
Comment on Kershaw

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In his wide-ranging and thought-provoking analysis of war and political violence in twentieth-century Europe, Ian Kershaw contrasts the immense violence wrought in Europe in the first half of the century with its relatively pacific history in the second half. Resisting the temptation to think of the violence of the first half of the century as a dysfunctional interruption to an underlying tale of economic, social and political progress, the author poses three astute questions concerning: (i) the causes of state-sponsored violence; (ii) the reasons why some states presided over low levels of violence while others presided over levels that 'soared into the stratosphere'; and (iii) whether there was something qualitatively new – or 'modern' – about that violence. Kershaw describes his piece as 'thinking aloud' and I read it in that spirit. I find myself in broad agreement with what he has to say, although we probably disagree over matters of emphasis – for example in respect of the significance of violence perpetrated by European states in their colonies, or the propensity for violence of liberal democratic states. I suspect that there is more principled disagreement about the salience of 'ideology' in fomenting the mass violence of the twentieth century. I have organised my responses according to the three stages of his argument; I end by considering the nature of 'peace' in Europe in the second half of the century and by offering a few reflections on the conceptualisation of political violence.

Ian Kershaw, rightly, emphasises the centrality of the First World War in engendering 'modern' political violence, not merely – or even mainly – because of the scale of the violence it unleashed, but because for the first time it legitimised violence towards the civilian population. He recognises the salience of a multitude of war-related developments in promoting the violence of the inter-war years, but the accent of his account is on the influence of three ideological currents that originated in the nineteenth century: nationalism plus popular sovereignty, colonial imperialism and socialism. He does not attempt to assess the relative influence of these currents, although later he tends to ascribe primacy to what he calls 'integral' or 'organic' nationalism. It is worth pointing out, however, that notwithstanding the rise of 'integral' nationalism from the late nineteenth century, it was broadly civic forms of nationalism that fuelled the First World War. Indeed, given that the war depended on the active participation of the citizens of the belligerent powers it may be called the first 'democratic' war.¹ More generally, throughout this section, I detect a tension between a historically specific, conjunctural account of the rise of fascism and communism – evinced in the discussion of the First World War and its aftermath – and a more abstract account, influenced by theories of totalitarianism

¹ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin, 1998), 435.

and by the work of Zygmunt Bauman, that sees mass violence as arising out of the totalising and utopian character of modern ideologies. I would place less emphasis than Kershaw on such ideologies (in which I would include nationalism, as well as communism and fascism) and more on the specific practices engendered by the First World War – on its technologies (mass production of armaments, the proliferation of heavy weaponry, the use of poison gas and aerial bombardment), its military and state policies (state organisation of the economy, the subjection of populations to new forms of categorisation and surveillance, the internment of enemy civilians, the forcible displacement of populations, the conscript army as a model for civilian life) and on new discursive constructs ('total war', 'total annihilation', 'final solutions', 'extermination of class enemies'). In seeking to understand the violence of the inter-war years, Ian Kershaw concentrates on eastern Europe, especially on the Russian civil war of 1918–20, whose lethal nature he correctly stresses. There are no definitive statistics on the casualties of the war, but the figure of three to five million deaths is certainly not an exaggeration. By no means all these deaths, however, may be attributed to war or terror. The most recent analysis of demographic data considerably inflates earlier Western estimates of Russia's war-related casualties for both the First World War and the civil war. It calculates war-related losses in the First World War – including those who died in, or never returned from, captivity – at perhaps 3.3 million.² It reckons Red Army losses from 1918 to 1920 at between 1,150,000 and 1,250,000, and total war-related losses at between 2.5 million and 3.3 million when Whites, partisans and various nationalist forces are included.³ It estimates that an additional two million plus died from typhus, typhoid fever, smallpox and dysentery, not including the high proportion of military casualties who died of disease.⁴ As for the latter, Evan Mawdsley writes: 'The armies probably suffered more from microbes than battle; in this, as in much else, the Russian Civil War was a throwback to earlier centuries'.⁵ This is a point that merits consideration. For whilst the Russian civil war was a 'total war' in key respects, insofar as the economy was mobilised to the needs of war, conscription reinstated, Soviet territory divided into regimental districts and propaganda waged to win hearts and minds, in strictly military terms it had few characteristics of 'total' war. There were no fixed fronts, troops moved mainly along railways, leaving huge unoccupied territories behind them, and naval and air power contributed little. And without in any way intending to minimise the horror of what Moshe Lewin called a 'demographic earthquake',⁶ it is not self-evident that even the recent high estimates of battle casualties – as opposed to the casualties of disease and hunger – place the Russian civil war closer to the mammoth bloodletting of Europe's 'dark century' than to earlier civil wars. The American Civil War, for example, saw over 370,000 die out of a population of 31 million, roughly

² *Naselenie Rossii v XX veke: istoricheskie ocherki*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000), 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Naselenie*, 102.

⁵ Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 286.

⁶ Moshe Lewin, *Making of the Soviet System* (London: Methuen, 1985), 210.

one-fifth to one-quarter the size of the population of Russia in 1921.⁷ More tellingly, the contemporaneous Mexican revolution caused 1.4 million ‘excess deaths’ out of a population of 15.2 million in 1910, and that can hardly be considered a civil war driven by totalistic ideologies.⁸

In seeking to explain the viciousness of the Russian civil war, Kershaw puts the accent on the ‘ideological component’. We can agree that Lenin’s advocacy of Red Terror was a significant cause of the horrific violence, but the latter was principally an expression of generalised anarchy, rooted in the breakdown of political and social relations. While Kershaw alludes to the brutalising influence of the First World War on European political culture, he implies a sequence of causality that led from the Red Terror to counter-revolutionary violence to the massive bloodshed of the inter-war period. It is easy, however, to exaggerate the salience of terror in Lenin’s political thought. A perusal of the subject index of the fifth edition of his *Collected Works* suggests that he did not write extensively to justify terror as weapon of revolutionary struggle. Much of what he wrote was actually a denunciation of those – like certain members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party – who advocated the use of individual terror. And the point he makes most regularly is that ‘terror can never be an ordinary method of fighting’.⁹ Nevertheless, he refused to renounce terror as a legitimate and even necessary weapon when revolutionary battle was at its peak, going so far as to argue in his 1908 essay on the lessons of the Paris Commune that ‘there are times when the interests of the proletariat call for ruthless extermination of its enemies in open armed clashes’.¹⁰ After the October Revolution Lenin was far more willing to justify terror, and his chilling calls for the ruthless elimination of class enemies clearly adumbrate those of high Stalinism. Nevertheless he did not invent the language of extermination. During the tsarist government’s brutal suppression of the Turkestan uprising in 1916, the military governor of Semirech’e called for the ‘destruction’ of the Kyrgyz.¹¹ Moreover, we should not forget that the Whites, too, had an ideology that blamed Russia’s calamity on Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy. Finally, as Kershaw recognises, not all – or even the bulk – of political violence in these years bore an ideological character, much of it being due to banditry, criminality and Bolshevik determination to compel a reluctant peasantry to give up its slender grain ‘surpluses’.

In the second stage of the argument, Kershaw proffers a robust set of variables that influence the propensity of states to engage in political violence. I find the

⁷ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War*, 5 vols. (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2000), vol. 1, 373.

⁸ Robert McCaa, ‘Missing Millions: The Demographic Costs of the Mexican Revolution’, *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 19, 2 (2003), 367–400.

⁹ V. I. Lenin, ‘S chego nachat’ (1901), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1959), vol. 5, 7.

¹⁰ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 13 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1962), 478.

¹¹ Peter Holquist, ‘Total’naia mobilizatsiia i politika naseleniia: Rossiiskaia katastrofa (1914–1921) v evropeiskom kontekste’, in N. N. Smirnov et al., eds., *Rossii i pervaiia mirovaia voina* (St Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999), 87. And long before the totalistic ideologies of the twentieth century, General Sherman in 1866 could urge ‘vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to the extermination of men, women and children’. James Wilson, *The Earth Shall Weep: A History of Native America* (London: Picador, 1998), 278.

model broadly persuasive, although it is not clear how far it is intended to apply only to political violence in Europe between 1914 and 1950, and how far to 'modern' political violence in general. Moreover, a clear distinction needs to be made between violence by states against their own citizens and violence by states against citizens of other states, since the propensity of states to engage in the former is not necessarily twinned with a propensity to engage in the latter. The Soviet Union, for example, carried out massive violence against its own citizens, yet was more circumspect when it came to waging war against other states (the war against Finland, the use of repression in the Eastern bloc, intervention in Afghanistan notwithstanding). As regards the final variable – the lower propensity to engage in political violence of states where national identity is defined in terms of constitutional statehood – I would enter a couple of caveats. First, the distinction between civic and ethnic forms of nationalism was not always clear-cut. Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of national self-determination, eminently liberal in principle, in practice legitimised the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the majority 'nation' in the successor states that emerged out of the Versailles peace settlement. Moreover, while it is true that states where national identity was defined in civic terms did not in general discriminate against minorities, this was not always true. In the wake of the Second World War the Benes government in Czechoslovakia brutally expelled Germans from the Sudetenland (as did the less obviously democratic government in Poland).¹² Second, the proposition that there is an inverse relationship between 'democratic culture' and political violence needs to be tested against Kershaw's important point that 'In their colonial territories and settler dominions, of course, such states [i.e. democratic states] could exercise and back the use of massive violence towards the indigenous populations'. It was Britain, after all, that pioneered concentration camps in the Boer war, used mustard gas against Shiites in Iraq in 1920, tortured Indian political prisoners in the Cellular Jail on the Andaman islands. All of which suggests that it may be impossible fully to understand political violence in Europe in the first half of the century except in the context of states' extra-European involvements. Isabel Hull, for example, has suggested that the practice of ethnic extermination developed out of the habits and assumptions of the German military in its 1904 campaign of annihilation of the Herero and Nama peoples in German South West Africa.¹³

The third stage of Kershaw's argument comprises a carefully qualified case for the 'modernity' of political violence in the twentieth century. He argues that the qualitatively new elements in twentieth-century political violence derive from the possibility of justifying social resentments in ideological terms, from the ideologically driven modern state, from bureaucracy and planning, and from science and technology. The argument is influenced by the work of Zygmunt Bauman, who sees the Holocaust as rooted in modern civilisation, with its conception of

¹² Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14.

¹³ Isabel V. Hull, 'Military Culture and the Production of "Final Solutions" in the Colonies: the Example of Wilhelmine Germany', in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, eds., *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 141–62.

society as something to be rationally managed, improved and transformed.¹⁴ Kershaw, however, cautions against mistaking the instruments of mass killing for the driving force. It is undeniable that the enormously enhanced capacities of the modern nation-state, together with modern ideologies, gave mass killing in the twentieth century a historically new intensity, systematicity and frequency. However, I am not quite so confident as Kershaw that the pre-modern instances of slaughter of civilians he cites are radically different from modern genocide or ethnic cleansing: for one thing, I am not sure that the distinction between religion and ethnicity is hard and fast; for another, whilst I accept that it is only in a world of competing nation-states that ethnicity becomes politicised, there do appear to have been deliberate and systematic efforts prior to the twentieth century physically to disperse or wipe out religiously or ethnically defined populations. I am not qualified to judge whether the destruction of the native peoples of central and southern America by Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors,¹⁵ or the decimation of Native Americans, or the extermination of Aborigines in Tasmania by British settlers in the 1830s,¹⁶ or the Russian army's brutal expulsion of perhaps two million Circassians and Turkic peoples from the Northwest Caucasus in the 1860s, qualify as 'genocide'.¹⁷ I merely note that there is no precise or agreed definition of genocide either in international law or in the scholarly literature.¹⁸ Moreover, certain arguments for the modernity of genocide seem to me circular in that they build into the definition of genocide – for example, genocide as state-planned mass killing by bureaucratised and industrialised methods – the elements of modernity that are meant to explain the phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is beyond question that the Holocaust, at least, was thinkable and practicable only with modern political and administrative structures, modern industrialised methods of killing and a modern ideology of racial mastery.

Kershaw suggests that it is the mass killing of civilians on ideological grounds that is the 'crucial component' of modern political violence. I detect ambiguity as to what exactly it is about modern ideologies that engenders mass violence. On the one hand, he argues that it is the utopianism of ideologies such as fascism and communism – their aspiration to create a perfect, homogeneous society purged of all contaminating elements – that powers the urge to eliminate the 'other'. As Bauman puts it: 'Stalin's and Hitler's victims . . . were killed because they did not fit,

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Tzvetan Todorov wrote: 'The sixteenth century perpetrated the greatest genocide in human history'. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: the Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1982), 5.

¹⁶ Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold: Europe's Conflict with Tribal Peoples* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998).

¹⁷ Stephen D. Shenfield, 'The Circassians: a Forgotten Genocide?', in Mark Levene and Penny Roberts, eds., *The Massacre in History* (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 154. Lieven gives a figure of 1.2 million expelled. Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 315.

¹⁸ Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997).

for one reason or another, the scheme of a perfect society'.¹⁹ On the other hand, he underwrites Michael Mann's argument that organic nationalism – as it operates in contests for state power in ethnically disputed territories – was the driving force of large-scale political violence in the twentieth century. Certainly, Hitler's ideology of racial mastery was both utopian and rooted in organic nationalism. But there are instances of genocide and ethnic cleansing (Rwanda, 1974; East Timor, 1977–1980) which are certainly inspired by organic nationalism where it would be difficult to see the perpetrators as being inspired by a belief that 'perfection can be brought about on this earth and by secular means'.

Although the general point is indisputable, I am not sure that the forty years after 1950 were quite as pacific as Kershaw suggests. In addition to the flashpoints of Northern Ireland and the Basque country and the uprisings against communism in eastern Europe that he mentions, colonels seized power in Greece (1967–74), a civil war flared up in Cyprus in 1974, Britain went to war in 1982. As significantly, the soon-to-be-former colonial powers waged war until the end of the third quarter of the century: the estimated casualties of France's entanglement in Algeria vary from 350,000 to 1.5 million; and Portugal's involvement in the wars of liberation in Angola and Mozambique in 1961 to 1974 cost tens of thousands of lives. More significantly, the cold war arose in Europe out of the inability of the Allies to reach a settlement over Germany, an issue that continued to flare up until 1961. Nor should we forget that the stability brought to Europe by the cold war was purchased through hot wars in Korea, Indochina and elsewhere. Kershaw makes no mention of the United States in this period, yet that country waged a string of wars that resulted in millions of casualties, a further reminder that democratic governments bear a large burden of responsibility for the political violence of the last century. A personal beneficiary of the 'golden age' of capitalist expansion and of post-war stability in Europe, I nevertheless balked at the description of the era I have lived through as 'unbelievably benign'. It didn't always feel like that. The threat of war and nuclear Armageddon hung over the entire era and there were times, such as the early 1980s, when ground-launched cruise and Pershing II missiles were being stationed in Europe, when stability seemed extremely tenuous.

I want to end by making a number of observations concerning the problem of conceptualising political violence. Kershaw defines his topic as violence 'stimulated by political motives or intentions, within, between, by, or against states'. This directs attention to actors – be they states, parties, dictators or other contenders for power – and their intentions and motivations. Yet even where massive acts of political violence, such as the Holocaust or Great Terror, can be traced fairly directly to a single individual, issues of intention – and thus of historical responsibility – remain contentious, as the debate between 'intentionalists' and 'structuralists' suggests. And where human intention is mixed up with circumstance and contingency, or where actions have unintended consequences, it is often extremely hard to determine whether an instance of massive human suffering can be defined as political violence. Was the famine that ravaged Ukraine and areas of the Volga, North Caucasus and

¹⁹ Bauman, *Modernity*, 92.

Kazakhstan in 1932–33, in which perhaps five to seven million died, an act of ‘political violence’? Certainly some historians accuse Stalin of deliberately waging genocide against the Ukrainian people. Others, including myself, would lay considerable blame on Stalin’s policies of forced collectivisation of agriculture and compulsory grain requisitioning. To that extent, we might be disposed to see the famine, at least in part, as political violence, especially since the standards by which we judge the performance of governments have become more exacting in the twentieth century (not because of any advance in moral sensibility but because modern communications increase the capacity of governments to assist famine-stricken areas). Yet the fact remains that nature also played a part, in that the harvest of 1932 was lower than expected. It thus remains problematic to construe the famine, as does the *Black Book of Communism*, as an act of political violence for which Stalin bears full responsibility.²⁰

I wonder how far an actor-oriented approach – one that focuses on the actions of states – captures the magnitude of political violence in the twentieth century, especially in its second half. Historians find it easier to identify (and evaluate) acts of violence that stem directly from human agency – such as Lenin’s demand for merciless terror – than acts that appear to stem from the impersonal logic of war. They are, moreover, more likely to notice revolutionary violence (including fascist violence) than violence used to defend the status quo, since the former appears willed, chosen, proactive, probably unreasonable, whereas the latter appears reactive, probably reluctant, part of the ‘normal’ order of things. They find it harder to identify the violence that may be inherent in the ability of a powerful state to command obedience from a weaker state, especially where there is no explicit threat of sanctions. They find it harder still to identify violence that stems not from human agents but from structures of inequality and injustice. Ted Honderich has argued that our feelings about violence are very much connected to agents and that our feelings are much less acute where the agents responsible for violence are not clearly identifiable.²¹ Yet violence normalised in structures and institutions, such as slavery, has been a major form of political violence in Europe’s history. Finally, historians find it harder to identify sins of omission than sins of commission. Yet certain forms of inaction may be said to be as causally efficacious as actions. How culpable, for example, was Churchill in *not* taking steps to tackle the Bengal famine of 1943? On this note, we may speculate that in fifty years’ time, historians will look back on Europe in the second half of the twentieth century and find its governments grossly culpable for their failure to take action to end the grinding poverty and staggering inequalities of the world of which they were part. This, too, may come to be defined as a form of political violence.

²⁰ Stéphane Courtois et al., eds., *The Black Book of Communism*, trans. J. Murphy and M. Kramer, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²¹ Honderich, *Violence for Equality: Inquiries into Political Philosophy*, enlarged and revised edition, (London: Routledge, 1989 [1976]), 14.