

BOOK REVIEW

The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century

By Manus I. Midlarsky¹

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In the 20th century, nearly 170 million men, women, and children have been killed in genocides around the world as compared to an estimated 38 million killed in all domestic and international wars and conflicts.³ Taking into consideration the last 100 years alone, the practice of genocide, intentional and systematized mass-slaughter of peoples in times of war and peace, might seem inevitable.

In his work, *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Manus I. Midlarsky considers the continuity of killing through cases of genocides, politicides, and instances of ethnic cleansing. The author considers a framework for understanding mass murder, including an examination of the complex process of perpetrator motivation, victimization, and explains the non-occurrence of genocide in a praiseworthy scope of international milieu.

Introducing preliminary considerations to the subject matter in the first section, Midlarsky speaks to the role that theory fundamentally plays in genocide research. He judiciously chooses to approach the *desire* or *intent* to commit genocide through a “top-

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³ Rudolph J. Rummel, *Death by Government*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994.

down" strategy. He does so, in his own words, in order to "identify the most general precursors of genocide."⁴ Subsequently, he narrows his case selection and investigative lens in order to effectively tackle specific influences within the field. In addition to explaining his rationale for case selection, reasoning for excluding particular cases from his analysis is made clear to the reader.

Midlarsky moves beyond normative boundaries of genocide research by looking at the influence of other events. For example, the assertion is made that the, "magnification of perpetrator loss suggested by prospect theory, anger at the presumptive 'other,' or other consequences of loss leading to the use of an imprudent *realpolitik*, and impact of the cynical variant, that can yield the genocidal outcome."⁵ Through a myriad of theoretical methodologies and by employing the theoretical approaches of many other notable genocide scholars, a multidimensional framework to understand the dynamic around complex behavior, motivation, and underlying stimulus associated with genocide takes form.

In the second section, Midlarsky discusses the theoretical foundations of explaining the perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity, including the continuity of killing, rational choice, and *realpolitik* as it relates to the disproportionate responses to provocation. Understanding and applying rational choice theory should be high on the research agenda of genocide scholars studying the wholesale elimination of civilians. Midlarsky stands out among other scholars of his field for achieving such an application. He supports the utilization of *preference* and *utility* as two fundamental bases of rational choice theory, arguing that, "these requirements are intimately connected" and that, "a clear preference exists that is to be achieved in the most efficacious manner."⁶ He moves on to apply the elucidating elements of *Utopianism*, *loss and risk minimization*, and presents a model of the transformation of massacre into genocide. The result is a concise but rich illustration of a basic relationship that can result in genocide practice.

Midlarsky applies his theory in specific contexts of conflicts and wars. These include, among others, the Irish famine, the Jews in Poland, and Muslims in Bosnia. Midlarsky delves into the management of threat to the state by examining the Holocaust, state-sanctioned violence and genocide against Armenians, and the instance of genocide involving the Tutsi in Rwanda. He explores additional consequences of loss at the societal level. Accordingly, Midlarsky looks at the cases of Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and Rwanda, while incorporating cases of perpetrator states from a list of countries that include, in particular, Italy, Vichy France, and Romania.

This monograph is a very good example of bringing together a wealth of otherwise seemingly disconnected instances of genocidal massacres. Although the presentation of

⁴ Manus I. Midlarsky, *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

these examples appears to be somewhat random, the main findings of each example are not obfuscated in the overall topicality of the book. The author has chosen to present each case study in accordance with the dimension of *realpolitik* and theoretical application.

Midlarsky takes a deeper look at the victim vulnerability in the fourth section by considering the intrinsic implications of *realpolitik* in the United States, Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries, Hungary, the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. He opens section four by discussing *high victimization*, arguing that Hungary and the Netherlands are conspicuous for the mass-murder of high percentages of their Jewish populations.⁷ The analysis presented in this section is a valuable contribution to the field of genocide research given that it unearths the deep-rooted impetus that resulted in an unprecedented ferocity of mass-slaughter in very specific regions of Europe.

Several of the best contributions of section four are the structured comparison of countries occupied by the Nazis at different points during the Second World War in Europe, the way in which the author addresses and manages the historicity of the events that took place prior to and during the war, and both the compliance and brutality factors that came into play while rounding-up and shooting Jews in Hungary, Netherland, and Romania. In comparing all three cases, the author contends that, "the pattern of Hungarian-Jewish deportations suggests a transition even within impudent-brute force *realpolitik*."⁸ Midlarsky concludes by stating that, "the structure of the Jewish community itself and failure of Jews to identify with each other, in class, religious outlook, or other life circumstances, undoubtedly contributed to the ease with which German exterminatory goals were satisfied."⁹

The final section presents notable exceptions to the dogmatic pattern of genocidal practice. The situations cast in this section, are often categorized, according to the author, "with seemingly identical instances."¹⁰ Not to be branded chiefly and loosely as acts or campaigns of genocide, the author argues in this section that genocide contributed to only a fraction of victimization during the Cambodian killing-campaigns. He reasons that the vast majority of Cambodians died in a politicide, rather than in what many would understand as having been simple and outright genocide. "The matter of etiology" according to Midlarsky, "lies at the root of my distinction here, not definitional semantics."¹¹

Many misconceptions underlying our conventional understanding of genocide and genocidal practice are brought to light when Midlarsky compares the Cambodian genocides with the occurrence of systematic and widespread-killing that took place in Rwanda during the 1990s. Cambodia and Rwanda, according to the author, "are typically

⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

treated as genocides that differ little from each other in essential characteristic. However, the victimization rates for the two countries are similar only when treated as proportions of the *total* country population systematically murdered.”¹² Thus, the underlying need to be able to classify genocide and genocidal practice in accordance with their specific social and political contexts is effectively exemplified.

The in-depth and comprehensive comparative research and analysis cast in *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century* is a remarkably unprecedented achievement. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Midlarsky’s book lies in its deliverance of the first comparative theory of genocide that can be applied in order to prevent future instances of mass murder. However, in spite of the overtly praiseworthy components of this work, it cannot escape the fact that it suffers from a number of critical shortcomings. In the first place, and although the investigation presented in this work is highly qualitative, the author’s work would have benefited from some empirical data and analysis. Even though this book is a very fine example of secondary research, a wave of primary research would have greatly supplemented an already incredible wealth of research. As an interesting and insightful book that links the events in otherwise disconnected regions of the world, Midlarsky simplifies the root causes of many events that have spawned a torrent of genocidal activity. This is most apparent when the author addressed the Rwanda case. Moreover, the author neglects to address the overwhelming offshoots and impacts of the genocides surveyed and investigated in *The Killing Trap*. Overall, this book’s strong theoretical conclusions and persuasive account of wholesale killing in such a broad range of contexts should serve as a valuable source in a critical field of scholarship.

References

Midlarsky, Manus I. *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Rummel, Rudolph J. *Death by Government*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994.

¹² *Ibid.*