

## THE KILLING TRAP

*The Killing Trap* offers a comparative analysis of the genocides, politicides, and ethnic cleansings of the twentieth century, which are estimated to have cost upwards of forty million lives. The book seeks to understand both the occurrence and magnitude of genocide, based on the conviction that such comparative analysis may contribute to prevention of genocide in the future. Manus Midlarsky compares socioeconomic circumstances and international contexts, and includes in his analysis the Jews of Europe, Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Tutsi in Rwanda, black Africans in Darfur, Cambodians, Bosnians, and the victims of conflict in Ireland. The occurrence of genocide is explained by means of a framework that gives equal emphasis to the non-occurrence of genocide, a critical element not found in other comparisons, and victims are given a prominence equal to that of perpetrators in understanding the magnitude of genocide.

MANUS I. MIDLARSKY is the Moses and Annuta Back Professor of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. He has authored or edited eleven books and sixty-five articles and book chapters. Most recently he has published *The Evolution of Inequality: War, State Survival, and Democracy in Comparative Perspective* and the edited volumes *Inequality, Democracy, and Economic Development* (Cambridge), and the *Handbook of War Studies II*.

Cambridge University Press  
0521815452 - The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century  
Manus I. Midlarsky  
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Genocide in the Twentieth Century

MANUS I. MIDLARSKY



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521815451](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521815451)

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN-13 978-0-521-81545-1 hardback  
ISBN-10 0-521-81545-2 hardback  
ISBN-13 978-0-521-89469-2 paperback  
ISBN-10 0-521-89469-7 paperback

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For Liz, with extreme gratitude, and for Tali: May she and her  
generation never bear witness to genocide.

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Right or wrong, we must win. It is the only way . . . And once we have won, who is going to question our methods?

Adolf Hitler

Evil, violent, iniquitous, and inhuman means, even supposing that they had an appearance of immediate utility at the moment of crisis, leave behind . . . long and disastrous traces.

Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve

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## PREFACE

I write this book after a 46-year gestation period. This does not mean that my thinking about the book spanned nearly five decades. Instead, my experiences as a seventeen-year-old were formative and ultimately decisive in the decision to do the research and writing.

For many years, I avoided the issue of the Holocaust, despite an intense training in Orthodox Judaism and a household deeply affected by the news of the Holocaust. Although both sides of my family were originally from Eastern Europe, site of the most extensive massacres, we were fortunate in that none of our immediate relatives was murdered by the Nazis. To my knowledge, not even a first or second cousin of mine succumbed to this bestiality. Yet, as in most American-Jewish households of that period, feelings ran deep, especially as the full extent of the horrors had been so recently revealed. At the age of seventeen, I was afforded the opportunity to experience them vicariously.

On Yom Kippur in Israel, in 1954, I visited an uncle (through marriage), who escaped from eastern Poland with his immediate family to live with relatives in Voronezh, in the depths of Russia. Virtually all of his relatives who remained in Poland perished in the Holocaust. Now in Israel after leaving the displaced persons camp in Germany, he was living in one of the last of the Israeli transit camps (Maabarot). Most of the younger couples with children had already been placed in new housing, leaving only the older people who remembered only too well the extent of their losses. When it came time for the Memorial Service for the Dead (Yizkor), the extent of their agony became abundantly clear. I have never before, or since, heard such anguished weeping. It was as if the many dead in the full extent of their suffering had entered the consciousness of the living, and we were now hearing their cries of horror at experiencing their wholly unjustified fate.

Such intensity of feeling was simply too much for a seventeen-year-old relatively sheltered American. For the next thirty years, I blocked out this memory. It was revived only after my wife, Professor Elizabeth Midlarsky of

Teachers College, Columbia University, who was then in the midst of a research project on helping during the Holocaust (supported by the National Institutes of Health) and editing a special issue of the *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* on that topic, asked that I contribute an article. I was exceedingly reluctant for reasons already given; the subject also was then outside my field of expertise. Yet perhaps it was the memory of that Yizkor service long ago, now revived, that was decisive in my ultimate agreement to write the article. As it happens, the article received a favorable citation in a review article on altruism in the 1990 *Annual Review of Sociology*, thereby allaying fears over my handling of this important and sensitive topic. Subsequent research on ethnic conflict brought me closer professionally to the topic of genocide, the subject of this book.

These heightened sensitivities to the Holocaust then led to an increased awareness of other genocides, including, of course, the Armenian and Tutsi, as well as the Cambodian politicide. All are explored in this volume.

My first and heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Liz, for dragging me kicking and screaming to face the reality of my recent heritage. She also was immensely helpful in suggesting better ways to frame the arguments, and to make them more coherent and accessible. My children, Susan, Miriam, and Michael, all contributed through their questions and concern within this long gestation period, Miriam perhaps most of all. In her rabbinical studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Miriam (now Rabbi Miriam Midlarsky Lichtenfeld) has continually raised important issues about the future of Judaism and the Jewish people in light of the Holocaust. These conversations fueled much of the thinking that fed into the writing of this book.

Acknowledgments and thanks are extended to Laura Ahrens, Yair Auron, Joseph Bendersky, Claudio Cioffi-Revilla, Helen Fein, Brian Ferguson, Joseph Grieco, Max Herman, Jan Kubik, Jack Levy, Roy Licklider, Robert Melson, Alexander Motyl, Jack Porter, Scott Straus, Anna Stubblefield, and Benjamin Valentino for their comments on portions of the book. For their efforts, the book is stronger. All errors, of course, are my own.

Research support of the Back family to the Moses and Annuta Back Chair of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, made this effort possible. For that too, I am extremely grateful.

Last, but certainly not least, are the secretarial and administrative efforts that were needed to complete the manuscript. Isabel La Venuta

and Sonya Riley rendered extremely competent service that frequently went beyond the call of typical office work. Sonya especially displayed a loyalty to the project and reliability of effort that led to completion of the manuscript in a timely fashion. She deserves the highest praise for her work.

One point needs to be made with great clarity. Although the primary purpose of this book is social science explanation, I hope that this analytic emphasis does not prove to be offensive to the survivors of genocide. The attempt to explain mass murder, which often involves understanding the perspective of perpetrators of great evil, can sometimes appear to be callous by those who experienced the full impact of that evil. Theory, with its necessary mode of abstraction, itself can be viewed as offensive by people who lost whole families and even entire societies. The question of abstraction pales before that of existence. Even the children and grandchildren of survivors can harbor justifiable sensitivities on this issue. Yet to explain is not to condone. Explanation has the virtue of perhaps establishing the foundation for the future prevention of mass murder. Without such explanation, certainly the probability of the future repetition of genocide is increased. It is my hope that social science analysts and genocide survivors, ultimately, are not members of disjoint sets on this issue. Hopefully, they can agree on the utility of the analytic mode, even when it appears to be abstracted from the immense brutalities of everyday existence in concentration camps or other killing traps.