War & Genocide

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Organized Killing in Modern Society

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Acknowledgements

I broke a leg badly at a crucial stage in the preparation of the book, and I appreciated enormously the skill and care of National Health Service medical staff at the Royal Sussex County Hospital, Brighton, in helping me make a full recovery. This experience of accidental harm made me realize even more how terrible it is that people cause deliberate physical harm to others in war – and that so many victims lack the care that I received for my injury. I was enormously fortunate in having the loving support of my family throughout this difficult time, and during the writing of this book. What I owe to Annabel cannot be measured.

Martin Shaw, Brighton, 2002

Introduction

In the twentieth century, human beings killed each other on a horrendous scale. They did it most obviously in wars, including two 'world wars'. They also did it in politically motivated slaughter that came to be known (from mid-century on) as 'genocide'. This kind of killing was not new, of course, but it did have terrible new characteristics that made people think differently about it – and so led to this new label. This book is about the relationships between these two kinds of killing, war and genocide, and about how both are produced by and affect modern society.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, many people in the Western world thought that they had left these kinds of slaughter behind. Others, aware that mass killing of civilians was still part of war in other regions of the world, hoped that international institutions would gradually develop ways of dealing with these problems. But few expected that mass killing would be brought home to the advanced West, as it was to New York and Washington, DC, on 11 September 2001. At the beginning of a new century, this shocking terrorist massacre reminded us that slaughter remains a fundamental problem for the entire world.

This book starts from the assumption that one of the most urgent problems of humankind is to prevent things like this being done to anyone, anywhere, by states as much as by terrorists. In order to prevent slaughter, however, we need to understand its roots in politics and society: to understand war and genocide historically and sociologically. To grasp the 'new' dangers in the emerging global world, we need to know where we have come from – to look again at the last century of extraordinary violence which some hoped we had escaped.

The history of mass slaughter and its threat

In the twentieth century, the age of 'mass' society and industrial technology, killing became doubly democratic. Huge sections of society became involved in fighting, and even more in supplying the killing machines. At the same time, many sections of society became targets and victims. Civilians constituted the majority among the tens of millions who died in the biggest killing episode of human history to date, the Second World War. Today we are in danger of forgetting that even this slaughter threatened to be just a curtain-raiser. For most of the second half of the century there was a threat of worldwide nuclear war, in which hundreds of millions of people could have been killed and the very survival of human society could have been threatened. Despite the end of the Cold War, this kind of war could still be fought in the twenty-first century, as many states – and possibly other organizations – possess nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

Not surprisingly, the danger of nuclear war reinforced the lesson of actual slaughter earlier in the century: that war was a supremely inhuman activity. Many people came to question what had been taken for granted in earlier periods – that war was a legitimate way of pursuing political goals. At the beginning of our new century, however, this ultimate threat of global destruction appears to have receded. Although more states have nuclear weapons, the end of the Cold War seems to have lessened the danger of conflagration. The world is groping once more towards the global order that was glimpsed briefly when the United Nations Organization was established in 1945. But because war no longer appears directly threatening – its dangers either long ago or far away – Western governments have been followed by many among their peoples in seeing more limited forms of war as increasingly necessary and viable.

Yet slaughter is still near the forefront of all those minds, even in Western societies, which engage with larger historical questions. The quintessential genocide of the twentieth century, the Nazis' extermination of the Jews, which became known as the Holocaust, preoccupies Western society more than ever before as the new century begins. And contemporary slaughter is not so distant: even before 11 September 2001, it erupted on the edges of Europe (across former Soviet and Yugoslav territories) as well as in many regions of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Wars of

the new era frequently involve – albeit on a smaller scale than during the world wars – deliberate mass killings of civilians. Thanks to television, even the most distant wars can come straight into the living rooms of comfortable Westerners. Through mass media, new victims of slaughter demand the same justice that is sought retrospectively for the victims of earlier periods.

Attitudes to war

How then should we think and read about war? Colossal literatures commemorate – even celebrate – the immense struggles of the last century, down to the last detail of each battle (not to mention tank and aircraft design). Every bookshop's history section is weighed down with apparently popular hardback tomes which, while often conveying the enormity of events, generally legitimate the practice of war by the 'good' in modern history. Similar literatures also celebrate the more recent efforts of Western armed forces in places like the Persian Gulf, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Paradoxically, even the commemoration of the Holocaust often encourages a relatively positive attitude to war. On the one hand, it isolates the slaughter of the Jews as something utterly different from the rest of Second World War killing. On the other, it makes the Nazis uniquely evil and so justifies (implicitly) even the most extreme actions the Allies took to defeat them. This way of looking at modern history gives us a simple paradigm of good war that skirts difficult issues. To depart from it does not mean denying the particular horrors of Nazism and its victimization of the Jews. To examine the general murderousness of modern war, including the uncomfortable overlap between the evils of Allied bombing and genocidal extermination, does not take all moral meaning from the struggle to defeat specific evils. It does, however, point us towards a discussion in which war as such is deeply problematic.

In many ways, this has been the common sense of the longer period since 1918. The slaughter of the trenches produced a profound disillusion with war in Western society. From this point of view, it was the *re*-legitimation of war in 1939–45 that was exceptional. In this light, we could argue that awareness of the dangers of nuclear war only reinstated the earlier anti-war common sense. In this sense also, the evils of localized slaughter since 1989 have given new force, and maybe new dimensions, to what had already

become a dominant set of sceptical sentiments about warfare. But, at the same time, they have stimulated new ideas of possible 'good' wars – to halt genocide and punish the perpetrators of slaughter.

This chequered history suggests that a sceptical structure of feeling about war is never enough. Indeed, historically, moral sentiments of this kind have often been mobilized for new warlike ends once circumstances changed. Horror at the worst forms of war can easily lead to demands for action – that is, war – to stop it. It is fairly easy to get caught up in this kind of dynamic. We need to be aware of the inbuilt tensions in the ways we think about war, which can easily lead us to change our attitudes as the context of killing shifts. To get to the bottom of these tensions, we need to look at the complex roots of killing practices in our present world society.

The argument of this book

Thinking seriously about the sources of mass killing involves confronting realities that are deeply uncomfortable. Despite appearances in the more prosperous regions, the practice of slaughter is all too prevalent in today's world. Our 'peaceful' West is implicated, in many ways, in how killing comes about – and hence in demands to deal with it. Ways of organizing society and ways of thinking that we take for granted are parts of these processes. I shall try to explain in this book why, even though some areas of our world enjoy unprecedented 'peace', there is little room for complacency about many of our inherited ways of using violence.

The book has two aims: to *introduce* the study of war and genocide, and to make an *argument* about the connections between them. Readers should be aware that I am not simply conveying an established consensus, but reinterpreting war, genocide and the connections between them in a way that challenges dominant understandings. Conventionally, war and genocide are seen as being categorically distinct. War is a social practice that has possessed high legitimacy historically, however compromised this has become over the last hundred years. Genocide on the other hand, is killing that is, by definition, illegitimate – indeed criminal. Nevertheless, this book aims to show how what many regard as the deeply necessary, even noble, social institution of warfare has tended to produce its apparent opposite, genocide. Conversely, it aims to show how genocide utilizes the ideas as well as the ma-

chinery of war in distinctive ways. Hence I argue that genocide can be regarded as a particular form of modern warfare, and an extension of the more common form of *degenerate war*. The outlines of my argument are summarized in box 0.1.

Box 0.1   The core of the argument

In this book I make a distinctive case about war and genocide. Here I summarize the main points that are explored in subsequent chapters:

1   *War* is the clash of two organized armed forces that seek to destroy each other's power and especially their will to resist, principally by killing members of the opposing force. War has long been a legitimate practice within human societies, but as organized killing has always involved moral tensions with the general prohibitions on killing. Because of these tensions, legitimate killing is generally restricted to combatants, and even then is qualified by rules of war.

2   Real war has always tended, however, to surpass its legitimate limits, involving killing of non-combatants and of combatants beyond the scope of military necessity. In modern war, the tendency for war to involve slaughter of civilians – as well as of combatants in new ways and on an unprecedented scale – has been magnified. In particular, civilian populations have been systematically targeted as part of the enemy, leading to a rise of civilian mass death.

3   I call this form of war *degenerate war*, because it involves the deliberate and systematic extension of war against an organized armed enemy to war against a largely unarmed civilian population. Degenerate war can be seen both in the armed conquests and aerial bombing of great powers and in guerrilla and counter-insurgency wars. Degenerate war has brought to the fore the fundamentally problematic nature of war itself in late-modern and global society, leading to widespread questioning of its legitimacy.

4   *Genocide* is the destruction by an organized armed force of a largely unarmed civilian group (or groups) principally by killing members of the group(s). In genocide, therefore, civilian groups are enemies as such, or in themselves, and not merely through their relationship to an armed enemy, for the organized armed power that attacks them. Genocide can therefore be distinguished in principle from other forms of war.

5   However, in its definition of civilian groups as enemies to be destroyed, genocide utilizes the logic of war and can be seen as an extension of degenerate war. Historically, genocide has occurred mostly in the context of war, and in practice it is intertwined with other forms of war. Therefore the best way of making sense of genocide is to see it as *a distinctive form of war*.

6   War arises from the contradictions that surround state power, and is extensively produced within modern society, through state power, economic organization, military and general social ideologies and the mobilization and participation of whole populations. Genocide mobilizes these same forces, but the difference between the legitimacy of war and genocide has a marked bearing on how these social institutions are utilized.

7   Genocide exhibits the same tension between *discriminate* targeting and *indiscriminate* results that we find in war, especially degenerate war. Targeted attacks on specified groups lead to 'senseless' violence being experienced by victims. Thus the experience of the victims of war and genocide diverges radically from the aims of practitioners and perpetrators: this must also be seen as part of what war and genocide are.

8   Because the trends towards degeneracy in modern war are structural, the legitimacy of armed force remains fundamentally in question. The appropriate response to the prevalence of organized killing in modern society is a *historical pacifism* that recognizes the underlying trend towards the delegitimation of war as a social practice. There should therefore be a presumption against forcible responses, which can be justified only as exceptional, not normal, acts. Moreover, the general answer to the problems of war and genocide is not only peace but *justice*. Addressing the grievances of victims, of war and genocide as well as underlying political, social and economic inequalities, is the more profound answer to problems posed by organized killing. In the global era, there are important trends that give new hope for just peace.

9   Yet, because genocide is a form of war, usually in the context of wider war, the immediate means of halting or defeating genocide, once it is under way, are usually through the use of armed force. War is being renewed in new ways in the global era partly because it seems to answer such demands. However, many forms of war that are utilized against genocide may also be degenerate in their killing of civilians, so that it is not clear that war can be a general answer to genocide. A key issue is whether the new Western way of war in the twenty-first century, which I call *risk-transfer war*, really manages to escape the degeneracy of earlier modes of war. Is it part of a solution, or does it merely reproduce the problem of war?

This book has therefore two main concerns. My principal case is that organized mass killing, or slaughter, is a fundamental problem of modern society. I use these terms to indicate commonalities between war and genocide – and the thinness of the moral and explanatory lines generally drawn to separate them. I explain the reasoning behind this approach in chapters 1 and 2. Secondarily, however, I am concerned with whether, to what extent, and how

such lines can still be drawn. Within a perspective on the problem of slaughter, I think it is still important to do two things: to examine the historical question – how the balance between legitimacy and illegitimacy of mass killing has come to change – and to address the contemporary dilemmas – how these issues are posed in practice in the relations of war and genocide today.

The organization of this book

This book examines the problem of slaughter from two main sides. It looks first at *how the organization of society produces mass killing.* Chapters 3–5 discuss the generation of slaughter in the relations of state, economic and ideological power. The book then looks at *how society is actually involved in war.* Chapters 6–8 deal with modern battlespaces, their combatants and victims. Finally, the book looks at *how society responds to war.* Chapters 9 and 10 discuss social movements relating to war, focusing especially on ideas of justice and peace and ways that people campaign for them.

These thematic discussions are necessarily quite abstract and general. The reader may legitimately wonder how far we can generalize about 'unique' historical events like wars and genocides. Generalization can appear to do violence – in the sense of inappropriate representation – to the particular characters of dramatic large-scale events, since these are not repeated in the way that smaller-scale, routine social actions appear to be. This issue is especially important in dealing with episodes of slaughter, which have huge emotional, moral and political significance. Yet we understand events through finding their common meaning. Uniqueness can be understood as the distinctive way in which generally intelligible features are combined in an individual case.

In this book I adopt two main devices to create interplay between generalization and particularity. I intersperse the main *thematic chapters* with short analytical summaries of the largest historical *episodes of slaughter*. These sections aim to suggest the specific dynamics of each set of events that involved large-scale killings. They thus show distinctive ways in which 'war' and 'genocide' have been linked historically. This method simultaneously defines the uniqueness of historical processes *and* enriches our understanding of the general connections that the book explores.

The other device that I adopt is the box. I use boxes flexibly to provide various kinds of detailed backing for the contentions of the thematic chapters. Some are ideas boxes, in which I expand on key concepts and thinkers. Other, history boxes deal with particular events that illustrate my arguments, as well as providing closer insight into the experiences of people caught up – as participants and victims – in large-scale historical processes (which are summarized still quite abstractly in the 'episodes' sections).

These devices are not unusual in books intended, as this is, for intelligent general readers as well as students. Nevertheless, they have a specific advantage for my argument. One of my prime concerns is to criticize the idea that the concepts and narratives of war-makers and genocidists are sufficient to define war and genocide. Their accounts define more or less what they do, but they don't define the whole phenomenon of slaughter. This is as much about the experiences and feelings of victims as it is about the intentions of perpetrators. In this book I develop a narrative of my own, strongly informed by victims' points of view but trying to understand the relationships with those of the perpetrators.

I hope that my narrative enlightens, but by breaking it up – even though 'episodes' and 'boxes' are still my accounts – I want to suggest some of the discontinuities. I do not propose a post-modern argument, according to which it is impossible to develop a grand narrative of war and genocide. I do want to draw attention, however, to the difficulty of encompassing killing, the arbitrary ending of life stories, in an untroubled story peopled by grand concepts and designs.

Sources and resources

This book is an entry point to studying the problem of organized killing. Boxes are often used to point the reader towards important areas of study and their intellectual sources. They often contain short citations that can be checked with full references at the end of the chapter, where I present 'Further reading'. In addition, because many sources of information are internet-based, I have developed a website linked to this book, www.martinshaw.org/warandgenocide. This site will lead you to many online study materials, including academic papers, and the websites of universities where you can study the issues raised in this book. This material will also be regularly

updated on the website. You can help me to keep this information up to date by contacting me through this site. You may also write to me about the issues raised in the book. My contention is that these are questions for us all, and so I welcome your views.

Episode 0   The trenches

The Great War of 1914–18, as it was called until the outbreak of a second global conflict made it the *First World War*, was the war that, above all others, defined late-modern attitudes to war.

There had been long periods of catastrophic conflict across large parts of Europe before, notably the Thirty Years War (1618–48) and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815). These wars prefigured total war in their destructiveness, but they lacked the distinctively modern forms of military technology and mass mobilization that produced the events of 1914–18. The century from 1815 to 1914 had seen only more limited wars in Europe. Although the American Civil War (1861–5) had been a modern conflict of drastic proportions, this had receded into history by 4 August 1914. On that day the war broke out that marked the true beginning of the twentieth century – 'the age of extremes', as Eric Hobsbawm (1994) called it.

The effects of the war on Europe were all the more dramatic for occurring at the end of the long nineteenth-century period of economic expansion, during which most wars were in colonial locales. During the last decades before the war, internationalization of the world economy had accelerated, reaching levels not attained again until the 'globalization' of the late twentieth century. The United States had overtaken Europe in economic dynamism. The confidence of affluent Western elites has been reflected in subsequent images of these pre-war years: 'the Edwardian age' and 'la belle époque'. Although it was a time of desperate poverty for the metropolitan masses and frequent famine in the colonies, the catastrophe of the war enshrined it as an age of lost innocence for rich and poor alike. Generations that have not known large-scale war always experience it as epoch-making; but in this case it seemed truly disastrous.

The Great War was not a world war in the sense of the Second World War, which spanned Asia and the Pacific as much as Europe and the Atlantic. The First World War has been called a 'European civil war'. It was an all-out struggle for regional and world power between the empires of Great Britain, France, Italy, Russia and their allies (reinforced after 1917 by the United States) on the one hand, and Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Turks and their allies on the other. Europe – from the Somme to the Dardanelles – was the main battleground, although episodes of the war were also fought out in the colonies.

The Great War was the culmination of imperial rivalries that had been growing throughout the previous hundred years. It was also, however, the outcome of the huge technical and social changes of the period. In 1815, horses and carts and sailing boats were still the prime means of military

transport. In 1914–18 horses were widely used (my own grandfather, serving in the British army, rode one in France for the duration) – indeed, they were still used in 1939–45. But railways, steamships and motor vehicles had revolutionized military transport. Likewise with weaponry: the machine gun, a late nineteenth-century invention, had made mass killing so much easier. And three new developments during the war itself were to transform the face of warfare: tanks, chemical weapons and aeroplanes.

All of these technologies were applied, in part, to overcome the stalemate of the Western Front, where the contending armies became more or less stuck, for most of the war, in the positions that they had reached after the initial German advances in 1914. Although naval battle was also important to the war, and aerial warfare became more so towards the end, the centre of the gigantic struggle, with millions of men on each side, was the systems of trenches that the armies dug, facing each other, along a line stretching across north-western Europe. Here the war was reduced to the ability of the opposing forces to push each other back a few kilometres – or even a few hundred or tens of metres – at a time.

Although military forces in 1914 had new technologies in weaponry, transport and communications that had not been available a century before, their principle instruments were sheer masses of soldiers. Industrial and agricultural revolutions had caused population to soar, and had enabled states to create standing mass armies. Raised mostly by conscription – the standard Continental method that even Britain resorted to for the first time in 1915 – armies had almost limitless supplies of men, as they soaked up extra manpower not only from industry but from the swollen rural populations. Women were increasingly left to fill the industrial gaps that men left behind.

In the stalemated battlegrounds of the trenches, increasingly desperate generals squandered their human reserves with epoch-making callousness. Losses of tens of thousands in a single day were not uncommon in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Even such enormous killing mostly failed, however, to make a strategic difference, and movement on the front was often negligible for long periods of time. The new resources that were thrown in often made little difference, except to increase the misery of the troops: tanks became bogged down in mud, mustard gas drifted back over the side that fired it, and aerial attacks were not developed enough to have a large effect.

The madness of the war was recognized in the more or less open conflicts that went on within armies. Some soldiers, desperate or traumatized, ran away from the front: when caught, they were generally shot. Others who remained in the trenches developed the 'live and let live system' to avoid killing each other (see chapter 9). There were even open rebellions, mainly

in defeated armies, such as those that brought much of the Russian army into the revolutionary camp in 1917.

Eventually the Western Allies overcame the long stalemate and prevailed over Germany, not least because of the United States' entry into the war. However, the pattern of victory and defeat only sharpened, in the medium term, the conflicts within Europe that had produced the First World War. (It contributed directly to the outbreak of the Second World War only twenty years after the armistice that ended the first one on 11 November 1918.) With masses of disillusioned soldiers returning from defeated armies, many countries entered revolutionary phases. The successful Russian Revolution led through civil war and political struggle to Stalin's consolidation of power after 1924. Failed revolutions led to counter-revolutionary fascism, which triumphed in Italy in 1922 and, after the world slump, in Germany in 1933. These totalitarian developments polarized the continuing interstate conflicts, as Hitler focused on revising the post-war settlement dictated by the victors at Versailles in 1919 and defeating communism.

In the short term, however, the common legacy of 1914–18 was that of colossal mass death and harm. Even in victor states the war was widely recognized as an exercise in futility. In the first decade after the war, millions of wounded survivors, damaged by shell shock, gas and the trauma of the trenches, had to be reintegrated into society. The military illusions of 1914 seemed to give way to the recognition of the need for international order, as a means of avoiding repetition of the gigantic social disaster that the war had been. In the 1920s statesmen and populations alike believed that further wars had to be prevented at all costs. The League of Nations was founded with great hopes for a more peaceful world. It is this understanding of 1914–18 that has proved its enduring legacy: the trenches are the archetypal experience of the futility of war.

Historically, however, this lesson was partially eclipsed in a very short period of time. As often in the case of large-scale human suffering in war and genocide, the universal appropriation, whereby the trenches were grasped as a common experience of senseless slaughter, was overcome by particularistic interpretations. Both Italian Fascists and German National Socialists celebrated the camaraderie of the trenches as a formative national experience. For them, the lessons of the suffering were national rather than universal. Italians and Germans needed to expunge their nations' historic defeats, and military comradeship pointed in the direction of heroic new wars.

In the inter-war West, the pacifistic lessons of the trenches lingered on. They informed a Second World War struggle that was less naively nationalistic, and more informed by anti-fascism and the desire to defeat aggression. And there is no doubt that unheroic representations of the First

World War have persisted as powerful components of the peace con-
sciousness that thrived throughout the Cold War. Nevertheless, the
widespread recognition of the senselessness of slaughter in the trenches
did *not* end war in its own time. This remains a salutary starting-point for
understanding the problems of war and genocide today.

Further reading

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