With *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, editors Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan have assembled a noteworthy essay collection that attempts to make sense of some of the most tragic and bloodthirsty episodes of the twentieth century. The essays, written by historians, political scientists, and sociologists, seek to discern the political, social, cultural, and economic factors that led to genocide. The question that haunts the authors is how and why does a regime turn genocidal?

The field of genocide studies has been slow to develop, much like the concept itself. While incidents of mass murder can be found throughout history, the legal concept of "genocide" developed in the twentieth century. Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin coined the term "genocide" (from the Greek "genos" meaning "race" and the Latin "occidere" meaning "to kill") in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. Following the creation of the United Nations, Lemkin and others fought for the adoption of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948. The convention defines genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." The acts include killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, and imposing conditions intended "to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." (The book helpfully includes the text of the convention in an appendix.) Significantly, the convention does not apply to acts committed against a political group. The omission was necessary to ensure the Soviet Union would sign the convention.

Genocide studies as a field came into its own during the 1990s. Interest in the topic first coalesced around the Holocaust, which attracted scholarly and public interest in the mid-1970s after decades of neglect. An explosion of research in the 1980s focused on how the Nazi regime intended to bring about the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." In the 1990s, the focus shifted to the victims, bystanders, and ordinary citizens who carried out the killing. As Holocaust scholarship matured, scholars also began to turn their attention to other acts of genocide in the twentieth century. Without seeking to diminish the import of...
the Holocaust, many believed that a comparative approach could yield important clues to the question of how and why a regime turns genocidal. Recent and contemporary acts of genocide, particularly Cambodia and those unfolding in East Timor and Yugoslavia, also fueled interest in the field. Because of source and language limitations, the majority of scholarship continues to focus on the perpetrators and the organizational structures that allowed them to carry out their plans.

The Specter of Genocide functions both as a cogent introduction to the field of genocide studies and as a measure of its state. Taken as a whole, the essay collection portrays the twentieth century as a turning point in the history of mass murder. What marks the century is the occurrence of genocide as a state-sanctioned or state-sponsored campaign in the context of war. The killing transpired not in a random or haphazard manner, but as a result of organized and calculated campaigns of deportation, concentration, and killing. Many of the scholars see the violent nature of the century—a local conflict or major war stains each decade—as a contributing factor. Ongoing violence desensitized populations and made them receptive to participating in previously morally reprehensible acts. Others point to the rise of modernity, with its new methods of warfare, surveillance, and identification as a contributing factor.

These explanations, however, do not account for the trigger—the element that transforms ordinary wartime brutality into genocide. All of the scholars, directly or indirectly, acknowledge the pervasive and destructive role played by ideology, be it racial, ethnic, political, expansionist, or religious. Kiernan argues that individually these ideological elements are benign (nationalistic at their worst) and lack the power necessary to precipitate mass murder. But when they are mixed together, along with a dose of organization, they generate a lethal concoction. Indeed, the major genocides of the twentieth century were committed by three very distinct regimes: the militarist Turks, the fascist Nazis, and communist Khmer Rouge. They all, however, embraced an ideological cocktail that advocated the creation of a racially, ethnically, and politically pure state.

The terrible results that came from the convergence of war and ideology can be seen in the genocides that marked the First and Second World Wars. In examining the Armenian genocide, Jay Winter argues that total war created the conditions that allowed genocide to develop. "In effect, total war did not produce genocide; it created the military, political, and cultural space in which it could occur, and occur again," he writes (p. 191). Winter contends that Turkey’s war mobilization generated a culture of hatred that demonized the enemy and increased the populace’s tolerance for violence. The very day that the Allies landed at Gallipoli in a misbegotten attempt to keep Turkey out of the war, Turkish officials launched a campaign against the Armenians, whom they regarded as a threat to internal security. "What turned a war crime into a genocidal act was the context of total war," writes Winter, "a context that translated deportation swiftly into the mass slaughter, abuse, and starvation of an entire ethnic group potentially troublesome to an authoritarian regime at war" (p. 208). Winter also sees a direct link between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust. An opportunistic student of history, Hitler noted that the Armenian genocide occurred under the watchful eyes of the German army and that its perpetrators suffered no dire consequences for killing nearly one million Armenians.

Gellately admirably tackles Hitler’s diabolical scheme, arguing that his war of conquest played a seminal role in the implementation of the Holocaust. The Nazi regime laid the groundwork for its campaign against the Jews and other undesirables prior to 1939, slowly desensitizing the population. "As the war continued, more and more people grew willing to accept with a shrug what would have been unthinkable for them when Hitler was
first appointed,” he writes (p. 242). Their indifference was reinforced by the brutality of the war at home and abroad. As the regime grew more radical in its plans, so grew the German people’s capacity to embrace them. With the public pacified, Hitler was free to carry out his plans against the Jews. Significantly, the war with Russia made the Final Solution more than just a racial fantasy; as the German army advanced, Russia’s large Jewish population came under Nazi control. Germany’s brutal occupation policies created an environment in which identification, deportation, concentration, and, finally, killing, could be carried out with little or no interference. Ideology fueled the campaign against the Jews, but war provided the opportunity and subterfuge.

Along with war and ideology, revolution—or the revolutionary spirit—has played a central role in fostering genocide. Eric D. Weitz argues that historians should resist the temptation to explain genocide merely as a byproduct of modernity. He regards the fusion of race and violence with the political aims of revolutionary movements and regimes as the real innovation. In reordering the political, social, and economic organization of nation, a revolution also recasts the composition of its society. This process invariably involves a discourse of purity and cleaness, which becomes part of the regime’s new ideology and rituals. At the same time, by virtue of having supported the revolutionary agenda, the populace becomes invested in its success. Its allegiance makes possible small acts, such as looting, snitching, and localized violence, that furthers the regime’s ideology, broadens its brutality, and facilitates its genocidal campaign.

Edward Kissi finds this pattern at work in the genocides perpetrated by two revolutionary regimes: Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge and Ethiopia’s Dergue. From April 1975 to January 1979, the Khmer Rouge consolidated its newly won power and launched a campaign to purify the state. It targeted officials of the previous regime, intellectuals educated in the West, ethnic groups, religious groups, and foreigners. It was a particularly thorough program. For example, only two thousand Buddhist monks survived from an original population of seventy thousand. Unlike the Khmer Rouge, the Dergue never succeeded in consolidating its power, facing constant internal opposition. Over a seventeen-year period (1974-91), the Dergue used force—often lethal—to combat armed uprisings and destroy political opposition groups. Kissi argues that the Dergue’s failure to establish absolute control prevented it from engaging in a cleansing campaign akin to the one carried out by the Khmer Rouge. Without total political control of the state, a revolutionary regime is unable to “purify” the regime.

Not surprisingly, counter-revolutionary regimes are not immune from the temptation to purify their ranks. Using new evidence from the Soviet archives, Nicolas Werth finds that the Soviet Union’s Great Terror of 1937-38, which resulted in 800,000 deaths, targeted not only social and political elites, but also “socially harmful elements” and “social outcasts.” While the Great Terror is more popularly known for the farcical public show trials of old Bolsheviks, NKVD also carried out a secret program of “social cleansing” with the Politburo’s approval. Under “Order no. 00447,” kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements were “repressed” through a combination of deportation and killing. Orders were also issued against Germans, Poles, and other groups that Stalin feared might stage uprisings in the wake of the Spanish Civil War. Although the death toll of the Great Terror does not compare to the Great Famine of 1932-33, Werth finds the cleansing impulse a troubling mutation in the regime’s behavior, one that shares parallels with Nazi Germany’s eugenics program. Both programs engaged in social engineering by actively identifying a group, engaging in harsh policing practices, and ultimately murder.
The collection also tackles the relationship of colonialism and genocide. Elazar Barkan notes that the evolving concept of human rights has prompted reconsideration of the treatment of indigenous people under the imperial project. He urges Europeans and Americans to reflect on their conduct in dealing with indigenous populations and scholars to "underscore more the genocidal component of colonialism." Undoubtedly, the course of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism demands more research and soul searching, but Barkan's essay will not help the cause. Too often it reads like a screed of the sins of the West since the advent of European exploration.

Two other thoughtful essays, however, illustrate just how much there is to learn about the relationship. Isabel Hull examines Germany's suppression of the Herero revolt in southwest Africa from 1904-07, during which approximately 75-80 percent of the Herero and Nama were killed. Over these three years, the German military's response to the political uprising was marked by an escalation in force. She argues that the use of extermination became embedded in German military culture, predisposing its leaders to use genocide to solve political problems. The brutality of the First World War only served to harden the approach and create a climate that made the military receptive to Nazi ideology and its Pan-German world view. "Without being anchored in actual practice and perpetuated in institutions, ideology would scarcely have endured long enough to capture a state," she writes (p. 143). While Hull emphasizes the need for scholars to consider the role of military culture in promoting genocide, the same could be said for the need to consider how the colonial experience influenced the attitude of the Great Powers toward genocide at home and abroad.

In considering the origins of the Rwandan genocide, Robert Melson finds Belgian colonialism a guilty midwife to a bloody mix of ideology, war, and revolution. He argues that the Hutu campaign against the Tutsi was the "product of a postcolonial state, a racialist ideology, a revolution claiming democratic legitimization, and war—all manifestations of the modern world" (p. 326). During their rule, Belgian administrators promoted the minority Tutsis as the racially superior elite of Rwanda, while casting the majority Hutu as their racial, social, and economic inferiors. In time, the previously friendly tribes came to believe the Belgian version of their social structure. When the new Rwandan republic was established, the Hutus assumed control of the government, officially making the Tutsis second-class citizens. Melson argues that the 1959 revolution created a racial state, laying the foundation for the blood bath of the 1990s. After the revolution, more than 336,000 Tutsi refugees fled to the neighboring countries of Uganda and Burundi. Over the next three decades, they conducted a guerrilla war against Rwanda, culminating with an invasion in 1990. In response to the invasion, Hutu Power, an elite group of government officials, began laying the groundwork for a genocidal campaign that would permanently wipe out the Tutsi threat. After the Rwandan president's plane was shot down in 1994, while returning from peace talks, Hutu Power gave the kill order, prompting ordinary Hutu peasants and farmers to turn on their Tutsi neighbors. Decades of inequity and fear of subjugation fueled the Hutu populace's genocidal rage as they turned hoes and machetes into deadly weapons.

As one proceeds through the volume—which also includes essays on imperial Japan, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and Guatemala—it is hard to ignore the depressing conclusion that state-sponsored mass murder is central to the story of the twentieth century. Genocide was not an aberration, but a defining characteristic. The story of genocide, however, remains in many ways a macabre side show. While it is not a topic for the faint of heart, the study of genocide is not merely an exhortation into the mechanics of mass murder, but also an inquiry into the very essence of what drives the
modern nation-state and its populace. As such, genocide deserves a place in the story of the twentieth century alongside the evolution of the Great Powers into Super Powers, colonial powers into post-colonial powers, and traditional land-based armies into rapid response forces. Indeed, the story of genocide cuts across–even encompasses–all of these forces, while raising troubling questions about progress, technology, and morality.

But before genocide can occupy a more central role, additional attention needs to be given to the diplomacy of genocide, including the ability of the United Nations to serve as a watchdog and the factors that cause world powers to be bystanders to genocidal campaigns. This work will help make genocide part of international history and thread it into the national histories of the bystanders. At the same time, the study of genocide should not remain the provenance of political and military historians. Work by social and cultural historians is essential to providing important insights into the local mores and relationships that made it possible for lifelong neighbors to become murderer and victim.

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