

Global Peace Services USA

...an idea whose time has come

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Greetings from John Eriksson, President, GPS USA.

This issue of the GPS Newsletter features two articles delving into actual examples of genocide: typically state-sponsored violence intended to brutally and systematically eliminate a particular ethnic or religious group when the victimized group has not taken arms except in its own defense.

*In the first article, GPS is pleased and honored to publish an essay by Nisan Ahmado, who has written a fascinating first person summary of the history, religion and culture of the Yazidi ethnic minority, centered in northern Iraq and southern Syria, as well as a wrenching account of the atrocities suffered by the Yazidis at the genocidal hands of ISIS in 2014: "Yazidis Beyond Genocide." Nisan writes from the perspective of a Yazidi woman, so her beautiful account of Yazidi rural life in better times and the subsequent deprivations is particularly moving and poignant. She is currently working as an Analyst assigned to the Extremism Watch Desk at Voice of America. Among her accomplishments, Nisan is a contributing writer to the anthology: *Demanding Dignity: Young Voices from the Front Lines of the Arab Revolutions*. She holds a bachelor of English Literature from Damascus University.*

The second article is a revealing comparative analysis by Robert Muscat of a number of well-known genocides: "Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, Mass Atrocity: Rational Policy, or Folly?" The author asks a different question from the focus of most genocide analyses: namely, whether the perpetrators achieved any of their purposes, including economic and political conquest as well as decimation of the targeted group, typically an ethnic and/or religious minority. The answer often is negative. In fact, the perpetrators may suffer not only defeat, but virtual extinction, themselves. Muscat identifies several warning signs in some countries that without adequate domestic and international attention, the forces that led to genocide in the first place could again pose a serious threat. Robert Muscat, a GPS Board Member, is based in Sarasota, FL. He writes on problems of conflict and peace-building, drawing on his long experience as an economist for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and consultant to the World Bank, United Nations specialized agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

In recent news of GPS, thanks to the work of Robert Muscat and GPS Vice President, Mindy Reiser, Global Peace Services shared its perspectives on peacebuilding at the April 14th panel, "Frontiers of Education," as part of the conference on "Frontiers of Prevention" organized by the Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention at Binghamton University, State University of New York. This inaugural conference by the new Institute, brought together invited panelists from the academic and practitioner worlds in the US and overseas to Binghamton, New

York on April 13-14 to explore the roots of genocide and mass atrocity and share innovative strategies to address and counter the forces leading to such devastating human consequences.

In order to continue and expand our current work, such as the GPS Newsletter, so that we can continue putting out our newsletter, with essays and articles readers are unlikely to find elsewhere and hold special events, such as the December panel on the Colombia Peace Process, we do need greater resources. Please consider making as generous a tax-deductible contribution as you can to GPS. This may be done by mailing a check to the postal address shown above or through our website www.globalpeaceservices.org. Phone: 301-681-6968.

Yazidis Beyond Genocide

I always remember that day in my childhood when I was playing in my grandfather's orchard in my village Basofan in the Afrin district, north Syria. I picked a sharp rock from the ground and scratched the bark of an olive tree. When my grandfather saw what I did, he scolded me for injuring the innocent tree. My grandfather, a Yazidi Kurdish farmer who loved his trees and horses, left an undeniable mark on my appreciation and respect for nature.

The world came to know Yazidis after the horrid massacre committed against them in 2014 by ISIS, the Islamic terrorist group. Beyond sorrow and pain, beauty and authenticity must linger in memory and Yazidis must not be remembered as only victims, but as curators of one unique human heritage.

My ancestral village was surrounded by olive trees, fig trees and wheat fields and all its residents, women and men, worked in farming. My grandfather loved his olive trees. I remember during the summers that I spent there; we used to wake up with sunrise, wrap some food in a cloth, tie it like a bag and head out to care for our land.

There were only two grocery stores in the village selling refreshments and canned products. Most of the people ate from what they planted and made their own dairy products. The harvest during summer was a time for preparing and storing food to survive the harsh winter. The harvest is a time of celebration; large pots of boiled wheat were set

around the village where people took their bowls for a meal of cooked wheat and sugar.

There was only one elementary school in the village; children who wanted to continue their education to higher levels had to commute to bigger towns, mainly the town of Afrin about 11 miles away. The much larger city of Aleppo was about 32.9 miles from Basofan. Residents used to travel to the main bigger towns to buy clothes and furniture.

Before 2011, Basofan was inhabited by 2000 people – most of whom fled the war in Syria to Germany. The village name, from Basufan – literally, the House of Sufis – is believed to recall the Yazidi Sufi worshippers living in the village. The area is full of historical artifacts and the village is the closest to a famous archeological site, the Church of Saint Simeon, which dates to the fifth century and is one of the oldest surviving church complexes.

Who are the Yazidis?

Yazidis, also pronounced Ezidis to differentiate them from the Yazidi sect of Islam, are an ethno-religious group inhabiting several countries in the Middle East, with fewer numbers in Eurasia. Yazidis are members of the Kurdish ethnic group. The largest Yazidis community lies in Iraq where about 400,000 Yazidis live.

Yazidism is an ancient religion that is considered one of the last remains of what is known as a

“Natural Religion,” which considers everything in the natural world a manifestation of God. Yazidis are monotheists believing in the one God. Some researchers say Yazidism weaves influences from various religions like Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Such an approach is always denied by Yazidis.

The word Yazidi is derived from the Persian word Yazad (Divine Being). Yazidis strongly dispute the research claims made by some scholars connecting them to the Islamic Umayyad Caliph Yazid Bin Muawiyah, whose reign lasted between 680 until his death in 683. A supreme spiritual leader called Emir represents the Yazidi community in matters of states and tribes. The Emirs usually share the same family lineage. The current Yazidi Emir is Tahseen Saeed (born in 1933) who inherited his title and responsibilities after the death of his father. Emir Tahseen currently resides in the Shekhan district in Iraq.

It is difficult to determine a precise chronological line for Yazidi history due to their status as a small marginalized minority, and because of their hostile surroundings, they had to pass on their teachings and heritage verbally to avoid persecution in case their writings and books fell into the wrong hands.

Religion and Books

There are two holy books belonging to the Yazidi religion; both are based on Yazidi teachings passed on by oral tradition from one generation to the next. The first is *Keteba Jelwa* (The Book of Revelations), and the other is *Meshefa reş* (The Black Book). *Keteba Jelwa*, believed to be written by a revered historic Yazidi religious leader Adi bin Musafer (the earthly representation of the archangel Tawoosy Malik). Both books are very concise explanations of the main commands and the story of creation. The two books also provide guidance to refrain from committing bad deeds such as lying, cheating, corruption and stealing, and an emphasis on doing good deeds.

Yazidis revere the light, with the sun as one of the most sacred symbols in the Yazidi religion. The sun is a manifestation of God's power. When

praying to God, Yazidis face the sun and recite their prayers. As everything is part of God, then nothing really dies. Reincarnation is a fundamental Yazidi belief. The soul leaves its earthly body, travels to its home among the stars and wanders there for a while, then returns to earth to inhabit another body.

One of the main reasons behind the persecution of Yazidis is accusing them of being devil worshippers. This is because of the different accounts of the story of the fallen angel who is called Iblis in Islam and Tawoosy Malik in Yazidism. The story starts the same way: When Adam was created, God ordered all angels to kneel to Adam. In Islam, one of the angels was prevented by jealousy and ego from obeying God's order, and he was banished from heaven as a punishment. Yazidi's story goes a different way. The angel Tawoosy Malik (Peacock Angel) passed the test by refusing to kneel to anyone other than God, and his independence and strength were rewarded by making him the superior king and entrusting him to take care of the affairs of all creation as God's deputy in the universe.

Yazidis believe that God exists in everything, and all creatures are parts of the grand soul. Every creature is part of the whole, and because everything is holy, Yazidis respect and praise all creation. They do not believe that evil exists as it is, nor do humans incited by a spirit or a devil commit evil actions. Human beings, in Yazidi teachings, are responsible for their bad deeds. As for the good deeds, all good springs from God.

Lalish, the main Yazidi holy temple, is in Sinjar valley in northern Iraq. It was built over a spring called the Holy White Spring. The temple is located in a village carrying the same name and believed to have been built in the period of ancient Sumerian and other early Mesopotamian civilizations about 4000 years ago. Yazidis must make a pilgrimage to Lalish at least once in their lifetimes.

Traditions and Culture

The Yazidi year is full of festive celebrations. The New Year, called *Charsema Sor* (Red Wednesday), is celebrated in the first Wednesday in April. It marks the day when Tawoosy Malik descended to earth and started life with all its manifestations. As a part of the Kurdish ethnic group Yazidis also celebrate Newroz (the Kurdish New Year) which coincides with Spring Equinox on the 20 of March. Most of the celebrations include going out to nature to sing, dance and meet the community.

Fasting occurs three times during the year, spiritual leaders fast many times during the year. Children are baptized and some boys are circumcised, although circumcision is not required.

Folk tales revive around concepts of courage, nobility, loyalty to kin, defying tyranny, love and harmony with the natural world. One of the most famous folktales in Yazidi heritage is the tragedy of Darwish Afdi, a brave noble man who fought and died in a grinding war to be with his beloved.

The Genocide

In August 2014, the Islamic State (variously called ISIS or ISIL) attacked the Yazidi-populated Sinjar Mountain, killing thousands of men and taking thousands of women and girls as sex slaves.

Many families fled to an arid Sinjar mountain with only their clothes on their backs, wandering thirsty and hungry under the scorching sun of August. Thousands of women and girls, as young as nine, were taken to slave markets, mainly in the former self-proclaimed capital of ISIS, called Raqqa, in northwest Syria, liberated in 2017.

The Yazidis massacre was one of two reasons for the U.S.-led military operation in Iraq, during the presidency of Barack Obama, which targeted the Islamic State in in August 2014 – the first offensive action by the U.S. in Iraq since it withdrew ground troops in 2011. President Obama explained the American actions in Iraq as "Targeted airstrikes to protect our American personnel, and a humanitarian effort to help save

thousands of Iraqi civilians who are trapped on a mountain without food and water and facing almost certain death."

As a marginalized and small group, Yazidis took refuge in mountains where they worked in farming. Yazidis consider the 2014 attack one of 74 genocides in their history. Yazidis call a genocide against them a *Faraman*, a Turkish word for decision. The Faramans directly called for targeting the Yazidis, confiscating their possessions and taking their women. Many massacres against Yazidis took place following official Faramans issued by Ottoman Sultans – such as the Faramans by Ottoman Sultan Sulaiman Al Qannuni in 1507, and those issued during the rule of the Persian Empire, beginning in 1630, over land settled by the Yazidis. The massacres continued to our modern age.

In 2007, four suicide bombs were detonated in the Yazidi community in the towns of Qahtaniyah and Jazeera near Mosul in Iraq. This attack was the deadliest during Iraqi War. About 800 people were killed and almost 1,500 were wounded. The violent attacks targeting Yazidis degraded their trust in neighboring communities, and now many of them want tangible guarantees of protection. Yazidis also formed their own armed guerillas so they will be able to defend themselves.

Yazidi religion calls for tolerance and living in harmony with humans and nature. Despite the violent attacks on the Yazidi community, its religious leadership called on all Yazidis to refrain from vengeance and rely instead on local and international courts to punish the criminals. Many voices from the Yazidi community called for coexistence with neighboring communities. Yazidi spiritual leadership always called for uprooting hatred, staying away from violence and building bridges with neighbors.

Yazidi spiritual leadership called upon the community to welcome and embrace women who survived the grip of the Islamic State. These women had been raped, tortured and forced to convert to Islam. Until the present, hundreds of women are still missing.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UHCHR) designated the persecution of Yazidis as a genocide. However, the prosecution of the criminals is hindered by bureaucratic procedures, as the Iraqi government has not submitted necessary paperwork to the United Nations Security Council to initiate legal processes.

In 2018, my ancestral village in northern Syria was taken by Turkish-backed forces during a Turkish military operation which targeted the district of Afrin, Turkey was going after the People's Protection Units group (YPG) which Turkey considers a group affiliated with the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), a group outlawed by Turkey, the US and Canada.

The attack on Afrin displaced thousands of people. A mix of ethnicities, religions and refugees lived for years in peaceful Afrin during seven years of the ongoing Syrian war. Yazidis and other minorities in the area pleaded in vain, and once more, they fled a looming genocide.

My village Basofan, one of the few Yazidi villages in the Afrin district, was deserted by most its residents. A few seniors refused to leave their homes, one was my grandmother. As I was writing this piece, I just learned that my 93-year-old grandmother died in my grandfather's home. His orchard today exists as luminous guidance in my life.

✿ Nisan Ahmado

Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, Mass Atrocity: Rational Policy, or Folly?

Introduction

In the past century, technologies for large-scale murder and for enflaming the minds of potential killers have enabled perpetrators to inspire slaughtering and ethnic cleansing of huge numbers of non-combatants. Despite punitive international conventions, new genocides and mass atrocities (GMAs) continue to occur. An array of scholars, institutes, and conflict-resolution organizations has emerged to study GMAs and devise methods to settle conflicts and to prevent emergence of GMAs.

One perspective appears (surprisingly) to have been neglected: Do GMAs accomplish their strategic objectives? Have GMAs achieved the ends for which they were intended as means? Their objectives included "purifying" the perpetrating society by eliminating an alleged source of biological or cultural contamination; ensuring the domination of the perpetrating (ethnic, national, etc.) group; identity homogeneity; or political, economic, and/or military consolidation or expansion. In fact, history shows that some GMAs have been

delusional, reckless, and self-defeating: in short, folly. A few thumbnail sketches will illustrate the point. GMAs can lead to results the opposite of those intended by the perpetrators.

Nazi Germany: Defeated by Genocide?

Historians of World War II cite many reasons why Germany lost: e.g. turning-point battles; overextension on the Eastern front; Hitler's decision to declare war on the U.S. after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, enabling Roosevelt to devote major resources to the war in Europe. At bottom, Germany and Japan misjudged American industrial capacity and political will to respond. The Allies' material and manpower advantages more than offset Allied mistakes.

One further Nazi error – which, if avoided, could have offset all the Nazi mistakes and Allied advantages – was the failure to develop a nuclear weapon. The failure was partly due to the anti-Semitic measures that forced the country's Jewish physicists (one fourth of all Germany's physicists) to flee. Other reasons cited for this failure include the destruction of Norway's "heavy water"

production; errors by the remaining physicists; and the post-war claims by remaining physicists von Weiszacker and Hiesenberg that they deliberately thwarted the effort. In a remark of singular stupidity, Hitler famously dismissed nuclear physics as “Jewish science.” The critical importance of the ejected brainpower was demonstrated by the contribution the Jewish scientist refugees made to the U.S. development of the atomic bombs that precipitated Japan’s surrender. If it were not for the Nazi Jewish obsession, achieving German nuclear capability was a credible, dreadful, “what-if.”

The anti-Jewish obsession also destroyed expertise across many fields. There is no telling how much this cost, but it was not insignificant. The half-million German Jewish population of the early 1930s could have provided troops for additional divisions. The camps and organizations implementing the Holocaust absorbed substantial resources that could have been allocated to the war. Even while Allied bombing was attacking the transportation system, considerable rolling stock used to move millions from all over Europe to the death camps was unavailable for military logistics. In short, as historian Lucy Davidowicz concluded: “The murder of the Jews was Hitler’s most consistent policy, in whose execution he persisted relentlessly, and obsessiveness with the Jews may even have cost him his war for the Thousand Year Reich.” [Davidowicz, 1981, *The Holocaust and the Historians*, Harvard University Press, p.38.]

The loss of the war, and the cruelty visited upon the peoples (other than the Jews) singled out for expulsion and exploitation, resulted in the opposite of what the Nazis promised the German people: destruction in Germany, millions of German deaths, and no territorial or power aggrandizement. The ethnic cleansing of Slavs – to seize land for German settlers – was completely reversed after the defeat. Poland forced out the Germans who had settled in the “cleansed” territory; Czechoslovakia forced out its Sudetenland ethnic Germans.

Germany has since utterly repudiated the Nazi principles. It has eschewed military action outside

its borders. It has welcomed immigrants and refugees that have brought the country substantial ethnic heterogeneity. Instead of totalitarian governance, it has maintained vigorous parliamentary democracy. This repudiation has not made Germany immune to the populism revival other European countries are experiencing, fueled in part by Muslim refugee inflow and lingering far-right anti-Semitism. But any return to genocidal extremism and totalitarianism appears unthinkable.

Khmer Rouge: Auto-Genocide, Self-Destruction

The evidence is strong that the collapse of the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime (1975-1979) was self-inflicted, and that its so-called auto-genocide was a major factor in the disaster.

First, by launching raids into Vietnam, the KR provoked a military response. Vietnam’s military strength was much greater than Cambodia’s; Vietnam soon drove the KR out over the Thai border. The KR’s delusional overestimation of its own invincibility stemmed from their interpretation of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and of their defeat of the preceding U.S. – backed Cambodian regime of Lon Nol.

Second, KR economic policies exhausted the population, especially their bizarre program of cultural purification which began with ejecting urban inhabitants into rural areas to cultivate rice under forced labor conditions. They also thought purification would be achieved by eliminating Buddhism and by persecuting or killing people tainted by foreign cultural influence. An estimated 1.5 – 2.0 million were killed out of a population of only 6 or 7 million. Intent on challenging Vietnam, the KR devastated the human capital that is the principal source of economic and military strength in the modern world, and substantially reduced the population base for mobilizing foot-soldiers. The leadership blamed its policy failures on its own ranks, killing cadre accused of conspiring with Vietnam and the CIA. In the end, the population greeted the invading Vietnamese as deliverers (although the Vietnamese soon wore out their welcome).

In sum, through collectivizing, religious destruction, ideological blindness, and elimination of social classes and family ties, the KR tried to destroy virtually everything marking Khmer identity. Its inhumanity aside, their auto-genocide was sheer folly, delusional, and self-defeating.

Turkey: The Armenian Expulsion

In the case of the 1915-1917 Armenian genocide, it has also been argued that the vast annihilation of human capital was self-destructive, weakening Turkey during the First World War. Turkey deprived itself of a large portion of its professional and administrative class. Resources badly needed for the war were diverted. Killing and driving out Armenians caused a shortage of support personnel that made the 1916 Russian invasion of Turkey easier. Count Metternich, a German official, noted that the Turkish government “seemed almost bent on losing the war.” Ironically, it was ostensibly the belief that the Armenians were conspiring to aid Russia that provided the rationale for the genocide. Armenian deaths amounted to 1.5 million.

The genocide helped sap Turkey’s strength at a time of maximum challenge to the empire’s viability. The genocide has also had lingering costs ever since to Turkey’s international relations. Successive Turkish governments have continued to deny the facts. Some three dozen countries have recognized the events as genocide. Such recognitions, as was the case recently following the Dutch parliament’s declaration in early 2018, cause diplomatic strain, even 100 years on.

Turkey remains unable to develop a *modus vivendi* with its other major ethnic minority, the Kurds. Oppression and violent reactions on both sides have roiled the country and complicated its foreign relations. Policy towards the Kurds has wavered between accommodation, negotiation, and violence. At its worst, the violence has not risen to genocide matching the Armenian expulsion, but the Armenian tragedy continues to cast a shadow forward.

Rwanda: The 100-Day Genocide

Hutu-Tutsi ethnic differentiation in Rwanda began in the nineteenth century. The differentiation, initially economic (Tutsis were herders, Hutu farmers) was deepened (according to some observers, invented) under subsequent German (1899-1916) and Belgian (1916-1961) colonial rule through measures installing ethnicity as the mark of identity. The colonial powers then bestowed favored status on Tutsis based on the bogus assumption ascribing innately superior characteristics to this minority.

In 1958, as Rwandan independence loomed, Belgium switched to a pro-Hutu policy. The power transition from Tutsi to Hutu ushered in a period of violence in 1959-1961 that forced tens of thousands of Tutsi into exile in neighboring countries. Tutsi refugees then launched a campaign of cross-border fighting. The Hutu divided between those favoring reconciliation and those pushing against power-sharing. The hard-liners gradually built up the organization and resources to carry out a drastic solution. The trigger in April 1994 was the death of president Habyarimana, a Hutu, in a plane crash, while returning from negotiations in Tanzania with representatives of the Tutsis. The hard-liners launched a massacre against all Tutsis and against Hutu seen as “moderate.” In under three months, some 800,000, or 70% of the Tutsi population, were butchered. This was not “conventional” warfare. Many ordinary Hutu, fired up by a radio campaign of Tutsi vilification, participated in the killings, with machetes their main weapons. The country was torn apart in a vast social upheaval.

The slaughter ended when the Tutsi force known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPF), invading from Uganda, overcame the Hutu. The Hutu suffered an immediate reversal of fortune and collapse of power. Two million fled into neighboring countries, suffering severe deprivation in external refugee camps. The country was shorn of much human capital, including teachers, medical personnel, and civil servants. Revenge killings targeted hundreds of Hutu non-combatants. The RPF imprisoned tens

of thousands of genocide suspects. The still-majority Hutu civilians now faced a Tutsi government, Tutsi security forces, and a devastated economy.

Rwanda began to recover soon, thanks to extraordinary rebuilding, reconciliation, and “transitional justice” efforts by the new government. The recovery has been supported by the World Bank and the international donor community. The entire population has been required to participate in programs aimed at pressuring peaceful reintegration of the communities where former killers and their surviving Tutsi neighbors now live again in close proximity.

The peaceful character of this effort to restore normality and make a return wave of killings unlikely has earned the government and people well-deserved kudos. Still, critics note the (perhaps unavoidable) superficiality of the harmony effects of psychosocial reengineering after trauma of such magnitude. The long-term consequences of such a spasm of hatred and violence may prove troublesome despite the extraordinary reconciliation efforts. The fact remains, despite the slaughter, the intended objective of the *genocidaires* was not achieved.

Serbia: Paying the Price for Ethnic Cleansing and Atrocity

As the Ottoman Empire was redrawn after World War I, the Balkan ethnic groups jockeying to establish national homogeneity carried out massacres and cleansing campaigns. One “solution” was creation of the state of Yugoslavia, comprising South Slavs: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, and others. The state contained several jurisdictions in which one ethnicity was dominant, but all had ethnically mixed populations. Yugoslavia held together but was an uneasy patchwork.

Under German occupation during World War II, the fascist puppet regime in Croatia established a notorious concentration camp and executed large numbers of Serbs, Jews, and others. In Serbia and

Bosnia, the anti-Nazi resistance was divided between communist and right-wing rivals. In the immediate wake of the war, there was a spasm of mutual massacres. In the end, the Communist Party, under Marshall Tito, took power.

Tito tried to forge a new society based on Yugoslav identity. While religious differences (Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, Muslim Bosniacs) appeared to diminish in importance, ethnic rivalry continued to define the country’s politics, heightening after Tito’s death in 1980. When Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia seceded in 1991, the Serb leadership resorted to military action, first to hold Yugoslavia together, then to create a greater Serbia that would incorporate ethnic Serbs located in other ex-Yugoslav areas. Although the Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia favored absorption by Serbia, these ambitions were thwarted by Croatian and Bosnian resistance and finally by NATO intervention. The intervention was a reaction to Serbia’s extreme violence, including a massacre (commonly labeled a genocide) of Bosnian men in Srebrenica in 1995 and a “cleansing” campaign Serbia undertook to force ethnic Albanians to flee from Serbia’s Kosovo province where they formed a large majority.

Serbia’s overreach and use of GMA tactics ended in failure. Kosovo seceded and gained independent UN recognition. Croatia’s ethnically Serb areas remained integral to that country. The ethnic Serb area of Bosnia remained a constituent entity of Bosnia. The estimated 150,000 casualties of the war included many Serbs.

Several (mostly Serb) civilian and military leaders have been convicted of war crimes by an international tribunal. Serbian officialdom and public opinion, however, have extolled these wartime leaders, showing no sign of regret or admission of guilt. Resistance to any valid process of transitional justice has thus far entailed a considerable economic cost: the refusal to abjure the wartime violations has blocked Serbia’s admission to the European Union.

Successes?

Some GMAs may appear to have been “successful.” One example was the anti-communist massacre in Indonesia in 1965-1966. Charging the Indonesian Communist Party with a plot to overthrow the post-colonial, anti-Western Sukarno dictatorship, the military inspired a blood-letting undertaken largely by ordinary citizens responding to the urging of local army units. Like the Nazi and Rwandan genocides, the killings were “extremely savage” and the victims were treated, dead or alive, with “huge contempt.”

The Indonesian massacre “succeeded” in the sense that the objective – elimination of Communist Party members and alleged sympathizers – was accomplished. The military leadership under General Suharto that ordered the massacres went on to rule for over three decades. Knowledge of long-term effects on Indonesian society remains obscure. In contrast with the stagnation under Sukarno’s inept, post-colonial socialism, the market-friendly policies installed by Suharto and designed by technocrats ushered in a long period of economic growth and eventual political democratization. All this might well have been achieved merely by removing Sukarno and the top leadership of the Communist Party organization. Whether the enormous spasm of killing was needless and excessive, its barbarity aside, remains unanswerable.

Even Winning May Be Losing: Self-Dehumanization

GMAs reveal the nether depths of human barbarity. Despite their differences of causation and context, they share a striking commonality: the perpetrators were not satisfied with mere murder (and opportunistic theft). In addition to eliminating the groups they believed threatened their interests or

survival – a purpose that could have been met by mere murder – they went far beyond, humiliating, terrorizing, sexually violating, and torturing the victims, and finishing often by mutilating the corpses. Many studies have tried to understand how masses of “ordinary” people were turned into warped killers. And what happens to the killers and their children after it is all over, and to the society that inherits such a history?

Why was mere dispatching not satisfying enough? A common “rational” explanation cites the terrorizing effect of atrocities: ethnic cleansing can be achieved more rapidly if the victims have reason to submit or flee. For rank-and-file perpetrators, however, one must look deeper. Beyond realpolitik consequences as in the cases above, one comes away from GMA studies reminded of the question posed by Matthew (16:26): “For what shall it profit a man though he should win the whole world, if he loses his own soul?”

We read how perpetrators have emerged with warped souls. The methods to instill genocidal readiness have common elements: inculcating cognitive conformity and gullible acceptance of authoritative assertions; reliance on conspiracy theories and stereotyping; behavioral coarsening and a normalizing of brutality; denigrating the characteristics of Others; heated rhetoric. All this robs peoples’ ability to separate truth from falsehood and their ability to empathize. The dysfunctional psychological legacies for the children, grandchildren, and whole communities of both victims and perpetrators have been observed in post-genocide Germany, Cambodia and Rwanda. The subject deserves more systematic attention as does the general perspective of the folly of GMAs.

✿ Robert J. Muscat

Global Peace Services USA

The newsletter of Global Peace Services USA is published regularly. GPS USA is incorporated in the State of Maryland and is tax-exempt. Current board members are: Anna Amato, John Eriksson, Robert Muscat, Mindy Reiser, Ronald Ridker, and Sovan Tun. We welcome contributions and comments. To contact us:

Global Peace Services USA
P.O. Box 27922
Washington, DC 20038-7922

Telephone: 301-681-6968
E-mail: globalpeaceservicesusa@gmail.com

Web site: www.GlobalPeaceServices.org

Global Peace Services USA
P.O. Box 27922
Washington, DC 20038-7922
www.GlobalPeaceServices.org