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FIRES OF HATRED
ETHNIC CLEANSING
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE
NORMAN M. NAIMARK



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Ethnic Cleansing, Modernity, and the State

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In his latest work, Stanford University historian Norman Naimark offers a brilliantly engaging and deeply dispiriting examination of the role of ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe. In doing so, he provides the reader with a series of well-crafted, cogent, analytical narratives describing the historical origins, political objectives, logistical procedures, and savage outcomes of five case studies of ethnic cleansing: the Turkish actions against the Armenians in 1915 and against the Anatolian Greeks in 1921-22; the Nazi assault on the Jews from the start of the Second World War to the initiation of policies of mass extermination in 1941; the Soviet deportation of the Chechens-Ingush from the North Caucasus and of the Tatars from the Crimea in 1944; the expulsions of Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia after 1945; and the more recent inter-ethnic conflicts, and attempts at international intervention, in Bosnia and Kosovo, which have brought the term "ethnic cleansing" into common usage.

Beyond offering brisk, vivid empirical accounts of these events, Naimark reflects more broadly on their commonalities and inter-relationships, on definitional problems such as distinguishing ethnic cleansing from war and genocide, on the character of the modern state, and on the murderous potential of integral nationalism. His consideration of these conceptual issues is compelling, and elaborated without the dense jargon and solipsism so frequently encountered in the social science literature on genocide and mass killing.[1] Naimark's slim volume is comparative history at its most intelligent, lucid, and readable.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the calamitous break-up of the former Yugoslavia (as well as the even more bloody disaster of Rwanda, which Naimark honorably concedes lies outside his field of expertise) opened a dreadful new perspective on the course and consequences of earlier events. This seemed all the more shocking to many since it crushed the hopes of har-

mony and peace inspired by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of state socialism. From this dismal millennial vantage point, numerous scholars have been moved to reconsider the history of the last hundred years and to re-assess the trajectory of European modernity.[2] “Was the twentieth century’s sordid history of genocide simply repeating itself in this last decade?” asks Naimark. “Or was there something new in these wars of ‘ethnic cleansing’ about which the media spoke and wrote so often” (p. 2)?

Naimark’s answer is twofold. Firstly, he argues, it is important to distinguish between “ethnic cleansing” and genocide. These two activities are characterized by their different objectives. “Genocide is the intentional killing off of part or all of an ethnic, religious or national group; the murder of a people or peoples ... is the objective. The intention of ethnic cleansing is to remove a people and often all traces of them from a concrete territory” (p. 3). The goal of the latter, therefore, is concerned with securing the ethnic integrity of a given space, usually identified with the borders of a new and insecure state. This may involve expulsions, deportations, or forced transfers of a population carried out in a more or less orderly, though invariably brutal, manner. In certain circumstances, however, “ethnic cleansing” can generate genocidal actions; as Naimark writes in his habitually simple yet evocative prose, “ethnic cleansing bleeds into genocide, as mass murder is committed in order to rid the land of a people” (pp. 3-4).

If it is necessary to distinguish in this way between genocide and ethnic cleansing, this does not mean that recent events in the former Yugoslavia were unprecedented. On the contrary, Naimark asserts that “‘ethnic cleansing’ is a useful and viable term for understanding not just the war in former Yugoslavia but other similar cataclysmic events in the course of the twentieth century” (p. 3). This second point takes us to the core of the author’s comparative project.

Genocide, in Naimark’s conception, is the consummate realization of the “impetus to homogenize” (p. 8), which all too frequently in the twentieth century prompted European states—as well as others which, as noted above, remain outside the purview of this work—to embark on ethnic cleansing.[3] It is this underlying motivation which makes the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing “a profoundly modern experience” (p. 6).

Naimark offers a compelling account of why this is so. Firstly, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries witnessed the spread of a “racialist nationalism”

which asserted an “essentialist view of nations, a view that excluded the ‘other’ and foreswore assimilation” (p. 7). This prompted European imperial powers to repatriate practices of mass murder from the colonies to their continental homelands.

Secondly, as European imperial territories fragmented in the early-twentieth century, there emerged a new form of state, defining itself in ethnic terms and striving to “homogenize” society to meet its own “needs for order, transparency, and responsiveness” (p. 8).[4] To accomplish this, the modern nationalist state intervened to an unprecedented degree in the lives of its citizens, subjecting its population to regulation, surveillance, and manipulation by means of policy and propaganda. Crucially, it “insisted on identifying ethnic groups and concretizing difference and otherness with the goal of banishing it” (p. 8).

Thirdly, the new states’ capacity to intervene in society and effect their desired social and spatial re-ordering would have been impossible without modern innovations in communications, transportation, and the means of killing: “the drive toward ethnic cleansing comes in part from the modern state’s compulsion to complete policies and finish with problems but also in part from its technological abilities to do so” (p. 9).

Naimark, drawing on the work of historians such as Omer Bartov and Elizabeth Domansky, identifies the First World War as the defining experience, the “crucible for the development of the modern nation-state and its willingness and ability to engage in mass population policies” (p. 9).[5] In particular, he points to ways in which states at war asserted “total” claims over the lives of their citizens and for the first time engaged in mass-scale forced deportations and evacuations (which persisted as practices of peace-making, as new post-war governments embarked on the “unmixing” of territories and populations before the treaties were signed, sealed, and implemented).[6] The Great War also “introduced industrial killing into the consciousness and reality of the European state system” (p. 9).

Finally, Naimark directs attention to the role of political elites in instigating ethnic cleansing, and of bureaucrats and technical professionals in organizing its implementation. Throughout the book, in fact, the author repeatedly emphasizes that eruptions of inter-communal conflict have more to do with the “warped ambitions” (p. 16) of cynical political actors, and their machinations and manipulations, than with the “ancient ethnic hatreds” so often adduced by the world’s media (and by politicians

in other countries reluctant to intervene) as the source of ethnic violence. This is doubtless true, but Naimark might have attempted to examine the motives which lead “ordinary men” suddenly to visit such fierce blood-letting upon neighbors with whom they have lived for years in peace.[7]

Naimark, however, is more interested in writing history “from above” and he writes this history with admirable clarity, constructing a series of detailed analytical narratives that draw together an impressive range of secondary literature in numerous languages as well as some of his own archival research in the Russian archives. Each of the five case studies examines the particular “confluence of events, political leadership, and intercommunal hostility” (p. 16) which determined the context and course of the events in question, and could stand alone as a short but thorough introduction to each topic, suitable for students as well as for a more general readership. At the same time, Naimark takes care throughout to assess the similarities and differences between each instance of ethnic cleansing.

A concluding chapter offers a useful systematization and reiteration of the insights the attentive reader will have elicited from the case studies, if they have not been numbed by the often gruesome descriptions of violence. Through all the individual instances of ethnic cleansing, from 1915 in Turkey to the present day in Kosovo, Naimark identifies a marked consistency of purpose and commonality of procedure.

Firstly, Naimark notes that ethnic cleansing is always a violent process. Unlike war, however, which “matches armed men against armed men in a contest of will, machines and numbers, ethnic cleansing usually involves an armed perpetrator and an unarmed victim—more often than not, an armed man and an unarmed woman, child, or elderly person” (p. 186). The violence of ethnic cleansing is particularly vicious and personal, motivated in part by a “rational” strategy of encouraging flight, but also by a desire to punish the victims for “their crime of being different” (p. 186). Even the “well-organised and premeditated” deportations of the Chechens-Ingush and Crimean Tatars involved high rates of mortality from disease and starvation, and the “orderly ‘transfer’” of Germans from Poland claimed up to half a million victims (pp. 186-187).

Naimark’s second observation is that all the surveyed cases of ethnic cleansing have occurred either during war or during the “chaotic transition from war to peace” (p. 187). In such circumstances, state leaders can carry out extreme actions beyond the scrutiny of their own public

and outside the purview of international opinion. War also offers regimes the opportunity to eliminate allegedly treacherous groups of the population. Furthermore, war “habituates its participants to killing and to obeying orders” (p. 188). The author remarks usefully that regular armies are frequently employed to carry out ethnic cleansing, but many of the worst atrocities are perpetrated by paramilitary formations.

Another characteristic common to all the cases of twentieth-century ethnic cleansing under examination has been their “totalistic” objectives. “Ethnic cleansing, driven by the ideology of integral nationalism and the military and technological power of the modern state, rarely forgives, makes exceptions or allows people to slip through the cracks” (p. 190). Here, as throughout the book, Naimark sensibly allows for exceptions to his generalizations: his comparative treatment is admirably sensitive to nuance and difference. Thus, while the author emphasizes the “totalizing” nature of the Soviet national deportations and of the Nazi persecution, deportation, and, later, murder of the Jews, he concedes that Turkish assaults on the Armenians and Greeks did not aspire to total elimination of these ethnic populations (permitting some Armenian women, for example, to convert to Islam and join Turkish households), and that the Polish and Czechoslovak governments in 1945 promulgated definitions of nationality and citizenship which left some slight room for accommodation with minorities, at least initially.

Throughout the case studies, Naimark stresses three further aspects of ethnic cleansing that testify to its “totalizing” scope. He consolidates these themes in his conclusion. Firstly, in almost all instances the authorities responsible for uprooting populations have striven to eradicate from the purged territory all residual traces of the former existence of these departing groups. To achieve this, the instigators of ethnic cleansing do not stop at the demolition of material remains of the displaced, levelling churches, mosques, synagogues, monuments, graveyards, and frequently homes (though sometimes the houses are occupied by neighbors or new settlers of the ethnic majority population). They also destroy all cultural and linguistic residues, burning books, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and archives, changing place and street names, re-writing history books and ethnographies, or proscribing the use of a language.

Secondly, ethnic cleansing also involves dispossessing the displaced population. Sometimes the state itself undertakes to expropriate their property. More often it

encourages its supporters to rob, exploit, and cheat the refugees out of their possessions. There is purpose in this criminality: to ensure departing communities have no means to return, and to ensure that if they do return, they can make no claims over confiscated or stolen property.

Finally, ethnic cleansing is deeply misogynistic, invariably being directed disproportionately at female populations as the “cultural and biological repository of the nation” (p. 83). In particular, Naimark underlines the use of systematic campaigns of rape as a “tool of ethnic cleansing” (p. 197), employed to terrorize the target population, to drive them out of their homes and territories, and to punish and humiliate them for their difference.

Naimark’s stated ambition in this work is that by identifying “the characteristics of ethnic cleansing and [examining] the way it works in concrete cases ... we may perhaps find ways to prevent future episodes, or at least to stop them earlier in their fearsome trajectories towards genocide” (p. 185). His conclusion, however, is not optimistic. Corrupt and cynical political elites continue to exploit integral nationalism to mobilize support; having gained power, they continue to implement “homogenizing” programs on behalf of their own socio-ethnic constituency. Yet when nationalist regimes undertake such actions, the international community continues to be impotent, refusing to intervene or intervening tardily and ineffectually. What is worse, history seems to demonstrate that ethnic cleansing is successful in its own terms. In Kosovo, despite international intervention (or, some would claim, partly as a result of a belated and misconceived intervention), “ethnically pure enclaves are under construction, separated from their former neighbours by walls, barbed wire, and heavily armed NATO forces” (p. 182). As Naimark argues, societies in the longer term are left impoverished by the departure of minorities and the permanent loss of diversity.

Overall, this volume is a significant contribution to the literature on genocide, as well as to our understanding of forms of collective violence and the nature of the modern state. The book’s strengths have already been described. To criticize it for a lack of great theoretical originality or sophistication would be to miss the point—this volume is designed to be a comparative analysis of a series of empirical case studies, and its conceptual framework is perfectly adequate for this purpose. It raises many important and challenging questions, in particular concerning the nature of “high modernism”; about the correlation between modern state-building and the

“totalizing” claims and practices of different systems and regimes; about the rationality of ethnic cleansing as a state strategy; about the character of popular participation in collective violence; and about the displaced person’s own experience of ethnic cleansing. That a slim volume such as this offers only partial answers is to be expected. Indeed, its great virtue and value lie precisely in its vigorous exposition of a new and vital research agenda, which will, without doubt, inspire many scholars to pursue more exhaustive studies. That the publishers failed to include relevant maps to illustrate the case studies is, however, unforgivable, especially since the author defines ethnic cleansing specifically with reference to its territorial dimensions.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Isidor Wallimann and Michael Dobkowski, *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000). While many of the individual chapters are engaging works of historical synthesis, social scientific abstraction, or theological and philosophical reflection, the volume as a whole, in the opinion of this reviewer, serves more to befuddle than to enlighten.

[2]. See, for example, David Mazower’s *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998); and Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

[3]. For a magnificent treatment of collective violence in non-European societies, offering meticulous analysis of many instances of ethnic cleansing, see Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001).

[4]. Naimark here acknowledges the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[5]. Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Elisabeth Domansky, “Militarization and Reproduction in World War I Germany,” in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870-1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 427-463.

[6]. For the “unmixing of peoples,” see Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the Na-*

tional Question in the New Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially chap. 6.

[7]. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve*

Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). See also, for example, Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*.

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