



2008.II.OI

A Violent Century—The Public Response

Essay by Walter G. Moss, Eastern Michigan University (wmoss@emich.edu)

The essay below comprises a summary of pp. 1–29 of Chapter 1 (“A Century of Violence”) of Professor Moss’s recent book, An Age of Progress? Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces (New York/London: Anthem Press, 2008), and the chapter’s final section, “The Public Response” (29–35), reproduced here with minor changes by kind permission of the publisher.¹ —Ed.

A Violent Century

Wars, assassinations, atrocities—these words appeared often in the history of the twentieth century. No earlier century had witnessed as much killing. Population increases provided more people to kill; technological developments provided more efficient means to kill them; and expanding media coverage informed more people about such killings and horrors as the century proceeded.

The century began with widespread warfare and violence—U.S. soldiers battling Filipino guerrilla forces resisting the American takeover of their country; British troops at war with the Boers in South Africa; civil war (the War of a Thousand Days) raging in Colombia; an international force of eight countries putting down the anti-imperialist rampage of China’s Boxer Rebellion; the anarchist Gaetano Bresci assassinating King Humbert of Italy in 1900. A year later, another anarchist, Leon Czolgosz, inspired by Bresci’s deed, shot and killed U.S. President McKinley. The anarchists were the leading terrorists of their day, and warfare and terrorism would continue throughout the century.

Altogether, besides the century’s two world wars, more than a dozen additional twentieth-century conflicts probably caused more than a million deaths each.² In 1999, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, there were still ongoing “27 major armed conflicts in 25 countries.”³ Besides the major wars of the century, numerous other conflicts produced significant atrocities. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s, “ethnic cleansing” occurred, mainly against Bosnian Muslims. Terrorism—defined here as the non-governmental use of violence, or threat of its use, for political purposes, but on a lesser scale than a revolution or warfare, whether guerrilla or conventional, civil war or war between nations—took many fewer lives, but by century’s end was becoming a more serious threat as the possibility of terrorists obtaining nuclear materials

¹ All rights reserved: no part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without the publisher’s permission. For more information, see the Anthem Press website <www.miwsr.com/rd/0820.htm>. Another brief excerpt is available at the Barnes & Noble site <www.miwsr.com/rd/0821.htm>.

² Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (NY: Penguin, 2006), xxxiv.

³ Taylor B. Seybolt, “Major Armed Conflicts,” *SIPRI Yearbook 2000* (9 Feb 2001) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0822.htm>.

increased. By one reliable estimate, 7,152 people of all nationalities, including 666 Americans, were killed as a result of international terrorist actions (those involving two or more nationalities) in the 1980s and 1990s. When cases of domestic terrorism, like the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, are added from the various nations of the world, the total is much higher.⁴

Some sources contend that murderous government policies such as those of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Cambodia's Pol Pot took even more lives than all the century's wars and terrorist acts. The scholar Rudolph Rummel refers to such policies as "democide," and writes that, "Just to give perspective on this incredible murder by government, if all these bodies were laid head to toe, with the average height being 5', then they would circle the earth ten times. Also, this democide [which he estimates at 262 million] murdered 6 times more people than died in combat in all the foreign and internal wars of the century."⁵ It should be noted that Rummel includes deaths that occurred during wartime, but were not part of any effort to kill enemy soldiers or civilians who died because of military actions directed at military targets. Hitler's killing of 5 to 6 million Jews in World War II is an example of such wartime democide. More controversially, Rummel considers the bombing of such cities as Hamburg, Dresden, and Hiroshima during that same war as examples of democide. The chief perpetrators of such killing, in addition to Hitler, were the communist leaders Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot.⁶

Still another type of violence sometimes mentioned, besides everyday criminal brutality, is what has been called structural violence. It differs in being less direct, a "physical and psychological harm that results from exploitive and unjust social, political and economic systems."⁷ In the twentieth century and beyond, this type of violence continued to deny many of the world's poor sufficient access to food, proper sanitation, and health care, thus "killing" many people prematurely.

The reasons for the wars, terrorism, and democide of the century are many. Some contend that war has always been a part of human history and that the twentieth century has merely provided more people to kill and more advanced technology to accomplish the killing. Historian Niall Ferguson states that the "extreme violence" of the century resulted

⁴ See Paul R. Pillar, "The Dimensions of Terrorism and Counterterrorism," in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment, Readings and Interpretations*, 2d ed., ed. Russell D. Howard & Reid L. Sawyer (Dubuque, IA: McGraw Hill, 2006), 28.

⁵ "20th Century Democide" <www.miwsr.com/rd/0823.htm>. Overall, Rummel estimates that over 300 million people were killed during the century as a result of warfare and democide. See also the excellent work of Milton Leitenberg, "Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century," *Cornell Univ. Peace Studies Program, Occasional Paper #29*, 3rd ed. (2006) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0824.htm>, which estimates a total of about 231 million deaths. Niall Ferguson (note 2 supra) 649 suggests a number in the 167–88 million range and discusses the difficulty of accurately estimating the toll of twentieth-century violence (647–54).

⁶ Various estimates in Stéphane Courtois et al., ed., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. M. Kramer & J. Murphy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 1999) suggest that communism's death toll during the century was 85–100 million.

⁷ Robert Gilman, "Structural Violence: Can We Find Genuine Peace in a World with Inequitable Distribution of Wealth among Nations?" *In Context* (Aut 1983) 8 <www.miwsr.com/rd/0825.htm>. The author also estimates the number of deaths from structural violence as compared with other types of violent deaths.

primarily from three causes: “ethnic conflict, economic volatility and empires in decline.”⁸ There is also the question of the responsibility of leaders and their publics.

The Public Response

Although the responsibility of leaders like Hitler and Stalin for twentieth-century violence was considerable,⁹ the massive deaths of the century also occurred because millions of people supported or acquiesced in their policies or those of other leaders who gave the orders for large-scale killings. This was especially true in wartime. In the first six months of World War I, for example, there were almost 2 million British volunteers for military service. During World War II, a combined total of more than 1 million Koreans and Taiwanese offered to fight for Japan. As minorities such as Turkish Armenians and European Jews discovered in two world wars, war also often permitted or encouraged atrocities beyond those allowed in peacetime. After attacking eastern Europe, the Nazis often encouraged ethnic hatred not only against Jews, but also, for example, inciting Ukrainians against Poles.

The Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has insisted that a good deal of twentieth-century violence flowed from “the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity,” for example, that of nationality, race, or class. He added that “the art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have.”¹⁰

Except for absolute pacifists, most people justified some killing but condemned the taking of other lives. Such judgments were seldom based on any logically consistent principles such as those enunciated in the Christian theory of a Just War.¹¹ For example, most U.S. citizens condemned any form of communist or terrorist activity that led to deaths, especially that of “innocent civilians,” but were inclined to ignore or justify the massive taking of civilian lives that resulted from Allied bombing, both conventional and nuclear, during World War II. Even before the U.S. nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which immediately or in the aftermath killed a few hundred thousand individuals, massive Allied fire bombing and other non-nuclear bombing had killed a higher total number of people in other cities like Dresden, Hamburg, Darmstadt, and Tokyo.

Contemporary or later arguments by those who maintained that such large-scale killing was unnecessary, that the war could still have been won without such massive deaths, re-

⁸ Niall Ferguson (note 2 supra) xli.

⁹ After examining closely the causes of seven twentieth-century wars, John G. Stoessinger, in *Why Nations Go to War*, 5th ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1990) 209, states that “with regard to the problem of the outbreak of war, the case studies indicate the crucial importance of the personalities of leaders ... [which] have often been decisive.”

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (NY: Norton, 2006) xv. Daniel Chirot & Clark McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All?: The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2006) 81–7, show how labeling or “essentializing” others according to various ethnic, national, and religious categories makes genocidal killing easier.

¹¹ For a brief summary of Just War theory, see Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale U Pr, 2000) 84; also Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. (NY: Basic Books, 2000).

mained largely unexplored by the average American.¹² Part of the reason for this was that deaths of foreigners mattered much less to most people than the deaths of their own citizens. In the United States, the Gulf War of 1991 against Iraq and Saddam Hussein was considered a great success partly because less than 200 American lives were lost. It is difficult to believe that most Americans would have thought the war worth the cost if the price had been thousands or tens of thousands of American lives. Charges that the U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq in the decade after the war led to hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilian deaths, whether true or not, seemed to matter little to most Americans, partly because many of them never heard about such charges.

There are many reasons why the deaths of foreigners or those considered fundamentally different seemed to matter much less to people than the deaths of those more similar. And there are additional reasons that help to explain how individuals from almost all nations at various times in the century were able to justify killing enemies, whether from other nations, classes, religions, or some other criteria of “otherness.” It is natural for people to feel more compassion for those closer to them—for family members, neighbors, or members of a group or nation with whom they identify. In addition, in the case of a nation or state, patriotism and nationalism were often reinforced by education, by media, and by social and cultural rituals such as the singing of national anthems, and, especially in wartime, by government propaganda.

In Nazi Germany and the communist societies of Lenin, Stalin, and the Asian Marxists, control over education and media resources enabled the government to convince many in their societies that “enemies of the people” were deserving of death. In democratic countries that espoused respect for human life and dignity, military training had to overcome resistance to killing; for as Gwynne Dyer has written, “The most important single factor that makes it possible for civilized men to fight the wars of civilization is that all armies everywhere have exploited and manipulated the ingrained warrior ethic that is the heritage of every young human male.”¹³ And in a chapter on military training, especially U.S. Marine training, Dyer indicates how an emphasis on toughness, compliance with orders, peer pressure, and concern for one’s fellow soldiers, can turn a young man (or at least a boy being made into a “man”) into someone who will kill when told to do so. As one U.S. Marine drill instructor stated it about a typical recruit, “I can train that guy; I can get him to do anything I want him to.”¹⁴

Observers as astute as the psychologist William James recognized that military training and wars appealed to positive, as well as negative, human traits. Well before World War I, he called for the creation of a “moral equivalent of war,” for opportunities for people to perform more of the heroic type of actions of war without all the accompanying tragedies of it. To many young men, however, life on the eve of the Great War was still too humdrum,

¹² For a good, recent overview of the decisions to undertake such bombings and a consideration of whether they were morally justified, see Glover (note 11 supra) 69–112.

¹³ Gwynne Dyer, *War* (NY: Crown, 1985) 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110. See also Glover (note 11 supra) 51, on a Soviet soldier serving in Afghanistan during the 1980s who was told that he should become “a bloody-minded brute with an iron fist and no conscience!” John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (NY: Basic Books, 1989) 41–2, comments on the perception before World War I that war was manly.

too unheroic; and because we know of the horror that followed we read with sadness lines such as those written by the poet Rupert Brooke upon the outbreak of the war:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping

The carnage of World War I, however, punctured such romanticism. English poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and the German novelist Erich Maria Remarque, all of whom served in the war, captured some of the disillusionment brought by the war in their writings. One of Owen's finest poems, "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1917), ends this way:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

The Latin words (trans. "it is sweet and honorable to die for one's country") he ended his poem with were from the poet Horace and were taught to many British schoolboys. Captain Owen was machine-gunned to death a week before the war ended on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month of 1918. One hour later, with bells still ringing in celebration, his parents received the telegram informing them of their son's death.

Like some pre-war poetry, however, many later films again romanticized war. In 1977 Philip Caputo recalled how as a young college student in 1960 he enrolled in a Marine Officer Training Program partly as a result of the romantic heroism of such war movies as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), and *Retreat, Hell!* (1952). He explained his motivation as such: "The heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary.... Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest I

needed to prove something—my courage, my toughness, my manhood.”¹⁵ After being sent to Vietnam and soon realizing that “both we and the Viet Cong began to make a habit of atrocities,” he no longer saw combat in such romantic terms.¹⁶

Other Vietnam veterans also recalled the impact of films about World War II, especially the very popular *To Hell and Back* (1955), starring Audie Murphy and based on the autobiography of this war hero turned actor. Both Ron Kovic, in his *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), and Lieutenant William Calley, court-martialed for the Vietnam atrocity My Lai, mentioned Murphy’s influence on their desire to fight in Vietnam. During the 1991 Gulf War, decorated combat veteran Colonel David Hackworth observed of Western troops, “Hollywood completely colors their way of seeing war.”¹⁷

In almost all cases of wars and atrocities, the enemy was depicted as less human by the use of derogatory terms. The Nazis equated the Jews with all sorts of subhuman creatures from rats to lice, and some Japanese publications depicted the British and Americans as beasts. One Japanese officer during the “Rape of Nanking,” was quoted as saying: “I regard them [the Chinese] as swine. We can do anything to such creatures.”¹⁸ But racist images also were common among the Allied powers during World War II. In the United States and Great Britain, some people referred to the Japanese as little or yellow monkeys. The U.S. war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who covered the war in the Pacific wrote, “Out here I soon gathered that the Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive; the way some people feel about cockroaches or mice.”¹⁹ During the Vietnam War, Americans commonly referred to the Viet Cong as “gooks.” As one sergeant testified: “[Our] colonels called them gooks, the staff all called them gooks. They were dinks, you know, subhuman.”²⁰

Even when the enemy was not of a different race but of a different class or religion, the same type of dehumanization made it easier to kill. In early 1918 a communist was mistakenly killed in the Soviet city of Saratov because he was wearing a fashionable suit and mistaken for a *burzhui* (a term of abuse for the bourgeoisie). Glasses also made a person suspect. And clean fingernails and uncalloused hands got some people shot by the Reds during the civil war. Sergei Kirov, a future communist leader whom Stalin perceived as a challenger to his own power, called the leaders of the civil war’s White Forces “lice”; and in the 1930s Soviet prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky spewed forth the following during Moscow trials of some of the most important accused enemies of Stalin: “Shoot these rabid dogs . . . Down with that vulture Trotsky . . . Down with these abject animals! Let us put an end once and for all to these miserable hybrids of foxes and pigs, these stinking corpses! Let their horrible squeals finally come to an end! Let’s exterminate the mad dogs of capitalism.”²¹

¹⁵ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War: With a Twentieth Anniversary Postscript by the Author* (NY: Holt, 1996) 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁷ Quoted in Michael Evans, “The Serpent’s Eye: The Cinema of 20th-Century Combat,” *Military Review* (Nov/Dec 2002) 87 <www.miwsr.com/rd/0826.htm>.

¹⁸ Ferguson (note 2 supra) 477.

¹⁹ Cited in Glover (note 11 supra) 176.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 50, quoting Robert J. Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, neither Victims nor Executioners* (NY: Basic Books, 1985) 202.

²¹ Quoted in Courtois (note 6 supra) 750.

Among those dehumanized by Lenin and his successors were any labeled bourgeoisie, capitalists, counterrevolutionaries, kulaks, or enemies of the people. Such labeling made easier Stalin's demand in 1929 that the kulaks be "liquidated as a class." Writer Vasily Grossman described how Communist Party activists in Ukraine "looked on the so-called "kulaks" as cattle, swine, loathsome, repulsive: they had no souls; they stank; they all had venereal diseases; they were enemies of the people.... What torture was meted out to them! In order to massacre them, it was necessary to proclaim that kulaks are not human beings." But Grossman also indicated other factors that helped cause the killings, for example Party people's anxiety to please their superiors or gain personally from confiscating kulak property.²²

Overwhelmingly killings and terrorist acts were committed by people who thought their beliefs justified what they were doing. The ideas of nineteenth-century thinkers like Marx (1818–83), Darwin (1809–82), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), as well as racist, nationalist, and imperialist ideas were often used, properly or improperly, to justify such killings. So too, but to a lesser extent, were religious ideas. In the Western press in the final decades of the century, there was much talk of "militant Islam" or "Islamic terrorists," but most Muslims did not advocate terrorism, and individuals from other religions also advocated or practiced terrorism. They included (among many others) Catholics who worked within the IRA, Protestants who bombed abortion clinics in the United States; Hindus in India who attacked Muslims; and the Jewish student of religious law who thought he was acting "on God's orders" when he assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 because of Rabin's peace plans. Yet the communist leaders, who were responsible for the greatest number of mass killings in the century, were all committed atheists who persecuted religion. Although the Nazis did not preach atheism, Hitler "was passionately hostile to Christianity" and, like Nietzsche, thought it was begun by Jews in an attempt to aid slaves to overthrow their Roman rulers.²³ Jonathan Glover, who identified himself as one who does "not believe in a religious moral law," (i.e., any moral law dictated by traditional religion), nevertheless recognized that many of the century's protests against atrocities came from religious people.²⁴

Glover began his book *Humanity*,²⁵ which is essentially an analysis of twentieth century wars and atrocities from an ethical perspective, with a section on Nietzsche. The latter predicted that morality based on traditional religious beliefs would gradually disappear. Glover stated that the century has generally moved in that direction and that the challenge for people at the end of the century was to create a humanized ethics. He added that when "there is no external moral law, morality needs to be humanized: to be rooted in human needs and human values."²⁶

²² *Forever Flowing*, trans. T.P. Whitney (NY: Harper, 1972) 142–4.

²³ Glover (note II supra) 355.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 405. Some religious thinkers like Michael Novak believe that religion contributes to respect for human rights and that if you "take away the immortality of the soul ... it is difficult to establish the dignity of man any higher than that of any other animal." See his *The Universal Hunger for Liberty* (NY: Basic Books, 2004) 145.

²⁵ Note II supra.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 406.

Besides beliefs and ideas mattering, technology also played a role in making killing easier. The dropping of bombs, for example, not only made it possible to kill more people, but also depersonalized the killing. Those dropping the bombs did not have to view the blood their bombs spilled or the limbs they tore asunder. Furthermore the bureaucracy and complexity of modern states and warfare helped dilute feelings of personal responsibility for the deaths of those considered “enemies of the people” or government.

A similar lack of responsibility was felt by many people in regard to the structural violence inflicted on the world’s impoverished people. One humanitarian who observed first-hand the consequences of such violence believed there were at least three reasons for this relative indifference: 1) the suffering of its victims was too psychologically and culturally remote from the experiences of many people in wealthier parts of the world; 2) the vastness of the problem, often conveyed in facts and statistics, made it difficult to appreciate the individual suffering it entailed; and 3) “the dynamics and distribution of suffering [caused by structural violence] are still poorly understood.” This same observer believed that much of this suffering resulted from denying poor people the fruits of scientific and technological progress.²⁷

²⁷ Paul Farmer, from Chap. 1 of *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: U California Pr, 2003) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0827.htm>.