs lead the society to turn against a subgroup in it. Gradually increasing mistreatment of this subgroup ends in genocide or mass killing.

Under extremely difficult life conditions certain motives dominate: protecting the physical well-being of oneself and one’s family and preserving one’s psychological self, including self-concept and values; making sense of life’s problems and social disorganization and gaining a new comprehen-

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sion of the world, among others. It is difficult, usually, to fulfill these aims by improving the conditions of life. Instead, people often respond with thoughts, feelings, and actions that do not change real conditions but at least help them cope with their psychological consequences. These include devaluing other groups, scapegoating, joining new groups, and adopting ideologies – all of which may give rise to the motivation for, and diminish inhibition against, harming others.

What motives arise and how they are fulfilled depend on the characteristics of the culture and society. For example, a society that has long devalued a group and discriminated against its members, has strong respect for authority, and has an overly superior and/or vulnerable self-concept is more likely to turn against a subgroup.

Genocide does not result directly. There is usually a progression of actions. Earlier, less harmful acts cause changes in individual perpetrators, bystanders, and the whole group that make more harmful acts possible. The victims are further devalued. The self-concept of the perpetrators changes and allows them to inflict greater harm – for “justifiable” reasons. Ultimately, there is a commitment to genocide or mass killing or to ideological goals that require mass killing or genocide. The motivation and the psychological possibility evolve gradually.

Such a progression is made more likely by the passivity of bystanders – members of the society not directly affected and outside groups, including other nations. Active opposition by bystanders can reactivate the perpetrators’ moral values and also cause them to be concerned about retaliation.

In the next chapter I will present a more detailed description of the core concepts. In subsequent chapters of Part I, I examine in greater detail each component of the conception, including the psychology of individual perpetrators, bystanders, and heroic helpers. In Part II, I apply the conception to a detailed analysis of the Holocaust; in Part III, to the analysis of the other genocides and mass killings.*

In Part IV, I discuss how, with some changes and extensions, this conception provides an understanding of the origins of war, the other major form of group violence. The difficult life conditions that lead to war may include internal problems, problems in the international order, and conflicts with other nations.

* Part of the overall conception I present and many of the specific concepts, ideas, and considerations also apply to individual violence within groups. One major difference is that the cultural and psychological influences that arise from the differentiation between “us” and “them,” ingroup and outgroup, need not be involved in individual violence. Another is that personal (rather than societal) characteristics and circumstances (or the characteristics of and conditions in families) become of primary importance.

Genocide and mass killing are tragedies for the perpetrators also. Their characters are affected, and at times the cycle of violence makes them victims as well. To diminish the chance of such tragedies, we must identify elements of culture, institutions, and personality that reduce hostility and aggression and enhance caring, connection, helpfulness, and cooperation within and between groups. To promote these ends we must create crosscutting relations that allow members of different subgroups (and of different nations) to work and play together; we must help groups develop positive reciprocity in their relationships; and we must guide individuals and groups to act in others' behalf. In these and other ways we can create a progression, an evolution of caring, connectedness, and nonaggression in opposition to the continuum of destruction. How the young are socialized by parents and schools is also essential. In Chapters 17 and 18, I present an agenda for creating caring and nonaggressive persons and societies.

Differences and similarities and the selection of cases. This book searches for the origins of genocides and mass killings. The outcomes differ greatly (for example, in the number of people killed and methods of killing), and the influences that lead to genocide are not identical. Difficult conditions of life vary. Severe economic problems, political violence, war, and even rapid, substantial social change can result in social chaos and personal upheavals. Of the cultural-societal characteristics that have the potential to generate violence, only some may be influential in a given instance. The continuum of destruction takes various forms as well. In some cases a society has progressed along this continuum for decades or even centuries. In other cases, the progression develops over a much shorter time under the influence of difficult life conditions or of the ideologies adopted to deal with them.

Why did I choose the Holocaust, the genocides in Turkey and Cambodia, and the disappearances in Argentina for study and analysis? Each is significant in its own right, yet they differ in many ways. If we can identify commonalities in their origins, we can gain confidence in our understanding of the origins of genocides and mass killings in general.

The Holocaust is an instance of suffering and cruelty that informs our age. It gave rise to a deep questioning of the nature of individuals and groups, of human beings and human societies. For many, the evil embodied in the Holocaust is incomprehensible. For some, it is preferable not to comprehend, because comprehension might lead to forgiving.¹ But as I have noted, only by understanding the roots of such evil do we gain the possibility of shaping the future so that it will not happen again.

The genocide of the Armenians is the first modern genocide. Turkey and the Turks have never admitted that it happened. The say it was self-

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defense, the deportation of an internal enemy in time of war. For this reason alone, the Armenian genocide deserves attention. There are other important differences between the Holocaust and this genocide. The Holocaust made use of bureaucratic management and advanced technology in the framework of a totalitarian system. The genocide of the Armenians was less planned, with limited bureaucratic organization and very little advanced technology in its execution.

Paradoxically, in this highly technological age, we are horrified by the nontechnological brutality of the Cambodian genocide, its direct, primitive methods of murder on a large scale. In this case people were killed not because of their religious or ethnic origin, but for political reasons. Because of their past or because of their current deviation from rules, many people were deemed incapable of living in the type of society envisioned by the Cambodian communists. Because the victims were members of the same racial and ethnic group as the perpetrators, and even religion did not enter into their selection, the mass killing in Cambodia can be regarded as “autogenocide.”

Five to six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, probably about eight hundred thousand Armenians in Turkey, and between one and two million people died in Cambodia. The disappearances in Argentina cannot be compared in magnitude: between nine and thirty thousand people were killed. The Argentine victims were regarded as political enemies who endangered the state: communists, communist sympathizers, or left leaning.

There can be no exhaustive test of my conception of genocide, but I can provide significant confirmation by demonstrating substantial similarities in the psychological and cultural origins of these four disparate cases and the existence of extraordinary life problems.

The definitions of genocide and mass killing

The word *genocide* was introduced by the jurist Raphael Lemkin, who began a crusade in 1933 to create what was to become the Genocide Convention. In 1944, in a study of the Axis rule in occupied Europe, he proposed the term *genocide* to denote the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group, from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing).² As a result of his efforts, on December 11, 1946, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) passed a resolution that said: “Genocide is a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups. . . . Many instances of such crimes have occurred, when racial, religious, political and other groups have been destroyed, entirely or in part.”³

In subsequent work of UN committees on what became the Genocide Convention, passed on December 9, 1948, disagreements about content were substantial. The Soviet Union and other nations objected to the inclusion of political groups as victims of genocide, arguing that the etymology of the term should guide the definition: only racial and national groups could be *objectively* designated. Others argued that political groups are transient and unstable. Some objected that the inclusion of political groups in the convention “would expose nations to external intervention in their domestic concerns,”⁴ and political conflict within a country could become an international issue. Those who wanted to include political groups pointed out that the meanings of words evolve. They wanted genocide to refer to the destruction of any group.⁵ Even the inclusion of economic groups was suggested.

The Genocide Convention as finally adopted did not include political groups. It defined the crime of genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” by killing members of the group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm, creating conditions calculated to bring about their physical destruction, preventing births, or forcibly transferring children to another group.⁶

Killing groups of people for political reasons has become the primary form of genocide (and mass killing) in our time. There is no reason to believe that the types of psychological and cultural influences differ in political and other group murders. In this book genocide means an attempt to exterminate a racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or political group, either directly through murder or indirectly by creating conditions that lead to the group’s destruction. Mass killing means killing members of a group without the intention to eliminate the whole group or killing large numbers of people without a precise definition of group membership. In a mass killing the number of people killed is usually smaller than in genocide.

For example, in Cambodia the scale of murder was genocidal, but the identification of who was to be killed somewhat imprecise, as it frequently is in political genocide. In Argentina the reasons were also political, but the number of victims was much smaller, and their identification even less precise – a mass killing rather than a genocide. The ideology that led to the killings in Cambodia demanded many more victims.⁷

Four mass killings/genocides

I will here briefly describe what happened in the Nazi Holocaust, in the genocide of the Armenians, in the autogenocide in Cambodia, and in the disappearances in Argentina.

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The Holocaust

The word refers to the extermination of about six million Jews by Nazi Germany from June 1941 to 1945. Another five million people were also killed: political opponents; mentally ill, retarded, and other “genetically inferior” Germans; Poles; and Russians. Gypsies, like Jews, were to be eliminated; more than 200,000 were killed, probably many more.

The extermination of Jews had several phases.⁸ After sporadic killings, a policy of extermination, the Final Solution, was created. The policy took shape in 1941; it was institutionalized in January 1942 at the Wannsee Conference. In 1941, *Einsatzgruppen* (literally, task forces; special mobile killing units) were established and sent to the eastern front. They lined up and shot groups of Jews at the edge of mass graves, which at times the victims were forced to dig. Later they filled trucks with Jews and drove them around until they died of the carbon monoxide that was routed back into the truck. About one and a half million people were killed in these ways.

More and more, the killing took place in specially constructed camps, most located in Poland. Some were strictly extermination camps. Jews were told they would be resettled and gathered from all over Europe; in territories not occupied by the Germans but allied with them, governments were asked to hand over their Jewish population. The Jews were herded into freight cars and transported to camps. After days on end without food, water, or medical care, some died on the way. On entering the camps they were told to undress for showers. Instead, they were gassed to death. Their bodies were removed by Jews assigned to special working units and were burnt first in open fires, later in great ovens.

Other camps were combined labor and extermination camps. The “selection” at Auschwitz is infamous. Those deemed capable of work or considered useful in cruel medical experiments were sent to the camp. Others were immediately taken to the gas chambers. Families were separated in this process.

Other modes of killing were part of camp life. Inmates were deliberately starved. Those who became weak or ill were sent to the gas chambers. Some were killed in camp hospitals with injections into the heart. Others died for real or imagined infractions of inhumane camp rules; they were hanged or suffocated in tiny airless prison cells.

In addition to the organized murders, there was both planned and capricious brutality in the treatment of inmates. Only the most limited bodily care was possible. Toilets were long rows of holes, with only seconds to use them. Inmates slept three or four to a bunk. They were

ruled by other inmates who were former criminals and were exposed to degradations, mutilation in medical experiments, and torture.⁹

The genocide of the Armenians

In the midst of World War I, during the night of April 24, 1915, the religious and intellectual leaders of the Armenian community in Constantinople were taken from their beds, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. At about the same time, Armenians in the Turkish army, already segregated in “labor battalions,” were all killed. Over a short time period Armenian men over fifteen years of age were gathered in cities, towns, and villages, roped together, marched to nearby uninhabited locations, and killed.¹⁰

After a few days, the women and children and any remaining men were told to prepare themselves for deportation. They were marched from Anatolia through a region of ravines and mountains to the Syrian Desert, where they were left to die. On the way, they were attacked by Turkish villagers and peasants, Kurds, and *chettis* – brigands who were freed from prison and placed in their path. The attackers robbed the marchers of provisions and clothes, killed men, women, and children, even infants, and raped and carried off women. Through it all, Turkish gendarmes urged the marchers on with clubs and whips, refused them water as they passed by streams and wells, and bayoneted those who lagged behind.

Telegrams to provincial capitals captured by the British army and reports by witnesses, including diplomats like Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to Turkey, provide evidence that the extermination of the Armenians was planned and organized by the central government.¹¹ Estimates of the number killed range from four hundred thousand to over a million; the actual number is probably more than eight hundred thousand.

The autogenocide (Khmer killing Khmer) in Cambodia

In 1975, after a five-year civil war, the communist Khmer Rouge, or Red Khmer, gained victory and power in Cambodia. They evacuated all the cities, including Phnom Penh, the capital, whose population had swelled with refugees to almost three million. All were brutally driven from the city and some were killed.

Whoever the small group of dominant communist leaders, Pol Pot and his followers, regarded as potential enemies of the ideal state that they wanted to build or as incapable of living in and contributing to such a state was killed. That included officers of the defeated army, government officials, intellectuals, educated people, and professionals such as doctors

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and teachers. Communists who became victims of infighting were often interrogated and tortured before being killed. The killings were not entirely systematic. There were more in some parts of the country than in others, more during certain periods than others. The killing actually intensified toward the end of the Khmer Rouge rule in 1979.

The populations of cities were driven into the countryside to build villages and irrigation systems and work the land. They were not allowed to settle in abandoned villages but had to build new ones from scratch. Peasants were allowed to keep some property, including small parcels of land. Those driven from the cities were allowed no property of any kind.

The people were forced to work very long days with little food. They were not allowed to forage in the forest, a customary source of food for Cambodian peasants. They were killed for the slightest infraction of the many and stringent rules, sometimes without warning. Parents were killed in front of their children, brothers in front of brothers. About two million people died from execution and starvation between 1975 and 1979.¹²

The disappearances in Argentina

In 1976 the armed forces took over the government in a coup. They intensified the war against guerrillas who had been committing murders and kidnapping people for ransom. The military began to kidnap and torture even people who were merely suspected of association with the guerrillas or regarded as left leaning or politically liberal. The selection of victims was indiscriminate; not even pregnant women were spared.

Most of those kidnapped and tortured were killed, alone or in mass executions. Some were drugged and dropped from helicopters into the ocean. The authorities gave away infants and young children of victims killed, often to military families, without informing relatives. When relatives asked about people who had disappeared, the authorities denied knowledge of their whereabouts. At least nine thousand were killed, with some estimates as high as thirty thousand.¹³

Is mass killing ever justified?

Are mass killing and genocide ever justifiable self-defense or understandable retaliation? How can they be? In both genocides and mass killings (but also frequently in war) the people killed include women, old people, children, as well as men who in no way harmed the killers. There may be antagonism or violence between some of the victims and the perpetrators. The perpetrators sometimes claim the victims provoked the mass killing.