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Crimes Against Humanity: An Exploration of Genocide and Ethnic Violence. Imperial War Museum, London.

Reviewed by Antoine Capet (Université de Rouen)

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In December 2002, the Imperial War Museum, London, inaugurated its latest permanent Exhibition, "Crimes against Humanity: An Exploration of Genocide and Ethnic Violence," which concludes its Redevelopment Scheme. The major aspect of this programme was the "Holocaust Exhibition," to which Crimes against Humanity in many ways provides–not a conclusion, alas!–but a sequel. <p> The central piece in the exhibition is a thirty-minute film, which runs permanently, based on reportage from three continents. Europe is represented both by newsreels on Nazi atrocities and retribution at Nuremberg, and by 1990s footage on Yugoslavia. Asian material concentrates on Cambodia and Khmer Rouge action. African perpetrators and victims come from Rwanda. America, like all "Western" countries is involved in three ways: first because, as it is suggested by Michael Ignatieff, one of the commentators (who all remain off screen): <p><blockquote> "We are often not innocent in the genocides of others. We supply arms, we engage in foreign policy decisions that tend to produce the collapse of other countries. It's not an accident that genocide happened in Cambodia after the pulverisation of the society by American bombing during the Vietnam war. This is not to say that the Americans are responsible for the genocide in Cambodia. It is to say that a society that has been pulverised by war is a society that is very susceptible to genocide."</blockquote> <p> Also because of the link made between economic despair and recourse to violence in the comment by Alison Des Forges, Senior Adviser to the Africa Division, Human Rights Watch: <p><blockquote> "We pay very little attention to the consequences of our actions–the question of how much we pay for coffee, how much we pay for sugar–and yet all of these things can have very immediate and direct impact on people's lives. Changes in world commodity prices, which for us represents small variation in what we have to pay, represent for the producer of that good, sometimes the difference between surviving and famine."</blockquote> <p> And, finally, an explanation of the origin of genocide is given by Michael Ignatieff which takes a special dimension in the light of the current United States crusade against so-called Rogue States: <p><blockquote> "Genocide is the way to a Utopia, the Utopia of a world without enemies. Who doesn't want to live in a world without enemies–right? It would be wonderful. You'd be secure, you'd be safe, no one can attack you. Hitler and Stalin served that Utopia. In Stalin's case it would be a world without the class enemy, constantly sapping the virtue and strength of the revolution. In Germany it's all those damn Jews, parasites, bloodsuckers, draining the life of the nation. If we could just get rid of all of them, we'll live in perfect peace and brotherhood."</blockquote> <p> So, in case the smug visitor believes he is above such barbarity, Fergal Keane, a BBC Correspondent, reminds him that: "The idea that the Germans were naturally predisposed more than any other race to committing genocide, the idea that the Cambodians had some secret germ inside them or that the Rwandese did, is absolute nonsense. We are all capable of it." <p> And the barbarity is everywhere on the screen. The leaflet given at the entrance of the Imperial War Museum warns that "This exhibition is not recommended for children under 16. Children under 12 will not be admitted"–and there is every justification for this as scenes of carnage, summary executions and criminal starting of fires, as well as corpses, mutilated bodies, charred bodies, skulls and various human bone remains come to punctuate the didactic commentary at regular intervals, some in black-and-white, some in full colour close-ups. <p> The scenes of

horror alternate with scenes of interviews– interviews of victims (mostly female), but also interviews of perpetrators. Some are repentant before the camera, like the two 'Young Hutu killers imprisoned in Rwanda' (one boy, one girl) who readily confess their crimes, with the familiar Nuremberg exculpatory plea that they only obeyed orders from above: <p><blockquote> Girl– "Some were dead, some alive. We beat the ones who were not dead. The other women killed one each." <p> Boy–"I killed three people. The soldiers tied them and made them lie down, otherwise I couldn't have killed them. They gave me a stick and I beat them." <p> Girl–"I beg everyone to understand. We had no choice. I ask for mercy on behalf of my fellow prisoners. We were forced to do it."</blockquote> <p> Some are not, with Milosevic defying the world before the cameras: Q. Steve Bradsaw, BBC journalist, interviewing Slobodan Milosevic: "Would you face a trial in a United Nations Court?" A. Slobodan Milosevic, speaking whilst President of the Yugoslavia Federation: <p><blockquote> "Oh Sir, please, let us be serious with that evidence. I can ask the same question to many foreign politicians, who are much more responsible for that war than politicians in Yugoslavia. If they are ready to do so, everybody have to be ready to do so."</blockquote> <p> The last part of the film, entitled Aftermath, raises enormously complex questions, as when Alison Des Forges asks: <p><blockqutoe> "How do you create a history? How do you create a way to remember when part of the population were the victims and part of the population are accused of being the killers? How do you balance the need for remembrance against the need for moving forward?"</blockquote> <p> Her question bears on Rwanda, but applies to post-1945, even post-1918 European history equally well. Clearly the 'principle of nationalities' which supposedly guided the peace-makers at Versailles cannot provide a lasting peace, as Mark Lattimer, Director of Minority Rights Group International, explains: <p><blockquote> "There are some five thousand, maybe seven thousand, different peoples alive in the world today–peoples with different ethnic, linguistic, religious identities. There are less than two hundred states. We cannot create a world in which every people has its own nationalist state. That is a recipe for unending conflict. Ethnic diversity is the norm in our current world and that's why ethnic co-operation must be the way forward?"</blockquote> <p> In the same hall where the film is shown in semi-darkness, the visitor to the exhibition also has access to a small interactive learning centre, with the opportunity to further explore the histories of particular instances of mass murder and genocide. <p> There is absolutely no doubt about the professionalism of those who designed the Exhibition hall, commissioned the film and arranged the hands-on facilities: prima facie, their evident aim of shaking the visitor's complacency is met one hundred percent. Even the familiar British it-could-not-happen-here syndrome receives a beating in the few shots of Northern Ireland patrols. <p> But then, what audience is precisely addressed? A national institution like the Imperial War Museum has to attract the 'general public', whatever that may mean. It also has an obvious educational mission–as the number of school parties which always fill it testifies. The educated visitor, when seeing this particular Exhibition, will be reminded of Hobbes's Leviathan and his discussion of "the reason why men enter into society," viz. to ensure that the community protect their lives. Clearly, in the cases shown, starting with the massacre of Christian Armenians in the 1915 Muslim Ottoman Empire, the State does not protect life–and therefore the State de facto dissolves into primeval barbarity. <p> But unfortunately the twentieth century has not innovated in this field: to take the example of France only, one is of course reminded of the ruthless execution of the heretic Albigenses in the early thirteenth century or of the massacre of St. Bartholomew in 1572, when French Protestants were submitted to the kind of treatment which the film so well illustrates. <p> The point is that the exhibition has to be seen in the long (alas!) perspective of human cruelty and intolerance of the Other, very often in the name of a sincere faith. Torquemada (1420-98) in a way served the same Utopia as that alluded to above by Ignatieff a propos Hitler and Stalin. And yet, if one is not to despair, one must find comfort in some religious and philosophical faith that man is not one hundred percent evil. Thus, visiting the Exhibition, one cannot help thinking of the enormous preparatory task required of History teachers taking classes to see it. And taking classes to it without doing this essential ground work would constitute a grave negligence of duty. One example will suffice: the conscientious teacher will have to explain that religious faiths both lead to higher aspirations to goodness (sanctity for the few who can attain it) and to total disregard of human decency against the heathen and heretics (barbarity for the few who take this disregard to extremes)–and this not only in the twentieth century, but from Creation (the Bible is of course full of the most horrible 'ethnic' crimes). Thus religious faiths or all-embracing political philosophies (which often use the same vocabulary: in the film, Pol Pot, Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea [Cambodia], 1975-1979, speaks of 'national salvation') can both provide the rem-

edy to fanaticism and the fuel of fanaticism, and explaining this to schoolchildren in their teens is no easy task if one tries to go beyond the usual clich?s. <p> Genocide is not a twentieth century invention, as must be explained to school parties, and indeed Michael Ignatieff makes it clear that it is more a question of degree than a question of nature: <p><blockquote> "The twentieth century is uniquely horrible because it combines fanaticism and technology in the most murderous combination that the human race has ever seen."</blockquote> <p> What about the 'general public', then? This is the great unknown quantity–it is well known that man has a remarkable capacity for quickly reaching saturation in the face of unpleasant and disturbing scenes. And there will not be anybody to 'prepare' the casual adult visitor. Going to see Mona Lisa in the Louvre without preparation is harmless–going to see "Crimes against Humanity: An exploration of genocide and ethnic violence" without preparation may prove harmful. All museums exhibits are constructions or reconstructions of reality–but some have more immediacy than others. How will the 'general public' receive this Exhibition? The professional intellectual who spends his life reflecting on how to conceptualise and the professional historian who spends his life reflecting on how to contextualise will probably never know, as the usual feedback methods can only be totally inoperative when what is required is to ascertain the most intimate, not the readily-delivered, superficial reactions of the public. <p> All Members of the H-Museum List are therefore encouraged to go and form an opinion for themselves when they next visit London.

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