

## A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation\*

Reviewed by Beth Greenbaum

Driven by thirst after just arriving at Auschwitz, told he can't even break off an icicle to suck, Primo Levi asks, "Why?" A guard answers, "There is no 'why' here."

Why did this happen? Why did the Holocaust happen? Why do other genocides continue to happen? Eric D. Weitz, in his book *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*, suggests a nation's attempt to create a utopian society leads to genocide. His answer to this unanswerable, almost unaskable question—why—is courageous and fruitful.

By examining events of four genocides (in Germany under Hitler, the USSR under Stalin, Cambodia under Pol Pot, and Yugoslavia under Milošević), Weitz shows how a maniacal search for the utopian society leads to exclusion of those "others" who don't fit in. Thus, the Soviets tried to obliterate their moneyed classes to create a proletarian society, the Cambodians tried to obliterate the educated and professional classes to create a classless society, the Serbs tried to eliminate all other ethnic and religious groups to create an exclusively Serbian nation, and the Germans tried to eliminate Jews, Gypsies, and the physically and mentally impaired to create a society of supermen.

Eric Weitz proves his thesis meticulously by explaining and showing how each of the four genocides shared several common attributes: the desire to create a utopia, the classifying and ostracizing of the "other," and finally, the removal of those "others" through expulsion, re-education, ethnic cleansing, or death. It was with glorious visions of nationhood—of the perfect society—that populations could rally around a charismatic dictator's call for a new union that excluded those deemed an impediment to the new nation. This elimination of undesirables led to mass murder and genocide, to state sanctioned sadism.

Weitz carefully defines in his first chapters the growing focus in the modern world on race and nationhood. He shows how social Darwinism's focus on evolution and survival of the fittest provided a rationale to those seeking to understand disparities in populations, as well as those seeking to sift out unwanted people.

In each genocide Weitz describes how the ruling elite, seeking a homogeneous citizenry, dehumanized a portion of the population through law and language. Like the Nuremberg Laws instituted in 1935 in the Third Reich, there were laws preceding each of the other genocides that banned certain citizens from jobs, parks, and public transportation. There was language used that turned humans into "microbes" or "vermin" or "parasites." Diversity was not

---

\* By Eric D. Weitz. 2003. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 341 pages.

welcome, and indeed dividing the population into those on the inside and those on the outside eased the way for outsiders to be dehumanized and pushed out altogether.

In the Soviet Union, despite the goal of unifying the country and teaching the “underdeveloped peoples” to brush their teeth, bathe, and read, there were “cleansing” actions against “suspect” nationalities and “anti-Soviet elements,” including Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Kurds, Koreans, and Chechens. And, of course, there were the notorious Stalinist purges by deportation, imprisonment, or execution of those of bourgeois or aristocratic origins, the unproductive, and social marginals. All this death and purging was intended to form a more perfect union.

The story of extermination in Nazi Germany has been told numerous times. However, Weitz presents a cogent explanation of the development and horror of racial thinking that led to the deaths of Jews and Gypsies. “Always direct in his lectures to fellow Nazis, Himmler made it clear that National Socialist occupation policy was designed carefully to distinguish the different peoples of eastern Europe—and to eliminate the inferior ones, physically or culturally or both.” The primacy of race, Weitz writes, as an ideology, as a set of social practices, as state policy, helps explain the origins of the genocide and how it could continue even when it contradicted military goals.

In Cambodia, the task of the Khmer Rouge was to “rid in each party member, each cadre, everything that is of the oppressor class, of private property, of stance, view, sentiment, custom, literature, art.” Essentially, the Khmer Rouge attempted to take away all that humanizes and civilizes man. The Khmer Rouge, like the other parties and movements discussed in Weitz’s book, “venerated the state as the agent that would create the future society,” depopulating the cities, collectivizing the countryside, creating conditions for an ideal communism.

Weitz quotes horrifying accounts of witnesses who watched Khmer Rouge kill a man by stringing him up, cutting out his liver while he was still alive, and cooking the liver in an already heated frying pan—and eating the liver. “Like rape, like torture, cannibalism symbolizes the utter, complete degradation of the individual, the utter domination of another through the decimation and consumption of the body. As an act of total power, nothing could be more complete than this.” And “this” is, ultimately, what state sponsored genocide is about: the degradation and dehumanization of a human being—even after death.

In the Balkan confluence of ideology and religion, Weitz describes a whirlpool formed of communism, nationalism, Serbian Orthodoxy, Albanian Muslims, Bosnian Muslims, and Croats. The racial cleansing and genocide in the Balkans again follows the process of separating a diverse population into factions and classifications. “In the drive to establish a completely homogeneous and ‘pure’ Serbian state and society, nationalists adopted the most violent

2002/03]

## A CENTURY OF GENOCIDE

109

methods designed to make a multinational society unthinkable and, finally, unbearable.”

One problem in reading Weitz’s historical narrative is his piling of fact upon cited fact, leaving no sense of the author’s voice. In a single paragraph, survivors’ voices mingle with SS soldiers’ voices, as well as historians’ voices. It would be preferable to know who is speaking without having to flip back constantly to the biographical notes.

This book offers a cautionary tale that might, as Weitz suggests, serve as a guide to the warning signs of genocides in formation. In none of the cases discussed was genocide predetermined or inevitable, not even in Nazi Germany. In each case, the leaders were animated by powerful visions of a future utopia.

If these movements and regimes envisioned distinctive utopias, they shared a common determination to remake fundamentally the societies and states they had either conquered or inherited. Ironically, in their drive to found utopia, the four regimes Weitz discusses fought to create the “new man” and the “new woman.” And none succeeded.

In his conclusion, Weitz writes that we are moving slowly toward “a new international order in which the world community seems more willing to intervene in cases of massive violations of human rights.” Perhaps we are also moving toward a global community, full of diversity.

