

Book Review: Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel Charny, eds. *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*

Samuel M. Edelman

Abstract.

Century of Genocide begins with the words “Will the killing ever stop?”. This is a profound question, as is the answer. In seventeen chapters and an introduction, the answer is clearly No. For any one interested in providing their students with a comprehensive understanding of genocide in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this book is an excellent resource.

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Book Review

Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel Charny, eds.
***Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, 2nd ed.**
New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. 532, paper. \$26.95 US.

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Century of Genocide begins with the words “Will the killing ever stop?”. This is a profound question, as is the answer. In seventeen chapters and an introduction, the answer is clearly *No*. For any one interested in providing their students with a comprehensive understanding of genocide in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this book is an excellent resource.

In this single text, the reader can move from the genocide against the Hereros in Southwest Africa to discussions of the Armenians; the Ukrainians and genocide in the former Soviet Union; the targeting of Jews, Gypsies, and disabled people during the Shoah; the Tutsis in Rwanda and Hutus in Burundi; the Cambodians; massacres and genocide in Indonesia and East Timor; genocide against Kurds in Iraq and Sudanese Muslims in Darfur; and genocides perpetrated against various indigenous peoples.

The foreword by Israel Charny makes a sensitive and passionate statement about genocide and its implications for many groups beyond the survivors of various genocides. Charny speaks about learning to care about human life. This concept of developing genuine and mutual respect and caring as foundations for human behavior is in direct opposition to those who preach tolerance but do not practice it. Clearly Charny’s work in the foreword to this text sets the tone of the book and gives us a sense of its direction.

The introduction by Samuel Totten and William Parsons integrates the ideas and concepts developed in the foreword and goes on to set out the parameters for the discussion in the rest of the text. Most important, though, is the authors’ outline for a campaign against genocide. Totten and Parsons set out a program for the scholarly study of genocide while also addressing the need for the financing and implementing a global genocide prevention and intervention effort (including an effective genocide early warning system) and the creation of more robust structures for educating about genocide.

Chapters 1 to 14, each focusing on a specific genocide (e.g., the Ottoman Turk genocide of the Armenians; the Khmer Rouge–perpetrated Cambodian genocide; the extremist Hutu genocide of the Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda), are written by well-known scholars. The critical essays that begin each chapter provide the context for the genocide, while the second part of each chapter comprises a compendium of eyewitness accounts relating to the specific genocide under discussion. Each chapter is similarly structured, so that there is a strong sense of internal consistency throughout the book. This new edition also includes maps of each of the genocides discussed.

Chapter 15—Martin Mennecke’s “Genocide in Kosovo?”—is also new to the second edition. This is an important chapter because it confronts the issue of whether or not the events that took place in Kosovo represent a true genocide. Mennecke’s discussion

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is comprehensive and well developed in its presentation of the issues surrounding Kosovo.

Chapters 16 and 17, though, offer students of genocide critically important insights; these two chapters make this edition a must for anyone teaching or learning about genocide. Jerry Fowler's "Out of the Darkness" documents his years of work for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Committee on Conscience, discovering and calling world attention to newly developing genocides. This chapter gets us into the Darfur situation, as well as other potential genocides, and shows the importance of genocide early warning systems in the modern world. Chapter 17 by Samuel Totten, on intervention and prevention, is a significant corollary to Fowler's work. Totten gives us, in a clearly written and well-argued text, the problems and possibilities of genocide intervention and prevention. He shows us the structural problems, as well as the problem of lack of political will to deal with genocide intervention and prevention; but he also shows us ways in which we can have an impact. From individuals to groups to nations, people can have an impact on genocide and, indeed, can change the world—but it is, and will be, a struggle.

In the end, that is what this book is about: the struggle to bring about significant and profound global change in fighting to end the scourge of genocide in our time. That is not an easy thing to do, and this is not an easy book to read. Nevertheless, it is a must read.