



**Ben Kiernan.** *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. x + 724 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-14425-3; \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10098-3.

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## A Major, Provocative Contribution to Genocide Studies

With this monumental book, Ben F. Kiernan has made an immense contribution to the field of genocide studies—and to fields ranging beyond it. The result of extensive research and deep reflection, it challenges scholars of genocide with its bold theses; delivers a laudably inclusive inventory of genocidal violence spanning many centuries; and represents a powerful example of a well-synthesized world history, one that will be highly valuable for scholarly as well as non-academic audiences.

Rather than simply subjecting his readers to an oppressive account of human slaughter—although inevitably the book does this as well—*Blood and Soil* offers an original analysis, uniting these dreadful episodes from antiquity to the present. Kiernan argues that a convergence of four factors underpins the causes of genocide through the ages: racism, which “becomes genocidal when perpetrators imagine a world without certain kinds of people in it” (p. 23); cults of antiquity, usually connected to an urgent need to arrest a “perceived decline” accompanying a “pre-occupation with restoring purity and order” (p. 27); cults of cultivation or agriculture, which among other things legitimize conquest, as the aggressors “claim a unique capacity to put conquered lands into productive use” (p. 29); and expansionism. Kiernan has developed and enriched this theory over the course of several books and articles. In the influential *The Specter of Genocide* (2003), co-edited with Robert Gellately, Kiernan concluded his own essay by arguing in a more tentative fashion for the combustible potential of these elements: “As in the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, the tragedy of East Timor demonstrates the virulent, violent mix of racism, religious prejudice, expansionism, and idealization of cultivation. Each of these

factors is, of course, often a relatively harmless component of nationalist ideology. Taken singly, none is a sufficient condition even for mass murder. But their deadly combination is a persistent feature of twentieth-century genocide.”[1]

In *Blood and Soil*, Kiernan places obsessions with antiquity and agriculture more prominently and weaves these four components together in varying ways. Sometimes, genocidal violence was “reinforced by cults of antiquity and agriculture”; in several cases from early modern Southeast Asia, expansionism in combination with cults of antiquity and agriculture provided “an intellectual backdrop to mass killing”; in other examples, “settler preoccupations with antiquity and agriculture” contributed to genocidal outbursts (p. 168). It is not always readily apparent how or why these factors—in particular, obsessions with agriculture and antiquity—produce genocidal violence, but the author is modest enough to acknowledge that those factors “often accompanied genocide but cannot fully explain it” (p. 168).

Occasionally, the analytic reader may question these categories. For instance, confidence in the book’s chief thesis may be undermined by the caveat, made in the introduction, that “catastrophes lacking more than one of the major features of genocide ... identified” were “excluded” from this study (p. 38). And Kiernan sometimes stretches to incorporate the agrarian and antiquity themes, as when seizing upon the utterances of “metaphors of cultivation” or “agrarian metaphors” by individuals in the service of violent regimes. In a 2001 article on the Cambodian genocide, Kiernan pointed to another genocidal dynamic—the “twin peaks” of “national ambition and national insecurity”—that could have been a stronger impetus in some of the episodes chronicled in *Blood and Soil*

than the convergence of the four factors the book stresses.[2] Kiernan occasionally invokes but does not develop this theme of ambition alongside insecurity in *Blood and Soil*. (In relation to Bosnia, for example, Kiernan quotes Norman Cigar in arguing that Serb nationalists' "dualistic self-view of superiority and accompanying vulnerability bordering on paranoia" fueled the genocide [p. 588]).

Nonetheless, *Blood and Soil's* patient accumulation of detail and evidence should win over readers who may initially be skeptical of its principal arguments. While Kiernan's thesis is probably more easily adaptable to ancient, medieval, and early modern genocides than to those of more recent times, *Blood and Soil* amply demonstrates the murderous potential of this combination of ideological forces in atrocities as recent as those in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Yugoslavia. The author also skillfully applies his theory to certain heavily researched topics, such as Nazism's ideological origins and precursors. "Land and race were linked," Kiernan avers, in the ideology and movements of the late nineteenth century that saw the German peasantry as the "true embodiment of the *Volk*" and that fused romantic agrarianism with other strains of conservative and nationalist thought (p. 378).

In addition to its bold effort at unifying disparate historical events, Kiernan's book is distinctive in other fundamental ways. In contrast to other major overviews of genocide, two-thirds of *Blood and Soil* is devoted to mass killings that predate 1900. More than two hundred pages—all of part 2 of the three-part book—are devoted to "Settler Colonialism," chronicling atrocities that accompanied land-grabs and ethnic cleansing in Ireland, colonial North America, Australia, the United States, and nineteenth-century Africa. The section on Africa begins with the French efforts to conquer, pacify, and settle Algeria between 1830 and 1875, one of several oft-neglected episodes that Kiernan masterfully integrates. This second section is in some ways *Blood and Soil's* strongest, a powerful complement to the recent work of A. Dirk Moses, among others, that links not simply colonialism, but also settler colonialism and imperialist occupation, to racism and genocidal violence. And, as Kiernan reminds us, some of the victims of the Europeans' colonial depredations acted with relative magnanimity: Herero chief Samuel Maharero's order "to spare women, children, other Africans, and non-German whites" certainly stands in sharp contrast to General Lothar von Trotha's infamous "extermi-

nation order," as well as the bellowing of German newspapers that "no war may be conducted humanely against nonhumans" (p. 382).

In its chapter on the Holocaust, *Blood and Soil* emphasizes the obsessions of Heinrich Himmler and Richard Walther Darré with the peasantry and its supposed values. In contrast, according to the Nazi vision, the Jew was (here Kiernan quotes Jeffrey Richards) "materialist and thus the enemy of Volkist spiritualism ... a rootless wanderer and therefore the opposite of Volkist rootedness," and in other ways a creature of the city and thereby "alien to the agrarian peasant ideal of the *Volk*" (p. 431). In fascinating, disturbing detail Kiernan also outlines the scale, grandiosity, and otherworldliness of the Nazis' ethnic engineering and population schemes. As elsewhere in this book, Kiernan provides an appropriate balance of analysis and description. While he does not overwhelm the reader with grisly details, his examples are exceptionally well chosen (such as an eyewitness account from Majdanek). Without overstating his case or wading too far into the contentious "uniqueness" debate, Kiernan concludes this chapter with a concise summation of the Holocaust's distinctive features: "A state-sponsored attempt at total extermination by industrialized murder of unarmed millions [that] has no parallel before or since" (p. 454).[3]

It is no longer easy to be surprised by the capacity of humans to commit cruel, depraved crimes against one another. As Yehuda Bauer wrote, "The horror of the Holocaust is not that it deviated from human norms; the horror is that it didn't." [4] Nonetheless, numerous startling revelations leap from the grim pages of *Blood and Soil*. For example, perhaps alone among genocidal perpetrators, the Khmer Rouge prolonged its murderous activities long beyond the end of its reign, sporadically massacring Vietnamese who were unfortunate enough to fall into its hands as late as the 1990s (p. 554). Kiernan also introduces or re-introduces readers to certain grisly figures who deserve a more prominent place in history's gallery of depraved killers: the sixteenth-century Japanese feudal lord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, for instance, whose efforts at expansion and unification entailed the murder of tens of thousands of Koreans, and, more obscurely, the following century's pitiless Javanese ruler Amangkurat I, whose victims included numerous close family members and associates.

A trailblazing work such as this one should not only posit original ideas but also elicit questions.

Among the issues that *Blood and Soil* prompts further reflection upon: How small can a targeted group be for us to classify its extinction or near-extinction as a genocide?[5] The destruction of the Pequots, who declined from about four thousand in 1647 to approximately five hundred a few years later, meets most standard criteria for genocide, and resulted from a calculated policy of the English authorities. Kiernan also offers an incisive account of the genocide of the Tasmanian people, whose numbers were nearly identical to those of the Pequots two centuries earlier. Modern-day students of genocide can be inured, in a sense, by the massive scale of the Holocaust. But Kiernan implicitly suggests that, although the Pequots' and Tasmanians' numbers were relatively small, their cruel fates should indeed be included in a litany of genocidal crimes.

A slow-motion genocide, such as that of North America's indigenous peoples, also presents a challenge to scholars. Kiernan reports that the native population "north of the Rio Grande" declined from roughly 7,000,000 to 600,000 in the three centuries following the arrival of the Europeans in 1492 (p. 219). Little question would remain that such a catastrophic decline, had it occurred over the course of only a few years, would qualify it as "genocide." The great expanse of time involved, the multiple shifts in policy of the English and later American authorities, and the diversity of experience of the many dozens of Native American nations have contributed to the controversy over how to characterize the tragedy of North America's indigenous peoples. For his part, Kiernan—who is admirably flexible and undogmatic in his use of the terms "genocide," "genocidal acts," and "genocidal violence"—has no qualms about including this long, complex story in two of the book's finest and best-researched chapters.

Another question for genocide scholars to consider: Should we regard the issue of intent with greater wariness and circumspection?[6] At times, the perpetrators made it easy to assign genocidal intent: "Kill Koreans one by one, and empty the country," commanded Hideyoshi in 1597 (p. 129). But it is often not so simple to determine intent, and perhaps when mass suffering and death results from criminal indifference, or could have been easily predicted by a conquering or occupying power, that power is no less guilty of genocide, if other elements of the standard definitions are met. This problem is discussed early in the book and appears elsewhere; as Kiernan notes, the International Law Commission (established by

the UN in 1948 at the time of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide) holds that "a general awareness of the *probable* consequences" of destructive acts "is not sufficient" (p. 17). This may be one of the elements of the classic definitions of "genocide"—along with the exclusion of political groups in the 1948 definition—that is overly legalistic and in need of revision.[7]

One additional area of further investigation that is suggested by *Blood and Soil*: the similarity of the cults of violence of certain presumably "left-wing" regimes (such as the Khmer Rouge) to fascist cults of violence. The lyrics of Khmer Rouge anthems that Kiernan quotes are highly reminiscent of the quasi-religious glorification of violence and martyrdom of the Iron Guard, the Arrow Cross, and other European fascist movements of the interwar and World War II era. These lines from the Khmer Rouge's "The Red Flag" may suffice to demonstrate that point for readers less familiar with the Cambodian example: "Glittering red blood blankets the earth—blood given up to liberate the people"; the even less elegant "Rainfall in Pisakh" includes the lines, "our anger shoots out at the imperialists ... and their reactionary lackeys, killing them until they disappear" (p. 548).

While the chapter Kiernan devotes to China has a somewhat rushed quality, it skillfully incorporates Maoist China into the continuities traced in this book. "Even if half the population of the world were wiped out this would not be a total disaster," opined the Great Helmsman (pp. 530-531). Such utterances were not uncommon from Mao, who offered to sacrifice unbelievable numbers of his own population to support world revolution. It would be illuminating to explore the ways in which Mao and others developed, nurtured, and then inculcated such a nihilistic disregard for human life. As to whether the label of "genocide" should be applied to the horrors of Maoist China, perhaps it is more useful to sidestep the genocide issue with Mao, and simply designate his rule as "the worst non-genocidal regime," in Jean-Louis Margolin's astute and precise phrase—which is sufficient to place it where it belongs in history.[8] At any rate, Kiernan's specialization in Asian studies is evident not only in his examinations of twentieth-century Cambodia, China, and Japan, but also in his chapters on late medieval and early modern East Asia—episodes that are rarely if ever discussed in other large-scale overviews of genocide. Yet geographically the book is well balanced, and few Europeanists venture as far outside their "comfort zones" as Kiernan

does here.

Ultimately, any of the book's weaknesses result from its admirable ambition and breadth, and are heavily outweighed by its substantial contributions and strengths. *Blood and Soil* is unsurpassed among works of this nature in examining and uncovering the ideological and philosophical, as well as cultural and political, underpinnings of genocide. However reticent some scholars may be to accept the book's thesis concerning the role of cults of antiquity and agriculture, we owe Kiernan a large debt for proposing this bold, richly suggestive theory, which is already exerting a strong influence within the ever-expanding field of genocide studies.

#### Notes

[1]. Ben Kiernan, "Twentieth-Century Genocides: Underlying Ideological Themes from Armenia to East Timor," in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 51.

[2]. Ben Kiernan, "Myth, Nationalism and Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3 (2001): 190.

[3]. While this is entirely consistent with current Holocaust scholarship, it might be time to reconsider the emphasis we place on the "industrialization" of the Holocaust as a distinguishing characteristic. See Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches* (Manchester: Manch-

ester University Press), 68-70.

[4]. Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 42.

[5]. See Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), for a brief but illuminating discussion of this issue. As Jones points out, "We readily use 'war' to designate" both small-scale wars, such as the so-called Soccer War of 1969 between Honduras and El Salvador, "as well as epochal descents into barbarity" such as World War II. "There seems to be no reason why we should not distinguish between larger and smaller, more or less exterminatory genocides in the same way" (20).

[6]. The issue of "intent" has come under greater scrutiny recently; see, for example, Tony Barta, Norbert Finzsch, and David Stannard, "Three Responses to 'Can There be Genocide Without the Intent to Commit Genocide?'" *Journal of Genocide Research* 10 (March 2008): 111-126, and Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 81-90.

[7]. Adam Jones recently noted that "[t]he position of the Rwanda tribunal (ICTR) that 'any stable and permanent group' is in fact to be accorded protection under the Convention, is likely to become the norm in future judgments." Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 13.

[8]. Jean-Louis Margolin, "Mao's China: The Worst Non-Genocidal Regime?" in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 438-467.

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