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**Book Review: Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Worse than War:
Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity**

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Book Review

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity*. New York: Public Affairs, 2009. Pp. 672, paper. \$29.95 US.

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For many decades, scholars and practitioners have been preoccupied with whether or not genocide and systematic human destruction can be contained and subsequently eliminated from the future narrative of humanity. With indelible imagery and exploration, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has compiled an impassioned study of mass murder and the systematic slaughter of human beings in his 2009 book, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity*.

Goldhagen establishes a clear argument that human destruction is not beyond our control, and he maintains that the perpetrators of atrocities are not natural killers. While exploring why some people choose to become cold-blooded killers while others do not, Goldhagen presciently shifts the focus of the ongoing debate about genocide and mass slaughter to “understand[ing] its causes, its nature and complexity, and its scope and systematic quality” (xi–xii). Goldhagen applies his theory that perpetrators of recent massacres are not just “normal” individuals but rather people who are all too eager and willing to perform the heinous task of killing their own.

The premise of Goldhagen’s theory is applied to the 1994 Rwandan massacre by Hutu of Tutsi, the Serbian-sanctioned genocide of Muslims and Croats in the aftermath of the state dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the Indonesian slaughter of Communists during the 1960s, the murderous campaign undertaken by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the extermination of some 200,000 indigenous Maya and leftists in Guatemala between 1978 and 1984, the massacre of Marsh Arabs and Kurds during the 1980s in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and to a corpus of “eliminationist” and genocidal campaigns across the African continent to the present day.

Divided into eleven chapters, and dealing with the multifaceted phenomenon of new perspectives on arcane preconceptions and debates about eliminationist politics, actions, and discourse, Goldhagen’s study centrally explores the notion that the expression of hatred toward the symbol of one’s putative enemies leads to a struggle to establish not only physical mastery, but also emotional and moral mastery that breeds a cycle of fury and, ultimately, destructive rage. His examples demonstrate how individuals and groups establish and subsequently surpass previously established baselines for brutality and murderousness.

As part of his case studies, Goldhagen conducts interviews with Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State; Francis Deng, UN Special Advisor for the Prevention of Genocide, and Clint Williamson, US Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues. His consultations reveal the political, social, and cultural impasses associated with the task of preventing genocide at the same time that he attempts to apply the difficult lessons learned from past atrocities around the world.

In Africa, Goldhagen interacts with perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide to discuss their willful participation in acts of extreme violence that left thousands brutally killed and thousands more emotionally brutalized. Minister of Justice Tharcisse Karugarama discusses not only perpetrator motivation and willingness, but also the international community's inability and unwillingness to prevent other governments around the world from undertaking genocide as a domestic policy that seeks to quell civil discontent and political rivalry. One highly significant question thus posed is "how can we prevent other countries from suffering the same or a similar fate?"

In another country, thousands of miles from Rwanda, Goldhagen explores the concept of "overkill" with one of Guatemala's leading forensic pathologists. Those interviewed demonstrate that many cases of excessive violence are readily discoverable among the remains of the country's genocide victims. Their examinations expose the harsh reality of how hatred is channeled to inflict offensive and often lethal wounds against even the most helpless of victims, including children and pregnant women. Commenting on Guatemala's genocidal history is former President José Efraín Ríos Montt, who held power during the barbarous events that took place during the 1980s.

While in Bosnia and attending the annual commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide (which took place in 1995 and resulted in the slaughter of more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys—the greatest example of mass killing in European history since those enacted by the Nazis and Soviets during the Second World War), Goldhagen talks with Haris Silajdžić, a member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, about the issue of pressuring external actors to involve themselves in the veritable genocide and sociocide that ravaged Bosnia's social landscape.

Asserting that each and every individual, institution, and government in all corridors of the globe has the capacity to make choices, Goldhagen explains,

We can persist in our malign neglect that consists of three parts: failing to face the problem squarely and to understand the real nature of genocide; failing to recognize we can far more effectively protect hundreds of millions of people and radically reduce mass murder's incidence; and failing to choose to act on this knowledge. (xi)

Through his extraordinary encounters and case studies, Goldhagen demonstrates that the world's most egregious atrocities, mass murders, and acts of evil are products of acceptance by average people and leaders alike who allow such profligacy to occur and continue unabated. To exclude the motivations of mass murderers and eliminationists is to commit a most serious oversight that allows for the continuation of heinous crimes against humanity. "Until recently, the rare analysis of mass-murder that focuses on the perpetrators' conduct addressed only the killing itself," Goldhagen writes (145). "Such omissions," according to the author, "produce faulty depictions, conclusions, and explanations of the perpetrators' actions, and false understandings of the broader events—renderings that bear only a caricatured relationship to the actual horrors and their commission" (145). Accordingly, greater attention, it is argued, should be paid to the perpetrators and their actions and not solely to the victims' experiences. Through his investigation of why perpetrators act, Goldhagen demonstrates that widespread reflexive assumptions have been the primary force behind the portrait that we have produced about the topic of genocide and systematic human destruction. In other words, as Goldhagen puts it, "there is no pressing reason to investigate something that seemed so obvious," (145).

Goldhagen also sets the Holocaust within the larger context of genocidal massacres recurring across the globe and throughout history. Though he underscores the intensive murderousness toward Jews and other human targets of the Nazi system, Goldhagen demonstrates that the Germans' mass annihilation and eliminationist system prefigure subsequent systems of human destruction. He argues that "because [such acts] are purposeful and discretionary political acts, such systems' variable overall destructiveness needs to be explained rather than ignored" (376). The institutions associated with the Holocaust and the distributive killing enacted by the Nazi regime represent a model of further eliminationist political systems in world history, not a progenitor of newer systems of destruction and annihilation but a microcosm *per se*.

By looking at five systems with sustained eliminationist orientation and programs, Goldhagen makes an unearthing exploration of their techniques and degrees of lethal acts. Goldhagen concludes that regimes—that is, Communist China, Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Khmer Rouge's—"murderousness [is no less] murderous than the murderousness of others, or their victims' deaths [are not] any less morally condemnable, significant, or meaningful" (379). While each atrocity resembles the others, the underlying difference is in the application of ideology.

Looking at both the merciless acts of the perpetrators as well as the abject outcome for their victims, Goldhagen's study itself falls victim to generalizations, abstractions, and discriminatory analysis. For example, he characterizes Nazi brutality toward Jews and other so-called *Untermenschen*, as, "the Germans' hallucinatory sense of endangerment" (473). Goldhagen thus fails to discriminate appropriately between those consciously involved in heinous killings and those operating willingly as ideological persons carrying out the policies of an elite few. From academic cherry-picking, and practicing poor history, to his disingenuous approach to such issues as the Israeli treatment of Palestinian Arabs, Goldhagen's work requires cautious consideration from a great many angles. In spite of its well-deserved praise, *Worse than War* is a highly repetitive and verbose piece of literature that, while posing some most crucial questions that address genocide and human annihilation, fails to produce solutions or provide answers to the questions so readily preached in this work. Some may find this scholarly inquiry more akin to a tedious moralizing lecture or admonition. Notwithstanding Goldhagen's inadequate solutions, the author deserves accolades in good measure for providing another source of support for the need to remain cognizant about the glaring acts of genocide that many so sightlessly dismiss or fail to acknowledge.

The penultimate section of Goldhagen's book outlines and presents measures, short of war, to which societies around the world can resort that will help abolish genocide from our global society. Highly platitudinal, Goldhagen's recommendations are ultimately, if regrettably, exalted and self-evident. The question of competency thus falls on the concept of international law as a mechanism through which genocide may conceivably be stopped. For as much repute as is placed in the force of international law, an equally measurable degree of discredit must also be cast against it. Goldhagen calls for the formulation of an international anti-eliminationist organization that would dispense preference to "real" democratic states in an effort to buttress the reforms needed in international law to achieve the desired means against genocide and mass killing.

Goldhagen's sense of urgency leads to the assertion that genocides and genocidal massacres are not unavoidable, nor do they exemplify themselves as inexplicable phenomena. To the contrary, Goldhagen repeatedly emphasizes the point that such

atrocities are events that never occur *ex tempora*. He contends that the international community possesses the capacity to do something about them and, if not to eliminate the impetus of eliminationism, then at least to make the world a relatively harmonious place. In this vein, Goldhagen does not recognize the international community's progress and positive steps in facing genocide.

Indeed, the United Nations assails itself of the unfair judgments cast against it by Goldhagen in his work, particularly through the set of principles adopted by the Organization's Security Council known as the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P. This document states that the international community has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian, and other peaceful means to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Though the praxis of the doctrine has yet to be measurably visible, nations' inaction on this front speaks clearly to the feasibility of the establishment of an organization of democracies dedicated to an interventionist *modus operandi*.

Far from being the most important political book published or even a highly necessary read for either politicians or political leaders, *Worse than War* exemplifies the idea that in spite of our effort—or our worst efforts, or no effort at all—the occurrence and intensity of genocide has exponentially heightened beyond imaginable bounds. Nevertheless, Goldhagen's work contributes to the corpus of genocide literature and should compel us to act in the best interest of "Never Again," lest we continue as complacent and apathetic beings content to live out genocide after genocide.