

Finding Light in the Darkness? The Historical Treatment of Genocide as a Template for the Field of Hate Studies¹

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It is one of the tragedies of writing about tragedy that the weight and texture of words matter unduly, for suffering needs a measure of grace to be bearable to others.

—Jonathan Spence²

I. INTRODUCTION

Near the conclusion of his book *Voices from S-21*, a case study of the secret prison in which Cambodian Khmer Rouge state security forces tortured and murdered some 14,000 men, women, and children between 1975 and 1979, historian David Chandler confesses to an overwhelming sense of personal and professional inadequacy:

I have tried my best to . . . bear witness to the victims, to grasp how S-21 could come to be, and to consider how similar institutions have come to life in the past and might reappear again. To perform these tasks, I have had to overcome my reluctance to move in close, my reluctance to share responsibility for what happened, and my eagerness at all costs to maintain my balance. I need to find the words that fit, and what happened at the prison continually overwhelms the words. As a historian and a student of literature I have tried, over the years, to control the data I deal with and to comprehend the writings that I read. When I have immersed myself in the S-21 archive, the terror lurking inside it has pushed me around, blunted my skills, and eroded my self-assurance. The experience at times has been akin to drowning.³

Chandler's admission of intellectual and moral enervation enjoins extreme humility at the outset of this reflection on the historical study of hatred—a topic so vast and so infused into the core of the human condition that it threatens to defy coherent explanation. Chandler continues, “Why, then, do so many authors persist in trying to write about it? There is something unsettling about ‘fine writing’ about pain. As [Jean] Améry has remarked. . . ‘the howl of pain [in torture] defies communication through language.’ In spite of or perhaps because of such warnings, writers and readers alike are drawn inexorably

toward a subject that is ugly, frightening, seductive, and ultimately inexpressible.”⁴

Why, indeed, study the inexpressible? What is the essence of this attraction? To what end ought we to pursue the field of hate studies? And what can historians contribute of distinct, if not unique, value? This essay offers a few modest reflections on these issues. My intention is simply to provide a starting point for future discussion and elaboration, both among fellow historians and between disciplines.

A brief personal note regarding my motivations and approaches may be helpful to understand what follows. To bring focus to the universal breadth of hate as an elemental aspect of the human experience, my comments will be drawn from my own specialized entryway into the field of Hate Studies, namely more than ten years of experience teaching and mentoring research on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Recently I have expanded my teaching interests to encompass genocide in a global, comparative perspective, and I have recently co-taught an upper-level undergraduate course on this topic for the first time. But although my teaching has become increasingly centered on the study of hatred in its rawest form, my primary research specialization lies in the social history of religion. Reflecting on the interplay between the study of genocide and religion, of the construction and effects of ideologies of evil and systems of religious belief and practice, has challenged me to reexamine the motives that drive my teaching and the purposes I hope to achieve through it.

I am discovering that to teach about the history of Nazism, the Holocaust, and genocide is to enter into a profoundly spiritual experience. By this I mean that in engaging with these subjects, students of history must come to terms with some of the most elemental, existential qualities of the human potential for radical destruction and limitless hatred. The topics force us into a direct confrontation with the concept of ultimate evil: its manifold attractions; its power to deceive and destroy both perpetrators and victims; and yet at the same time, appearing in the midst of the reign of death, the possibility of overcoming evil with good. They therefore demonstrate how the critically informed historical study of extreme evil provides a template for equipping students with the intellectual, emotional, and ethical tools they require to more effectively recognize and overcome manifestations of such hatred in their own, contemporary world.⁵

II. ARGUMENT

The historical study of genocide offers a model for identifying those issues fundamental to an understanding of the formulation and expression of hatred in history. What follows is a synopsis of the building blocks of a coherent, historically informed study of genocide. I will define and discuss the utility of six (6) of these core issues as fundamental contributions toward a theoretical matrix for the emerging field of Hate Studies. Note that although I refer specifically to

genocide for simplicity and consistency of expression, the model is meant to be applied in a much broader sense, to systematized hatred in its many forms.

I begin with the premise that an informed understanding of genocide extends far beyond documenting the actual act of killing. Rather, it must encompass both the multiple factors of justification, mobilization, and implementation leading up to the decision for extermination, and the personal, social, and political after-effects on perpetrators and victims alike. Historical analysis thus aims to create a depth of context, and a coherent ordering of intertwining political, social, economic, and cultural variables, that together enable understanding of the seemingly boundless capacity of ordinary humans to commit acts of unspeakable hatred.⁶

A. *Introduction to Hatred*

To understand genocide, or any act of mass hatred,⁷ historians must first determine the roots, contexts, and exacerbation of animosities (whether defined by race, ethnicity, religion, class, or gender) which underlie the explosion of destruction at a given, historically contingent time and place. Consideration of political, economic, or cultural power relationships (real or perceived) and their shaping or manipulation over time is central to establishing the framework in which a given incident can be comprehended.

B. *Ideologies of Destruction*

In spite of the massive sense of irrationality and confusion that often accompanies actions of genocide and mass hatred, understood as historical phenomena these processes are neither random nor chaotic. They require a guiding set of beliefs and values that justify, necessitate, and fuel the targeting, persecution, and/or physical and cultural annihilation of a target group. Typically, these involve a volatile mixture of a mythical past depicted in terms of lost power and purity; a corrupt present in which the very survival of a given race-nation-people-culture is perceived as being in extreme danger; and grandiose promises of a utopian future, equivalent to a political, cultural, or racial rebirth of this people, contingent upon the implementation of extreme measures of political, economic, and social revolution. Chief among the latter is the identification of a target group blamed for the current crisis conditions, and whose humiliation, expulsion, or elimination is a precondition for the restoration of power and purity. The ideology of mass hatred and genocide is thus comprised of a toxic cocktail of fantasies and fears with regard to both perpetrators and victims. Within this fantasy world, however, arguments for brutalization leading to annihilation follow along internally logical and ennobling lines.⁸

C. *Imagining the "Other"*

Ideologies of hatred require the identification of a target group and its removal from the political, cultural, and moral community of the perpetrators through persecution, propaganda, and the manipulation of popular perception. This process depends heavily upon the dehumanization and demonization of the target group—in short, an act of imagining and (re)constructing this group to portray it as a mortal danger to the perpetrator community. The target group is usually presented in biological terms: that is, as possessing inherent, unchangeable negative qualities that makes it a source of simultaneous contempt and fear, an object of ridicule for its weakness and degeneracy and inspiring awe at its purported powers of camouflage, conspiracy, and control. Thus the imagined "Other" is portrayed as both vulnerable and formidable, an easy target and one whose defeat can be achieved only through a war of annihilation, a "war without mercy."⁹

D. *Initiation of Terror*

Through a comparative framework, historians can discern the warning signs of mass hatred and genocide. What are the factors that turn hatred into love, death into life, and genocide into glory? Historical research illuminates recurring patterns that distinguish states and societies that have committed actions on the sliding scale toward genocide. Theoretically, these findings can serve as guidelines toward predicting which regimes are most likely to commit acts of mass hatred, even genocide, and under what conditions. As noted above, the principle factors leading toward genocide include a profound sense of crisis, involving the loss of stable, legitimate rule; deeply felt national or group humiliation; and a fear for the group's very survival, especially in a Darwinist international arena. These "trigger situations" establish the crisis conditions that make the extreme claims of perpetrator ideologies plausible to broad segments of the perpetrator society.

E. *Implementation*

This concept treats the organization and mobilization of resources necessary for hate crimes on a massive scale, culminating in attempted genocide; the methods and technologies of persecution and killing; and the rationalizations/justifications employed by perpetrators. In most, although not all cases, centralized, state-led state organization is required for the scale of destruction required by genocide. This aspect, probably most notably exemplified in the case of Nazi Germany's assault on the European Jews, highlights the rational, abstract, bureaucratic, and thoroughly modern quality that frequently typifies genocidal actions.¹⁰ A related but distinct issue concerns that mobilization of broadly based active support, or at least passive acquiescence, from the larger

2003/04]

FINDING LIGHT IN DARKNESS

171

society. Studies of propaganda, indoctrination, the chilling effects of a terror system, and societal and cultural dehumanization of the victims, cutting them off from the community of moral obligation, are central to this theme.¹¹

Secondly, historians look for the modes and levels of destruction. This is important beyond a technical comparison of killing techniques—say, death marches or machetes versus open-air executions with small arms fire versus gas chambers. The modes of physical destruction chosen speak much about the organization, mentality, and objectives of the perpetrators: What is the balance between humiliation and efficiency, between the subjective degradation of the victims and the quest for objective, rational processing of the target group? In addition, genocide encompasses elements of identity that go beyond the physical to encompass the annihilation of the culture, the memory, and the existential being of a target group. Henry Huttenbach has termed this facet of genocide “an act of anti-creation, which aims at a totality of extinction so extreme that even the very act of genocide might be denied . . . an act of radical, absolute erasure of every aspect of existence.”¹²

Finally, and of central significance, historians attempt to reconstruct the hearts and minds of the perpetrators to address the haunting question, “*How can a human being do this?*”¹³ Through the techniques of social history, the history of mentalities, and micro-history, especially, historians can delve into the motivations and justifications that enable perpetrators to commit mass murder. Often embracing techniques drawn from social psychology and cultural anthropology, studies of individuals, units, and institutions involved at all levels of the genocidal process have provided a fascinating range of explanations.¹⁴ Fervent ideological belief, apparently, is a useful, but by no means necessary factor in facilitating genocide. Other important considerations include the radicalization of conventional warfare; careerism; segmentation and distancing of responsibility; group pressure; hardening and routinization; and psychological compartmentalization.¹⁵ Although the explanations vary and provoke fervent debate, comparative studies overwhelmingly have shown the universal potential of ordinary humans to commit extraordinary evil. Christopher Browning concludes his seminal study of the “ordinary men” who perpetrated the Holocaust with the damning question, “If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?”¹⁶ Chandler, writing on the Cambodian genocide situated thirty years and a continent away, similarly ends his work: “To find the source of the evil that was enacted at S-21 on a daily basis, we need look no further than ourselves.”¹⁷

F. *Impact*

Finally, and very importantly, historians must present the targets of mass hatred and genocide as more than passive objects. Establishing or restoring

historical agency to victims is historically requisite to avoid unwittingly adopting the perpetrators' perspective of their targets as two-dimensional, dehumanized stereotypes devoid of intelligence, feeling, power, or cultural resources. Victims were not the helpless objects of vast forces beyond their ken; rather, historical study can unveil the complexity of their responses and experiences. Key issues include victims' attempts to comprehend their situation and devise rational solutions; recognition of moral gray zones created by the impossible conditions imposed by the perpetrators; and finally, issues of memory, history, and the long-term legacies of the experience of individual and collective victimization.¹⁸

III. CONCLUSIONS

The set of core issues identified above provide the tools for a broad comparative study of genocide. With minor modification, they can usefully be applied to the study of hatred and its historical expression throughout history. The question remains, With what approaches can historians best employ these tools to create works that speak in a focused, yet comprehensive manner? A few suggestions as to methods and ultimate goals conclude these reflections.

First, as the noted Holocaust historian Omer Bartov has suggested, studies of mass hatred and genocide must be conducted in both breadth and depth. That is, broad, macro-scale studies are required to provide the comparative, global reach that is necessary to understand the roots and commonalities of modern genocides as they relate to "some of the most crucial and pervasive aspects of modern society, political organizations, and ideologies." But Bartov goes on to argue for the simultaneous pursuance of "precisely the opposite perspective . . . the need to focus on the local level so as to grasp the sociocultural dynamic that makes for outbreaks of violence within communities that have often existed in mutual interdependence for centuries."¹⁹ Bartov argues that local studies are necessary to put a human face onto the abstract issues covered at the macro-level:

I feel that much of what we have been unable to grasp when looking at the "big picture" can be much better understood when seen at the local level where the personal interaction between people, their prejudices, needs, and urges, as well as their memories, traditions, and perceptions, would all have to be taken into account. The devil, I would say in this context, is in the local.²⁰

Bartov's call for a globally framed, locally rooted approach to the history of genocide resonates with a theme sounded above, namely the need to recapture the humanity, or the loss thereof, of perpetrators and victims alike. For it is the human response to the temptations and terrors of hatred that speak to us most profoundly, as fellow humans seeking to understand ourselves and the

strengths and flaws of our humanity. It is the quest to comprehend these responses that provides at least a partial answer to Jean Arméry's rhetorical question posed at the outset of this paper. Awash in a sea of statistics and numbed by either overwhelming evidence of terror or the cold abstractions necessary to order critical analysis, historians do well to recall the admonition of the pioneering French social historian Marc Bloch, who regarded history as above all the reconstruction of the human condition: "It is men that history seeks to grasp. Failing that, it will be at best an exercise in erudition."²¹

Finally, I believe that for the historical study of hatred to be meaningful, we must seek to move beyond both the initial emotional shock of encountering a given event, and the simple assembly of facts. Ultimately, students of this terribly fascinating genre of history should be able to understand the causation and consequences of evil—its allure, its rationalizations, its corrupting effects, and its potential limitations—from multiple perspectives and apply these insights critically, intellectually, and morally to present-day situations both at home and abroad.²² Understanding, scholars of hatred have repeatedly emphasized, does not mean condoning. Rather, it is the foundation for any hope for the amelioration, and possibly even the prevention, of hatred in its innumerable institutional, cultural, and political guises. This paper has shown a few of the ways in which historians might contribute to this quest. That there are many others is a certainty. Let the discussion begin.

NOTES

1. This article has its origins in a paper presented at the Conference to Establish the Field of Hate Studies, Gonzaga University (Spokane, WA), March 18-20, 2004. The author thanks his colleague in teaching the history of comparative genocide at Washington State University, Roger Chan, and the members of the Visible Knowledge Project working group at Washington State—Susan Kilgore, Michael Delehoyde, Lydia Gerber, and Carol Sheppard—for their suggestions and support in entering this challenging field.

2. Jonathan Spence, "In China's Gulag," *New York Review of Books*, 10 August 1995. Cited in David Chandler, *Voices from S-21. Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 144.

3. Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 145.

4. *Ibid.*, 111.

5. Raymond C. Sun, "Encountering the Darkness: Using Case Studies of Perpetrators, Rescuers, and Survivors in Teaching about the Holocaust." Unpublished paper given at the Fall Meeting of the Conference of Faith and History, Huntington College, Indiana, October 2002, 1.

6. The following typology is based in part on Scott Strauss, "Contested Meanings and Conflicted Imperatives: A Conceptual Analysis of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3 (3): 349-75 (November 2001) and Mark Levene, "Why is the Twentieth Century the Century of Genocide?" *Journal of World History* 11 (2) (Fall 2000): 305-36.

7. In the term "mass hatred" I encompass actions of inter-communal violence: extreme warfare that targets non-combatants and/or seeks to destroy the economic, social, cultural, and political foundations of an enemy group; ethnic violence or "cleansing" actions; and terrorism are but the leading examples.

8. Highly publicized, historically questionable, and rhetorically overheated in arguing for the primacy of ideology in explaining genocide is Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). Goldhagen's work is nonetheless useful in forcing students to weigh the complex balance between true belief, institutional inertia, and individual and group psychology as motivating factors behind acts of mass hatred and destruction.

9. Both the phrase and the concept of a war of annihilation are taken from John W. Dower's seminal interpretation of the role of racial hatred in the Pacific War, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

10. On the bureaucratic aspect of genocide, see Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961) and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

11. Recently on this theme: Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

12. Henry R. Huttenbach, "From the Editor: Towards a Conceptual Definition of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 4 (2) (2002): 174.

13. The quotation is from the relative of a victim of the terror bombings of the Madrid railway system on March 10, 2004. Quoted in the *New York Times*, March 11, 2004.

14. Notable case studies of small units and institutions that illuminate the larger processes of mass hatred and genocide include: Chandler, *Voices From S-21*; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), revised edition; Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*; and Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002). Pathbreaking works on individual perpetrators are Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994 [1963]) and Gitta Sereny's interviews with Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983 [1974]). The disciplinary roles can be successfully reversed. A recent, historically grounded work expounding a working model of the social psychology of perpetrators is James Waller's *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

15. An extreme statement of the role of ideology is Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. On warfare, see Omer Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), especially Part I, "War of Destruction." Careerism surfaced as a major and controversial theme in Holocaust Studies with Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and Sereny's *Into That Darkness*. On segmentation and bureaucratic killers, Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* remains the basic work. The classic study of the role of peer pressure in motivating perpetrators to become murderers is Browning, *Ordinary Men*. Arendt, Browning, and Sereny all vividly demonstrate the importance of compartmentalization as a coping mechanism among the killers.

16. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 189.

17. Chandler, *Voices from S-21*, 155.

18. A model study of a target group's attempts to assert agency in the face of looming destruction is Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Out of the vast literature on the memories and legacies of genocide, one of the most eloquent sources is Peter Balakian's coming-of-age account of his encounter with his family's experience in the Armenian genocide, *Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

19. Omer Bartov, "Seeking the Roots of Modern Genocide: On the Macro- and Microhistory of Mass Murder," in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85. A controversial example of the approach Bartov advocates is Jan T. Gross,

2003/04]

FINDING LIGHT IN DARKNESS

175

Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (New York: Penguin Books, 2002; originally published by Princeton University Press, 2001).

20. *Ibid.*, 87.

21. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 26.

22. Sun, "Encountering the Darkness," 2.

