We can no longer choose our problems; they choose us.

Albert Camus

Genocide has existed in all periods of human history, but prior to the contemporary period it was rare except as an aspect of war, or, in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, as an aspect of development. To a large extent genocide also appeared in a form specific to a given period—conquest, religious persecution, colonial domination. In the twentieth century, however, genocide has been a common occurrence; moreover, the forms it has taken are diverse and spring from different motives: there has been a convergence of destructive forces in our period.

Camus called the twentieth century an age of murder, but it is, more precisely, an age of politically sanctioned mass murder, of collective, premeditated death intended to serve the ends of the state. It is an age of genocide in which 60 million men, women, and children, coming from many different races, religions, ethnic groups, nationalities, and social classes, and living in many different countries, on most of the continents of the earth, have had their lives taken because the state thought this desirable. Such an age should perhaps be condemned out of hand, but it must also be understood: for we have to live as well as die in that world, and, to be realistic, a great many persons alive today have contributed to that genocide, mainly through passivity, but often through more active involvement.

There have been other ages of genocide—Assyria engaged in genocide almost annually for several hundred years and turned deportation
and forced labor into routine instruments of public policy, and millions of lives were taken in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in the name of progress. Yet there are unique aspects to genocide in the twentieth century—the scale, the range of victims, the technology, the variety of genocidal forms, even the motives—that set it apart from earlier ages of human destructiveness. It is these that this chapter will explore, but without neglecting elements of repetition and continuity in the politics of death.

I

Genocidal precedents exert pressure, yet each occurrence of genocide is separate: the specific victims, perpetrators, motives, methods, and consequences differ. Nevertheless, each genocide is related to all others in certain ways. Genocide must be legitimated by tradition, culture, or ideology; sanctions for mass murder must be given by those in authority; the forces of destruction have to be mobilized and directed; and the whole process has to be rationalized so that it makes sense to the perpetrators and their accomplices. Victims, however else they may differ, will be vulnerable to attack and will be perceived as lying outside the universe of moral obligation. They will be dehumanized: "Cargo, cargo" is the way Franz Stangl described his victims at Treblinka; "Guayaki," a term meaning "rabid rat," is how the Paraguayans refer to the Aché Indians. They will be viewed not as individuals but only as members of a despised group, blamed for their own destruction, and held accountable in terms of the ancient notion of collective and ineradicable guilt. Then, too, there is the ever present cruelty; this must be discussed at greater length, however, since it is often either ignored or misunderstood.

One is tempted to say that in the contemporary period genocide is a crime of logic, whereas in earlier ages it was a crime of passion. But this would distort both the present and the past: much gratuitous cruelty accompanies genocide today, and most of the genocide from the twelfth century B.C. forward has been premeditated, a rational instrument to achieve an end. What is proper, though, is to recognize that because much contemporary genocide aims at the total elimination of a group, which even with modern means of destruction takes time, sheer passion is not likely to sustain the participants beyond the initial destruction. Thus, the fabricators of genocide today have created the image of an "ideal killer": the "dispassionate, efficient killer, engaged in systematic slaughter, in the service of a higher cause." Nevertheless, all genocide, over and above the actual killing of persons, appears to contain a large measure of cruelty. Not all of this is gratuitous, however. Some of it in earlier society stemmed from the sheer exhilaration of power that accompanied destruction, or was calculated to create terror or to exact retribu-
tion; more recently (though this also occurred in earlier societies), some cruelty has been ritualistic, expressive of good triumphing over evil, as in the slaying of the Indonesian Communists. In many respects, then, the brutality that accompanies genocide is culturally patterned. In more modern, secular cultures, however, there is little or no support for torture, as opposed to the taking of lives, yet much sadistic behavior still occurs. Here the cruelty can perhaps be understood as the dehumanization—loss of compassion, psychic numbing, detachment—that results from the prolonged participation in mass slaughter. But however one is to explain it, cruelty is everywhere the twin—not the father—of genocide.

There is another element that is found in many genocides, though there are important exceptions in earlier ages: the refusal to accept responsibility for one's acts. The refrain is familiar: we knew nothing, we only obeyed orders, it was God's will, we were defending ourselves, they had it coming. On the other hand, while most twentieth-century genocide has been preceded by crisis or great frustration, this seems not to be the case historically, except perhaps where religious genocide has occurred. Indeed, the relationship between crisis and genocide is almost the opposite of what some scholars have taken it to be. And even in the twentieth century, crisis has not always existed: the Indians of Paraguay, Brazil, and Peru, for example, have been destroyed out of cold calculation of gain (and in some cases, sadistic pleasure) rather than as the result of economic or political crisis. While context and situation are important, genocide is never an accidental feature of society.

II

Genocide is almost always a premeditated act calculated to achieve the ends of its perpetrators through mass murder. Sometimes, however, genocidal consequences precede any conscious decision to destroy innocent groups to satisfy one's aims. This is most often the case in the early phases of colonial domination, where through violence, disease, and relentless pressure indigenous peoples are pushed toward extinction. With the recognition of the consequences of one's acts, however, the issue is changed: to persist is to intend the death of a people. This pattern of pressure, recognition, and persistence is typically what happened in the nineteenth century. Today, however, when indigenous groups come under pressure, the intention to destroy them is present from the outset; there are few illusions about the likely outcome. The distinction, then, between premeditated and unpmeditated genocide is not decisive, for sooner or later the genocidal is transformed into genocide.

Rather than being simply an expression of passion, genocide is a rational instrument to achieve an end. While these ends have varied from
perpetrator to perpetrator and, to a large extent, by historical period, they have typically included the following: revenge, conquest, gain, power, and purification/salvation. From these we can construct a grammar of motives which, in effect, asks the perpetrator: What are you trying to do and why is it so important that you are willing to sacrifice thousands, even millions of lives (including those of children) to achieve it? Formal, but nevertheless useful, answers to these questions are contained in the different types of genocide, arranged in terms of the grammar of motives. Classified in this manner, the pure types of genocide are retributive, institutional, utilitarian, monopolistic, and ideological.

**Retributive Genocide**

Retribution may play a role in all genocide, but it does so mainly as a rationalization: it is a way of blaming the victim. Though it draws from the vocabulary of justice and of judicially administered punishment, genocide destroys persons most often for what they are rather than for anything they have done. In this sense, retribution flows from the dehumanization that has been fastened to the victims before they are attacked. As a principal motive in genocide, retribution is rare, but it does seem to figure prominently in accounts of conquerors like Chingis-khan (Genghis Khan). Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how the "Conqueror of the World," as he called himself, differed in his actions when inspired by revenge than he and others did when they engaged in the institutional genocide associated with warfare until about the fifteenth century.

**Institutional Genocide**

Institutional genocide was the major source of politically sanctioned mass murder in the ancient and medieval worlds. The massacre of men, the enslavement of women and children, and, often, the razing of towns and the destruction of the surrounding countryside, were universal aspects of conquest: genocide was embedded in the very notion of warfare. As such, no explicit decision had to be made to commit genocide—it had become routinized. In part, institutional genocide was motivated by the desire to create terror, to display one's power, and to remove the possibility of future retaliation. But it was also due to a failure of political imagination: genocide was a substitute for politics. Instead of ruling a city or territory, extracting tribute from it, and perhaps even incorporating it into one's own system of power and authority, the society was devastated. By the late medieval period this practice had largely ended in the West (indeed, it had begun to change with the Romans, who understood that only through politics could one build an empire), yet it became a prominent part of the Crusades and was made all
the more deadly because of religious passion. In any case, institutional genocide continued in the East with figures like Timur Lenk until the fifteenth century. For some 500 years thereafter, the genocide of conquest disappeared. It is possible, however, that both guerrilla warfare and the use of nuclear weapons signify a revival of this early form of genocide. If the means are different, the motives seem not that dissimilar, and the consequences include both widespread devastation and the massive taking of innocent life by those in authority.

**Utilitarian Genocide**

If utility played a role in institutional genocide, it became particularly prominent in the genocide of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, when colonial domination and exploitation of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Australia, Tasmania, parts of Africa, and elsewhere became pronounced. It has continued in the twentieth century, especially in Latin America, where Indians have been subjected to genocidal attacks in the name of progress and development. Apart from the more sadistic aspects of this kind of destruction, the object has been Indian land—for the timber it contains, the minerals that can be extracted, and the cattle it can feed—and, at the turn of the century, Indian labor to harvest, under conditions of forced labor, the sap of the rubber tree.

Richard Rubenstein has recently argued that development leads to a population "surplus," which in turn leads to programs to eliminate the superfluous population. What is happening with the remaining indigenous population of Latin America, and what was the fate of millions in various areas of the world earlier, has nothing, however, to do with a surplus population (whatever that is, for Rubenstein never defines his basic term). They are being killed, were killed, because of a combination of ethnocentrism and simple greed. The basic proposition contained in utilitarian genocide is that some persons must die so that others can live well. If that proposition no longer claims a large number of lives, it is because the previous genocide was so effective and the remaining tribes so small, with at most a few thousand members each. Yet precisely because of the tenacity of the assaults against them, and the small size of the groups, utilitarian genocide, although somewhat rare in the twentieth century, tends to be total.

**Monopolistic Genocide**

Most genocide prior to the twentieth century was external—it was exacted of groups that lived outside one's territorial boundaries. There are some important exceptions—most of which are connected with religious persecution—but for the most part genocide was directed outward: its goals were conquest and colonial exploitation. Today almost all
genocide is domestic—groups within one’s borders are destroyed. Again there are exceptions—Hitler committed both domestic and external genocide—but most examples of genocide in the twentieth century have been directed inward. Issues that were not at stake in external genocide are central today: who belongs, who is to have a voice in the society, what is to be the basic shape of the community, what should its purposes be?

While these questions obviously lend themselves to ideological solutions, the genocide that has emerged as a means of shaping the basic structure and design of the state and society has been more inclusive than that. Examples of such attempts come from those that are ideologically motivated (Cambodia), those that are not (Pakistan), and those that combine elements of both (Armenia). In fact, whatever the shape of the regime, the most frequent source of genocide in the twentieth century has been the struggle for the monopolization of power. While issues of international dominance, of the distribution of power, of who rules can be raised in any political system, they have been crucial to conflicts that have emerged in Pakistan, Burundi, Nigeria, and other societies that have pervasive cleavages between racial, religious, and ethnic groups. These plural societies are in large part a legacy of nineteenth-century colonialism, but their genocidal struggles take place today within the framework of self-determination. Having been subjected to colonial exploitation and genocide, these societies now butcher themselves.

**Ideological Genocide**

Most genocide in the twentieth century has not been ideological but, where it has, the results have been catastrophic: ideology under modern conditions tends toward holocaust. Most genocide in the past was also not ideological: it was an instrument not for the restructuring of society according to some blueprint of the mind, but for gaining, on the ideal plane, revenge, and on the more tangible one, booty, women, territory, public slaves, or the exploitation of "native" labor and resources. Ideology, in the form of religion, did contribute to human destructiveness—it provided rationalization to the Spanish for conquering and enslaving Indians, it formed the background for repeated attacks on Jews, and was one, but only one, ingredient in the so-called wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the other hand, the Inquisition, which is sometimes cited as an example of genocide, was nothing of the kind: cruel as it was, the Inquisition took the form of a judicial inquiry, with those suspected of either heresy or of insincere belief receiving scrutiny; those convicted (and not all were) were burned en masse, but they were tried as individuals. Nevertheless, some
genocide before the twentieth century certainly was ideological: the destruction of unholy cities in ancient Israel and of the Albigensians in the thirteenth century. The Crusades also to some extent had a religious basis, though many other elements (political ambition, desire for material acquisitions) became entangled in it. In all these cases, however, the aim was essentially conservative: genocide was used to protect and defend a particular religious faith, not as contemporary ideology is, to transform society. With us the attempt has been to eradicate whole races, classes, and ethnic groups—whatever the particular ideology specifies—in order to produce a brave new world free of offensive human material.

At the heart of contemporary ideology is what Camus called a "metaphysical revolt" against the very conditions of human existence: plurality, mortality, finitude, and spontaneity. It is, as it were, an attempt to re-establish the Creation, providing for an order, justice, and humanity that are thought to be lacking. At the same time that it strives for a kind of salvation, it is often motivated by a profound desire to eliminate all that it perceives as being impure—be it race, class, or even, in the case of the Khmer Rouge, cities. The revolt is metaphysical, but it is also deeply moral in an ancient way: the rejection of the unclean, the fear of contamination. How else explain the constant references in Nazism to purification and the Cambodian references to the cleansing of the people? When one attempts to bring about a "perfect" society, much of the human material must be jettisoned; and since humans are going to be killed for what they are rather than for what they have done, the most primitive, but still basic, moral category surfaces, that of the impure. Indeed, one contemporary philosopher suggests that the "dread of the impure and rites of purification are in the background of all our feelings and all our behavior relating to fault." When defilement is understood ideologically, it is literally true, as Paul Ricoeur notes in a different context, that "we enter into the reign of Terror." Yet it is possible to substitute one symbol of evil for another; in the Soviet Union the idea of guilt, especially the objective guilt of class origins, assumes the role played elsewhere by defilement. At bottom, ideology turns politics into a variety of the sacred. Yet holocausts are born, not in the name of God, but of biology, history, and peasant simplicity.

Tendencies, however, are not necessarily results; holocaust is not a matter of deduction. Ideology seldom exists in a pure form: its relationship to culture is of particular importance. Does the culture reinforce the ideology, as in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, or does it come into conflict with it, as in Italy and Cuba? That culture can humanize and restrain ideology gives hope; that it does not always succeed and may even buttress ideology is part of the contemporary uncertainty about the future of genocide in its most extreme form, holocaust.
A recent study of genocide begins with this statement: "The word is new, the crime ancient." This should read, "The word is new, the phenomenon ancient," for while the slaughter of whole groups has occurred throughout history, it is only within the past few centuries that this has produced even a sense of moral horror, much less been thought of as "criminal." Indeed, from ancient times to well into the sixteenth century, genocide was not something that men were ashamed of, felt guilt for, or tried to hide; it was open and acknowledged. Massacre, deportation, forced labor, the transfer of children from one group to another, torture—all are laid out in the Bible, in the official records and monuments of empires, in epic and dramatic poetry, in histories and memoirs. The early Hebrews, the Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans, the Church with its heretics, the Crusaders, the Mongols, and the Spanish in America—each went to great lengths to leave public records of their acts of human destructiveness. Some went further—they boasted of the number of persons killed, the amount of booty gained, the prisoners deported for forced labor, the terror their attacks had inspired.20 In Assyria public festivals were held in celebration of the destruction of yet another people, with prisoners slaughtered as an offering to the gods. Stelae, bas-reliefs, obelisks, monuments of every sort were then erected by the king to commemorate his deeds.21 Like us, but for different reasons, the kings thought that no act of genocide should be forgotten. But one does not have to look only at the Assyrians: similar accounts of revelling in destruction could be taken from the memoirs of the Crusaders and others.22

In the twentieth century, however, no country has acknowledged that it engaged in genocide. Monuments have sometimes been raised for victims, but not by perpetrators to commemorate their deeds. Turkey not only did not acknowledge publicly that it killed over 300,000 Armenians between 1895 and 1908 and over a million between 1915-1917, but even sixty years later it still denies that genocide was committed: people were relocated as a wartime security measure and some died in the war, but that, it says, is all. Nazi Germany attempted to hide its own massive destruction of the Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, and other groups, including those Germans who were, for reasons of health, considered unfit to live. The most noble chapter in German history, according to Heinrich Himmler, would never be written.23 Civil war, the destruction of terrorists, or the repulsion of external invasion are the terms used by contemporary regimes to describe their genocidal activities. The United Nations, moreover, has only once detected an instance of genocide (despite the fact that its own trucks were used in Burundi to transport victims to their death) and that was of Communist China before it was a member of the United Nations.24 While the Khmer Rouge was destroy-
ing the lives of 3 million of the inhabitants of Cambodia and turning others into refugees, it consistently denied that it had engaged in genocide; rather, it accused other countries of major rights violations. Occasionally, the leaders of a country have admitted privately what was taking place, and years after the event some examples of genocide have been lamented by a new leadership—for example, Nikita Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin's destruction of various nationality groups and, especially, the members of the Party. Yet he also mentioned with approval the destruction of the kulaks. So genocide in the twentieth century, while justified in the eyes of its perpetrators, is not open and is not acknowledged except privately, or for reasons that reject some genocide but fully endorse other examples of it.

In the twentieth century, we find genocide to be horrifying, morally unjust, and criminal, yet we go on committing it. For us the formula goes something like this: It never happened, and besides, they deserved it. Prior to the sixteenth century, when the Spanish in America began to have doubts about killing men whose souls they claimed they wanted to save, the formula would have read: We did it, and they deserved it. Even so, responsibility could still be assigned to a god or, better yet, the victim. But with us, as genocide has become more repugnant, as it has come to seem unthinkable, it has actually become commonplace. Contemporary man deals in bad faith as well as death.

IV

The scale of genocide in the twentieth century is staggering and helps to account in part for the sense of the incomprehensible and the unreal that conditions contemporary responses to genocide. Although genocide has claimed many victims throughout history, in terms of scale, there has never before been a century like ours: in less than one hundred years some 60 million persons have been murdered to meet the needs of the state. And with the exception of the destruction of small groups of indigenous peoples, or the admonitory genocide (a version of the struggle for power) that claims the lives of several hundred persons, genocide in the twentieth century almost never claims less than 100,000 victims—that is the minimum, and the scale quickly goes up from there. Turkey destroyed the lives of a million or more Armenians; Nazi Germany destroyed 6 million Jews, but it is often forgotten that it went on to murder other groups as well, so that a reasonable estimate for the total number of its victims, apart from war deaths, is 16 million; Pakistan slaughtered 3 million Bengalis; Cambodia brought about the death of 3 million persons; and the Soviet Union first destroyed 20 million peasants in the 1930s and then went on to take hundreds of thousands of other lives in the 1940s with its assaults on various nationality groups suspected of disloyalty.
In some ways, of course, it is a mistake to discuss numbers of victims. Every life and every group is unique, and deaths can thus never be compared. Also, numbers have the effect of dissolving the solidarity that victims might otherwise feel for each other; instead of sensing a common plight, questions of who has suffered the most come to the fore. And numbers lead us into thinking that genocide is defined by some magic number of victims, whereas legally and morally that is not what genocide means. Nevertheless, numbers do indicate the massive-ness of the problem of genocide in the current period. They can also help us to see some qualitative differences between genocide as it is practiced now and as it was until at least the nineteenth century, which in its often total assault on indigenous peoples began to resemble the twentieth century, with its attempts to annihilate groups as a whole.

Genocide for most of its history has been local—the conquered city, the particular group of Muslims or Jews before one, the Indians within easy reach of exploitation. It was also segmental—except for groups of heretics or, occasionally, out of desire for revenge, there was no attempt to destroy an entire group (all Jews, all Muslims, all members of a particular race or class). The reason usually given for both the local and segmental quality of genocide prior to the nineteenth century is that dominant groups lacked the means: the instruments of violence were limited and the means of communication and transportation difficult at best. While this is true, it also misses an important point: genocide previously had a finite quality to it; there was no aspiration to eliminate a group totally. In the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, still viewed genocide as rooted in a finite world: tied to appetite, limited in its goals, a world without demand for totality or infinity. But contemporary theories of genocide (Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm, Albert Camus) characteristically present a radically different image of genocide, coinciding with a changed set of experiences with human destructiveness. It remained for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to generate both the means and the desire to destroy entire groups.

V

Genocide of any magnitude requires a sizable number of participants, but it does not necessarily follow that a large increase in victims requires an equally large increase in perpetrators. This partly depends on the technology of destruction that is employed (some forms are, so to speak, labor-intensive, others less so); on whether the victims are concentrated in one area or must be rounded up over a large territory; and on the extent to which the victims are able to resist. It also depends on what might be called the style of destruction. Some regimes, such as that of Idi Amin, concentrate the task of destruction in the hands of specially created units, with almost no participation by wider segments of society.
Others, such as Turkey, deliberately involve the army, local officials, selected tribal and ethnic groups, and in the case of both Turkey and Indonesia, large numbers of peasants. The decision to involve a large number of groups is not due primarily to the availability of technology, but to certain political objectives. In acting as Turkey and Indonesia have, the regime satisfies the passions and greed of elements of the society, thus building support for its actions; destroys the victim group in the most vicious way possible in order to emphasize the subhumanity of the dominated; and, by plunging a large part of the population into murder, binds them to the regime. In other cases still, such as that of Nazi Germany, the intended magnitude of destruction is so great, and the victims so scattered, that most social and political institutions are harnessed to one overriding aim—the taking of lives.

The large-scale genocide of the twentieth century does require numerous participants, but the extent to which this is true varies from case to case. The scale of genocide in the twentieth century is unprecedented with regard to victims; with regard to the percentage of the population that participates in the actual process of destruction, it would appear to be no greater than in previous ages of genocide. But given the frequency of genocide in this century, this means that an enormous number of our contemporaries, with the support and permission of political authority, have committed mass murder.

VI

At all times, genocide has claimed a wide range of victims, but in the twentieth century it has become more extensive. Before our own period, victims came from one or more of the following categories: those subjected to conquest, those destroyed for religious reasons, and those exploited in a colonial relationship. Only a small number of these were killed because of who they were.

Until the early modern period, one was typically subjected to genocide simply because of where one was. Most of the victims of genocide in the past became such because they were on a conqueror's line of march. They died or were enslaved because they were there, not because of any special selection process that singled them out in terms of race, religion, political convictions, or the like. They were victims of institutional genocide. On the other hand, victims of religious genocide, though few in number, were chosen because of who they were: their views and practices were considered a threat to unity and truth. And with the beginnings of colonial domination in the sixteenth century, a much larger set of victims was killed because of who its members were (they came from a different race and a less technologically advanced culture) and what they had (land, gold, labor power). They became victims of utilitarian genocide.
In the twentieth century the range of victims has greatly increased; moreover, almost all of them have been selected for genocide because of who they are, because in the eyes of the stronger group (whether majority or minority) they do not deserve to live. The victims, otherwise so different, have only three attributes in common: for historical, situational, or ideological reasons they have been defined as beyond the circle of moral obligation and thus as inhuman; they are vulnerable to genocidal attacks, whether sporadic or sustained, selective or indiscriminate; and if they do survive, they often carry a greater burden of guilt than the victimizers do for attempting to take their lives. The diversity and range of those who have fallen victim to genocide in this century can be suggested by the simple device of naming names and listing categories: Armenians, Gypsies, Jews, Slavs, Bengalis, Cambodians, Tibetans, Hutus, Ibos, Chinese, Achés; Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims; Communists, non-Communists; kulaks, intellectuals, workers, stone age hunters, national groups, homeless peoples; persons who are black, brown, red, yellow, white; the sick and the well; those who resist and those who are compliant; those who are killed because of their race, religion, ethnicity, physical condition, political opinions, class origins, or stage of historical development.

Falling victim to genocide has been so widespread and varied in the twentieth century that few groups can be reasonably sure that they will not be next. Even the most powerful nations—those armed with nuclear weapons—may end up in struggles that will lead (accidentally, intentionally, insanely) to the ultimate genocide in which they destroy not only each other, but mankind itself, sealing the fate of the earth forever with a final genocidal effort. Human history would assume this form (though it would never be written): mankind would have moved from the mortality of the individual (who could be murdered or, like Abraham, "die old and sated with life") to the genocidal destruction of human groups (large or small, completely or incompletely) to the extermination of the species itself. The will to genocide, which began as the will to power, revenge, wealth, salvation, would have become (what perhaps in some deep sense it had been all along) the will to nothingness.

VII

All the elements of the technology of death that we associate with twentieth-century genocide—bureaucracy, modern communications, rapid transportation, even the concentration camp in a primitive form—had emerged by the late nineteenth century. But apparently the first to perceive the possibilities of this new technology to eliminate a whole group of persons numbering in the millions was the ruling clique in Turkey, which in 1915 began the systematic extermination of the Armenians, an extermination that is the prototype of genocide in the
twentieth century. It was premeditated, centrally planned (though carried out by local officials to a large extent), and intended to be total. It was also, to the extent possible, to be carried out without the knowledge of the outside world. As Michael Arlen notes, "The Armenian genocide was based on the imperfectly utilized but definitely perceived capacities of the modern state for politically restructuring itself, which were made possible by the engines of technology." In fact, he suggests, "In virtually every modern instance of mass murder, beginning, it appears, with the Armenians, the key element . . . which has raised the numerical and psychic levels of the deed above the classic terms of massacre has been the alliance of technology and communications."33

If modern forms of technology do not cause genocide, they facilitate it, extend its range, sustain its actions, and make it possible to destroy huge numbers of victims in a relatively short time. Yet it appears that Hitler's gas chambers were developed not only for the sake of efficiency, but to reduce the moral and psychological burdens that his soldiers had experienced in shooting large numbers of women and children on the Eastern Front.34 The means that contemporary bureaucracy develops to destroy whole groups are calculated not only to kill, but to neutralize any sense of guilt or responsibility for what is done. Ideology can help overcome any feeling of revulsion or any sense of guilt, but only a few of those who are part of the apparatus of destruction may be ideologically motivated. More decisively, modern forms of organization can distance most persons from the actual killing and can routinize the work which supports the killing.35 Most bureaucrats in Germany, for instance, "composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, signed correspondence, talked on the telephone, and participated in conferences." Yet, as Raul Hilberg indicates, they "could destroy a whole people while sitting at their desks."36 Routinization reduces the occasions on which moral questions can arise and encourages the job holder to focus on the technical details of his work rather than on its meaning.37 Moreover, the sharp division of labor fragments the act of destruction—those who decide to commit genocide, those who organize it, and those who carry it out are not the same persons; no one, therefore, accepts responsibility for the final result. Finally, because of the hierarchical structure of the organization, everyone can insist, not insincerely, that they were only obeying orders.38 If organization, communications, transportation, and various new implements of violence (among them the gas chambers) have played central roles in the technology of genocide, their capacity to reduce moral awareness has also been important.

Nevertheless, highly developed organization and sophisticated means of destruction are not always employed in the twentieth century: often there is a mixture of the primitive and the modern. Indian tribes are hunted, like any other prey, in Latin America, but are also bombed from
the air; they are given sugar laced with arsenic and blankets that contain the bacilli of fatal diseases, but are also relocated to reservations that are little more than concentration camps. In Turkey and Indonesia, socially induced hate and dehumanization are substituted for the bureaucratic neutralization of moral responsibility. In Cambodia, ideology allows the cadres of the Khmer Rouge to destroy parents in front of their children, to desecrate age-old religious institutions, and, in place of means of destruction that distance the perpetrator from the victim, to resort to direct and brutal means of disposing of the "impure" portions of the population: beating persons to death with hoes, driving nails into their heads, and carving them open with knives. And in Uganda, victims would often be strangled slowly and then killed with a sledgehammer blow to the chest; thereafter, they would be driven in trucks for hours to a river where they were thrown to crocodiles.

While the capacity for organization varies—the Young Turks were more efficient than the Sultan, the Nazis more sophisticated in the production of mass deaths than either—the use of a low level of technology to destroy hundreds of thousands of victims is done by choice in the twentieth century. Cambodia did have bullets; peasants armed with ritual knives was not the most efficient means of destruction available in Indonesia. Rather, the technology chosen was a mirror of the purposes of the perpetrators (to inflict as much suffering as possible, to gain support for the regime by satisfying the appetites of groups long hostile to the victims) and the culture of the particular society (to invoke the symbolism of an autonomous peasant society, which when it kills uses hoes, or, with Indonesia, emphasizes the ritual triumph of good over evil).

The technology of genocide in the twentieth century thus offers the perpetrator a choice of means that can be tailored to a specific situation. This kind of choice in itself makes contemporary genocide unique, as does its enormous capacity to destroy human life.

Prior to the twentieth century, however, there was little choice in the technology of mass death. For several thousand years the technology of genocide was relatively static. Weapons used were hand-held (clubs, swords, bows) and could be used only in close contact with the victim. The introduction of firearms increased the efficiency of killing and made the work of destruction less physically tiring, but it still involved direct contact. Yet if I am correct in thinking that there were few, if any, moral barriers to genocide until the sixteenth century, this proximity to the victim would not have generated the burdens it would for us. It is odd, then, that those who stress the distancing from violence that is required for contemporary man to destroy his fellows have not explored the more direct, and bloody, genocides of the past. The work was slow and tiring; it went on for days; and in the end, sometimes literally wading in blood, one knew what one had done.
They were able to carry out these acts (which an Eichmann would not have had the stomach for) because, like us, they tended to obey orders, but mainly because—and here they are unlike us—they were not burdened with moral inhibitions against killing those outside the group. The ancient Hebrews, for example, did not worry about killing those who had betrayed the faith, but only about ritual defilement—whether, say, a man had had sexual intercourse before going into the *herem* (a term usually translated "holy war," but which means "a pact with the deity by which everything animate was devoted for destruction").

In addition to various weapons of the sort mentioned, fire was used to destroy large groups. This was one of the favorite methods of the Spanish in America, but was also used by the Crusaders. Another technique, later used by Stalin, was to induce starvation: prisoners were locked up without food and left to die; crops were burned; and, not uncommonly, the available crops were seized and used by the dominant group, allowing the producers to die in a genocidally induced famine.

All of the techniques of destruction in use before the twentieth century were relatively primitive compared to what is available to us. Yet, given the finite goals of earlier genocide, smaller populations, and the absence of moral restraints, it was sufficient unto the day.

VIII

In the end, though, it is the concentration camp that is the symbol of the technology of evil in the twentieth century. It is here, in the world of the dying, that the Nazis, Stalinists, and those like them pursue their beliefs that everything is permitted and everything is possible, and thus aim at the total domination of man, stripping him initially of everything except his body, and finally of even that. Yet we know from Bruno Bettelheim, Aleksander Solzhenitzyn, and Elie Wiesel, and thousands of other survivors, that the attempt fails; under sustained assault and the most grotesque conditions, human beings can still maintain decency, can share with others, and can continue to respect life. One looks for parallels to the concentration camps, but, as Hannah Arendt indicates, there are none: "Forced labor in prisons and penal colonies, banishment, slavery, all seem for a moment to offer helpful comparisons, but on closer examination lead nowhere." Whether the camps serve as places of detention, forced labor, or extermination (the usual classification, but misleading since most inmates do, after all, die in the camps), they are places in which "punishment is meted out without connection with crime . . . exploitation is practiced without profit, and . . . work is performed without product." It is here that one confronts what Arendt calls "radical evil": an absolute evil that cannot be punished, forgiven, or comprehended in terms of any recognizably human motives. Not surprisingly, therefore, the metaphor of pain and endless torment that
most of us fall back on is one that secular society knows only at second hand and abstractly, the image of Hell. In fact, it is through the medieval depiction of Hell, where

\begin{quote}
The very weeping there forbids to weep,
And grief finding eyes blocked with tears
Turns inward to make agony greater
\end{quote}

that the literary critic George Steiner believes we can begin to grasp the horror and meaning of the concentration camp. For it is here that we find the "technology of pain without meaning, of bestiality without end, of gratuitous terror. . . . In the camps the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation was realized." quite true, yet the comparison is dangerously flawed: for Hell, as traditionally understood, was a place of justice, and neither those readied for mass execution in Treblinka nor those left to a Darwinian struggle against exhaustion and gradual starvation in Kolyma deserved their fate.

The fact that the analogies fail is not without its own significance. For the failure of imagination indicates that we are in the presence of a unique form of human destructiveness, one that in itself separates the twentieth century from all that has gone before.

IX

The twentieth century, then, is an age of genocide. Moreover, in terms of the number and range of victims, the variety of forms that genocide has taken, the urge toward total destruction of whole groups, the elaborate technology that facilitates death and eases conscience, the concentration camp, and the radical evil that is inseparable from it, it is a unique age of genocide. But to speak of "uniqueness" in the context of political death is, at bottom, to call attention to the acuteness of the problem; it is, in human terms, to indicate the necessity of finding means to prevent further genocide. The massiveness of genocide in this century, however, makes us feel that the task of prevention is futile. Despair stands in the way of action, knowledge leads to a sense of hopelessness. Yet we know from Sören Kierkegaard that despair is a sin, whether against God or man, and sin exists to be overcome. We cannot bring back to life the dead of this century or those who have been victims of political mass murder throughout the ages, but we can act. It is not true, as some have thought, that "he who saves the life of one, saves the world," but it is a good beginning.
NOTES


15. If this is the tendency, it may not, for reasons suggested later, always be the result. Yet, with one partial exception, all holocausts have been
associated with deeply ideological regimes. The Armenian holocaust was motivated in equal parts by ideology and the quest for dominance, but retribution and even utility played important roles, especially at the local level. I am uncertain whether a holocaust could ever come about wholly apart from ideology, but it may be that a strong convergence of motives could produce such a result.


19. Ibid.


25. For the conversations between the Turkish leaders and the American ambassador at the time of the worst of the atrocities against the Armenians, see Henry Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story (New York: Doubleday Page, 1918), pp. 307, 333-39, 342, 351-52, 391-92. For Khrushchev’s speech and commentary on it, see Bertram D. Wolfe, Khrushchev and Stalin’s Ghost (New York: Praeger, 1957).


40. If one starts from the present, one asks what weakens and erodes the moral restraints against genocide. If, on the other hand, one starts with the ancients, one has to ask how these restraints came about in the first place and when, and subsequently consider why they have not been more effective. If we just assume that such moral inhibitions have always existed, we distort the history of both genocide and society. On the historical nature of morality and the invention of guilt, see Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals.
45. Ibid., p. 457.
46. George Steiner, In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 53-55. The quotation is from the thirty-third canto of Dante's Inferno as translated by Steiner.
47. Ibid., pp. 54-55.