

Perpetrators' fear as a causative factor of genocides

Introduction

'How reasonable is it to believe that there are enough such beasts distributed throughout society to account for the extraordinary human evil that has littered our history?' asked genocide scholar James Waller. The unpleasant truth we should face is that genocides are often committed by 'ordinary people' such as ourselves. My research sought for an explanation for this situation by suggesting that a considerable proportion of both the societies, from which perpetrators were recruited, and the perpetrators themselves were to an extent frightened. In order to prove my hypothesis, I have considered the impact of fear on the societies and on some of the executioners in four case studies: the Armenian, Jewish, Cambodian and Rwandan genocides.



One of numerous 'killing fields' of Cambodia



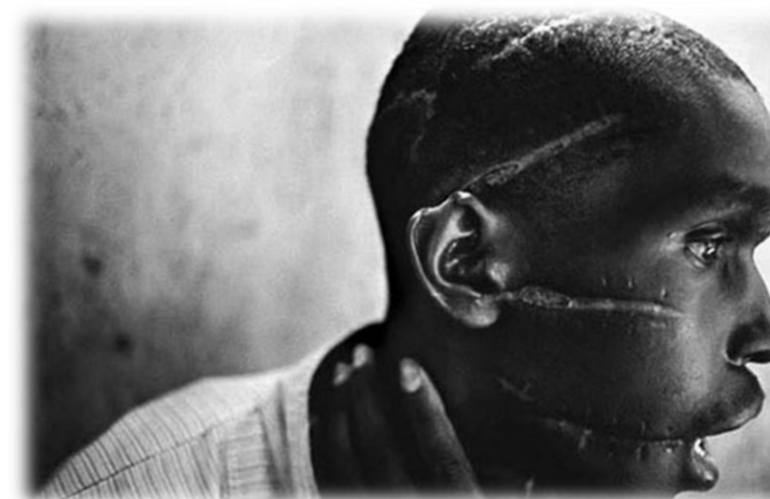
German soldier about to execute a young Jew

Fear during genocide

The executioners are usually recruited in a rather organised manner with clear hierarchy and chain of command. Furthermore, those groups often included people of extreme cruelty and ruthlessness. Those, who had a choice and had not killed, were considered weak and were becoming increasingly isolated within own group that comprised of numerous mass murderers. The others, who had been ordered to kill, were in even worse situation since their disobedience could have resulted in being accused of treason and subsequent death. Nonetheless, it is depressing that killing tens, or hundreds of people is apparently easier than following one's conscience regardless of the consequences.

Methods

In order to prove the hypothesis I analysed variety of resources related to four case studies. The primary sources I used included the resources of State Archive on the site of former Nazi concentration camp, Majdanek, major speeches of Adolf Hitler, excerpts from the programmes of Rwandan 'hate-radio' - the RTLM. Furthermore, the research took into account numerous articles by scholars specialising in the genocide studies as well as other publications related to the topic.



A victim of Rwandan genocide



Death of an Armenian child at Aleppo desert

Limitations

The research was, admittedly, very narrow with a clear aim of suggesting a fresh perspective on genocide studies. Due to breadth of the topic, the use of resources was highly selective, and perhaps inadequate. However, in order to prove the role of fear beyond any doubt, one would probably need to communicate in Turkish, Armenian, German, Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Khmer, and Kinyarwanda. Not to mention reading and analysing the resources of gathered by innumerable sites of mass-murders, archives, and perhaps personal diaries.

Fear prior to genocide

Under normal circumstances, an attempt to perform a genocide would probably cause enormous public outrage. In order to proceed, the organisers should therefore justify their actions in a manner that would calm down most citizens. The basis for their arguments might be found in stereotypical perception of minorities that became the victims. Long-term cultural background may be linked with nation's modern history and used to present the victims as dangerous, despite their harmless appearance. Such a standpoint may be promoted with use of the official propaganda as in the Third Reich, or mass media as in Rwanda. In both cases, the dramatic impact of modern technology on public opinion could have been felt.



Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels



Cambodians imprisoned in Tuol Seng (T-21)

Conclusion

My primary goal, similarly to most genocide scholars was to prevent future genocides. It cannot be said that my way of thinking was entirely new or that distinguished scholars utterly neglected the issue, however, it was my impression that its preventive potential was a little underestimated. My research demonstrated that perpetrators and their societies can be manipulated with use of fear. It is my firm conviction that it might be used to develop this branch of genocide studies and perhaps save lives in the future.



Paweł Pujszo
Supervisor: prof. Christopher Read
History Department