



The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat by Robert J. Lifton; Eric Markusen

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Political Psychology, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 383-385

Published by: [International Society of Political Psychology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791472>

Accessed: 19/02/2014 06:00

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BOOK REVIEW

The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat. By Robert J. Lifton and Eric Markusen. New York: Basic Books, 1990, 346 pp., \$22.95.

The Genocidal Mentality is a timely corrective to the recent disappearance of nuclear threat from public awareness. The end of the cold war, progress in arms control, and talk of a "peace dividend" in the United States have created an impression that the nuclear sword of Damocles no longer hangs over the earth. Inconvenient problems that contradict this fantasy of security are banished from the political agenda, most disturbingly in the United States. These problems include: (1) the continuing development, production, and deployment of first-strike and other advanced weapons technologies by the United States and the USSR; (2) the continuing automation of command and control, with the "hair trigger posture" this entails; (3) the persistence of the "deadly connection" with the proliferation of nuclear, conventional, chemical, and biological weapons in politically unstable parts of the world; and (4) the absence of comprehensive planning for a peace economy, disarmament, and alternative global institutions for common security. To their credit, Lifton and Markusen have not been deflected by political and public relation fads, and the psychological defenses these serve, from confronting the continuing threat to human existence posed by deterrence and related national security policies.

The book is a major contribution to political psychology in the tradition of Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* and Fromm's *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. And like those earlier efforts, this one creatively subsumes psychological and sociological levels of analysis in a common conceptual framework. The "genocidal mentality" of individuals is viewed in dynamic causal interaction with genocidal institutions, weapons, and war plans. While this is perhaps an obvious precondition to understanding the real world, it is unfortunately rarely met by most of the literature on national security, which tends to focus on geopolitical macrosystems to the exclusion of the human subject. Most political scientists who do take account of the human subject, such as Robert Jervis, tend to focus on cognitive processes, implicitly assuming a utilitarian model of human motivation. Lifton and Markusen extend the analysis of deterrence beyond ques-

tions of cognition and utility, and into the deep waters of the self, its existential needs, and the deformations of self wrought by nuclear threat.

The book consists of a careful comparative study of current superpower preparations for nuclear genocide and the genocide actually committed against Jews and other groups by the Third Reich during the 1940s. Drawing upon a wealth of published primary and secondary literature as well as Lifton's in-depth interviews with Nazi doctors and American nuclear weapons professionals, the authors uncover social and psychological mechanisms common to the two genocidal systems. The analysis is carefully qualified by the articulation of differences as well as similarities. Unarmed Jews in the 1940s, for example, are hardly comparable to the military threat posed by nuclear-armed superpowers. Neither can an actual genocide be equated with a potential one. Finally, while the Nazis were intentionally genocidal, proponents of deterrence argue that its purpose is precisely to prevent genocide, which would occur only in the event the policy failed.

One might well ask, given the seriousness of these differences, whether the comparison set up in *The Genocidal Mentality* is not fatally flawed from the beginning, regardless of similarities that might also be adduced. The authors themselves confront this problem. They point out, correctly in my opinion, that the differences upon close examination prove to be far from absolute.

However little the Jews threatened the survival of Hitler's Germany in reality, the Nazis certainly *perceived* them as destroying the body politic. Conversely, as real as the military threat of a nuclear adversary undoubtedly is, *perception* of the threat has been distorted by Cold War ideology on both sides. Whereas the threat itself might have been reversed by international agreement, Cold War perceptions precluded this and fueled escalation instead. For purposes of a psychological study, therefore, the differences between the two situations do not outweigh a fundamental commonality: the genocidal response of a traumatized nation to perceived threats to its survival. For Germany, the trauma was the humiliation of defeat in World War I. For the superpowers it was the terror that accompanied Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the threat to human survival felt even before nuclear arsenals were built up. In both cases, the nations attempted to cope with an unmanageable primary trauma through a genocidal response directed at a target of convenience.

Similarly, there is a continuum between potential and actual, which is recognized in law under the category of "inchoate crimes"—the threat or conspiracy to commit a criminal act. The authors trace this sequence in the Nazi case, showing how the evolution of organizational and technical means interacted with the genocidal mentality to push Germany across the threshold from potential to actual. In the nuclear case, both superpowers are very far along in this sequence. And with one superpower having already crossed the threshold with the 1945 atomic bombings, the psychological barrier separating humanity

from actual nuclear holocaust is thin indeed. If the Nazi holocaust has anything to teach us, we obviously need to learn it *before* nuclear genocide goes any further.

Differences regarding genocidal intent likewise prove less than absolute, a conclusion understandably disturbing to Americans in proportion to their support for deterrence policies. While the Nazis undoubtedly undertook a policy of intentional genocide, they concealed this intent from themselves and others through secrecy, deception, and an ideology in which the genocide was interpreted in terms of a higher purpose. The Nazis did not imagine themselves to be murdering innocent people, but rather to be cleansing their nation of “life unworthy of life”—carriers of a disease that was destroying Germany. Conversely, the ideology that interprets nuclear war preparations in terms of the higher purpose of maintaining peace and security, along with the Pentagon’s culture of secrecy and deception, serve to conceal from policy-makers and others the genocidal intent embodied in the operational planning of nuclear war.

Lifton and Markusen’s comparative analysis poses a serious challenge to the ideology of deterrence. The authors probe below the surface of the ideology to the dissociation of self at its basis—the split self who prepares for and threatens nuclear genocide while imagining himself to be maintaining peace and security. The book documents in rich detail the mechanisms of dissociation operating in the professionals who create and maintain genocidal cults on behalf of the state—doctors and biologists in the Third Reich, weapons scientists and strategists in the deterrence regimes. But the cults also depend upon widespread public dissemination of genocidal ideologies and attendant “vast societal involvement.” This is a book for deterrence professionals and citizens alike, for Holocaust survivors and their children no less than for political psychologists. It is a book for healing our dissociation in the century of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

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