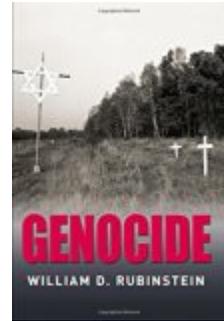


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William D. Rubinstein. *Genocide*. Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Education, 2004. vii + 322 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-50601-5.

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## A Provocative History of Targeted Mass Killings

With his book *Genocide*, William Rubinstein has provided a fascinating exploration of genocide throughout human history. His discussion of the chronology of genocide from the pre-modern era to the present is especially useful, and he also considers events not normally brought to mind, such as the Taiping Rebellion in China. Although Rubinstein tends to discuss tendentious, emotion-laden material carefully, his book is also peppered with the occasional tangential argument that reads more like a polemic than a history of targeted mass killings.

Rubinstein's thesis is that genocide has different causes and varies in intensity depending on genocidal epoch. He divides the history of genocide into four eras: the pre-modern (pre-1492), the Colonial Age (1492-1914), the Age of Totalitarianism (1914-1979), and the era of ethnic cleansing and Third World dictators (1945-2000). Some of the more controversial claims Rubinstein makes are that pre-literate peoples were probably more genocidal than modern ones, that numbers of genocide victims are often exaggerated, and that Western slavery and colonialism are not really examples of genocide. Rubinstein supports these arguments in various ways, whether it is by pointing to the political nature of the definition of terms like "genocide" or to the manipulation of statistics regarding genocide by parties to the event who are political stakeholders in the outcome. No common analytic method unites these findings, although the tenor of the book gives the impression that the author wants to debunk what he considers over-inflated past casualty estimates. *Genocide* concludes with a chapter detailing

a history of attempts to outlaw and combat genocide. While Rubinstein agrees the horrors of genocide are real, he does not believe that we live in an age of genocide. Accordingly, Rubinstein concludes that, relatively speaking, humanity's track record in the late twentieth century has been fairly good.

Despite this optimistic conclusion, the final paragraph of his book asserts that "Islam is arguably the only socio-cultural system in the world to have successfully avoided being crucially influenced and moulded by the European West, with its traditions of toleration and pluralism. The threat posed by militant Islam must be met and defeated ... especially [by] the English-speaking democracies, who carry the torch of Western civilization" (pp. 312-313). The argument that Islam has not been influenced by Western ideas is overstated—for example, Islamic philosophers such as Avicenna are responsible for preserving the works of classical Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, enabling them to survive as part of the Western canon. Islam's confrontation with modernity has been a formative influence in its evolution; to argue that it has had no meaningful molding interaction with the European West is to ignore a rich tradition of interactions, especially those of the Islamic modernists and liberalizers. In addition, Rubinstein mentions that the Baath party is a purveyor of a fundamentalist Islamic worldview. Rubinstein's perspective is decidedly unorthodox considering that Baathist ideology, conditioned by historical and social circumstance, is often secular. Ultimately, Rubinstein is unable to offer an explanation for why we should expect militant Islamic shock-troops to

be the next purveyors of genocide. Indeed, given the fact that the attention of the lone superpower in the world is currently sharply focused on militant Islam, one could argue that a specifically “Islamic” perpetration of genocide is unlikely, although Sudan’s Arab Janjaweed militia and its involvement in genocidal events in Darfur may present a contemporary exception.

On a more technical note, I have two observations about the book’s format that tend to detract from Rubinstein’s arguments. First of all, the citations do not include the publisher, only the city and year. Second, source citations which refer to Web material are incomplete since no URL is listed. Finally, there is no comprehensive bibliography; instead, “Notes and References” are provided

at the end of each chapter, thus decreasing the likelihood of finding relevant citations quickly. The book appears to be intended as a textbook and an introduction to genocide for the casual reader; these considerations hamper its usefulness for the former role, albeit only slightly.

In general, I expect Rubinstein’s book will generate healthy debate. While I have some reservations about his treatment of Islam, his book is an interesting and stimulating tour through the history of an all-too-important subject. One can only hope that books like this will help us learn the hard lessons of the past so we can collectively and radically diminish the prospects of genocide occurring in the future.

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