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Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Genocide Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smp/title~content=t713431069>

Nations Have the Right to Kill: Hitler, the Holocaust and War

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Online publication date: 27 September 2010

To cite this Article Lee, Megan D.(2010) 'Nations Have the Right to Kill: Hitler, the Holocaust and War', Journal of Genocide Research, 12: 1, 127 – 129

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14623521003633537

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623521003633537>

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Nations Have the Right to Kill: Hitler, the Holocaust and War

Richard A. Koenigsberg

Elmhurst, NY: Library of Social Science, 2009

112 pp, \$39.99 (pbk)

In 1989, social-psychologist Richard A. Koenigsberg was browsing through the New York University Library to get acquainted with the materials pertaining to World War I. Having spent his entire career researching Hitler, Nazism, and the Holocaust, Koenigsberg was appalled by what he found—in particular, by the blasé attitude of other scholars toward statistics of death and devastation connected to the ‘Great War.’ Comparing his own research with the sources on the war, Koenigsberg asked: Why does the atrocity of genocide shock the human conscience, but the atrocity of war does not?

In his most recent work, *Nations Have the Right to Kill: Hitler, the Holocaust and War*, Koenigsberg seeks to fill a gap in the scholarly narrative of war using a comparative framework to trace the philosophical connections between war and genocide. The author claims that ‘nationalism is a living religion so powerful that we barely conceive of it as a religion’ (quoted p xiii), and agrees with Carolyn Marvin’s assertion that wars are merely ritual sacrifices to gods with names like America, France, and Germany. Genocide, like war, is seen by the perpetrating state as a necessary ritual sacrifice; unlike war, however, it is treated as a political, social, and criminal aberration. The author insists that religious sacrifice leads to both war and genocide; therefore, war and genocide should be viewed with equal horror.

The book is broken into three sections: ‘The Holocaust,’ ‘War,’ and the ‘Logic of War and Genocide.’ In his first section, Koenigsberg investigates the Third Reich’s written and spoken logic of justification for the Final Solution. Adolf Hitler’s experiences in World War I left him feeling embittered towards the Jews, whom he saw as a privileged and parasitic class, despite their proven sacrifice for Germany throughout the war. When the Third Reich was given the chance to correct this imbalance in World War II, Koenigsberg writes, ‘the Final Solution was undertaken in order to demonstrate that no one was exempt from the obligation to suffer and die for Germany’ (p 14). If the strongest, bravest, and most desirable members of society were expected to sacrifice their lives for the nation, then the Reich would expect the same of those they considered to be the weakest, most cowardly, and least desirable.

Part II of the book enters into graphic detail about the atrocities of the World War II. Koenigsberg questions what he views as a complacent approach to the subject by scholars, particularly historians. Their position is based on ‘the assumption that we actually understand societal mass destruction,’ which he describes as ‘unfounded’ (p 34). Koenigsberg asserts that the treatment of casualties as common-place statistics has its roots in the view of war as a normal or natural occurrence between states, which he illustrates with a discussion of the warfare waged by the Aztec empire. The Aztecs insisted that enemies be captured and

brought back alive as prisoners, then sacrificed to their sun god. The idea has changed little over time, as Koenigsberg reiterates that today's fervent nationalism is another form of religion that calls for blood sacrifice to state gods.

In Part III, the author brings war and genocide together, investigating the underlying ideologies of each within a comparative framework. He insists that 'the persistence of warfare as a social institution should be interrogated rather than taken for granted' (p 79). Both war and genocide are atrocious aberrations of human conduct, connected to the dogma of sacrifice, and both should shock and upset the human psyche. The author concludes that both the sacrifice of the German soldier in glory on the battlefield, and the sacrifice of the victim in the gas chambers of the concentration camp, were essentially for the same purpose: to feed the sacrificial bloodlust of the national deity.

The strongest point of this book lies not necessarily in what is written in its brief 100 pages, but rather the conversations it seeks to start. Debates surrounding how and why states enter into conflict are as pertinent today as they were in 1914, and this book provides a platform, standing above the daily flood of media-fed realities, on which these conversations can begin. Furthermore, Koenigsberg's second section provides a haunting picture of the gruesome brutalities of the First World War, thereby humanizing statistics that are often taken for granted. Many will disagree with equating a soldier's voluntary death to a civilian's involuntary murder; however, this comparison forces the reader to re-examine his or her own subconscious attitudes towards conflict. Koenigsberg is not denying that genocide is atrocious; to the contrary, his previous work and his commentary in this book suggest a reverence for the victims. What he wishes to ask, through the lens of someone who has spent an academic lifetime studying studying, is why war is still considered such a commonplace occurrence.

Elsewhere, however, the book seems to sacrifice depth for breadth. The monograph simply attempts, in too few pages, to discuss too many topics worthy of a more in-depth analysis. For example, the reference to the Aztecs is intriguing and the connection is clear, but it leaves the reader wanting much more information. The work could easily have been longer without diluting its focus. Koenigsberg's critique of the academic community also sometimes falls flat, leaving no clear answers to the questions he raises. He insinuates that the trend of not reporting in depth on the individual carnage of war indicates a general complacency amongst scholars toward the atrocity of war. Interestingly, after making this argument, Koenigsberg points to the work of Jay Winter, whose work *Remembering War* has been celebrated for considering the complexities of nationalism, patriotism, and atrocity with regard to World War I. Winter is not the only scholar who frames his research in this way, and so it seems the author is critiquing a view that is not necessarily current.

As well, the main thesis about nationalist fervor denies the agency of the public at large. Even in a state that chooses to go to war, the state apparatus is run by only a few individuals with the power to make those decisions. The citizens of the state cannot simply be lumped into a monolithic group that follows like mindless sheep to a sacrificial slaughter. The record-breaking attendance at the antiwar rallies

prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is just one example of the massive questioning of such a 'national sacrifice,' which receives little credit in this work.

On the whole, this book offers an intriguing exploration of how scholars have addressed war, and why publics have often been eager to participate in it. The questions it raises contribute to analysis of the dangerous impact of groupthink, and the hazards of unquestioning acceptance of government action. Those interested in the social psychology of war will find this book an interesting addition to their reading. The questions it raises are not necessarily new, yet *Nations Have the Right to Kill* reminds us that neither have they been answered.

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DOI: 10.1080/14623521003633537