

Understanding Genocidal Tendencies Within Different Cultures
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What makes a person kill another? This question has been around since the beginning of man-kind. Not much is known today, but the majority of people who kill, do it for a purpose and believe that they are doing the right thing. Killing another human being is difficult to do when looking at it within the Western cultural and ethical view. When people start seeing others as below them or just simply different, it becomes easier for them to kill in order to wipe away certain “problems”. This has been seen time and time again throughout history, including today.

When studying different atrocities and genocides, scholars use a wide variety of different types of information to make conclusions on why certain types of destruction happen. There are many different angles taken to read genocide such as government type, economic standing, etc. These categories are helpful, but ignore the underlying factor that connects them all, the creation of culture and beliefs. These two factors are often overlooked, but should be the top priority of research in order to prevent future genocides. This paper focuses on the importance of the culture and ethical decisions made from the perpetrators for prior genocides, such as the Holocaust and the Cambodian Genocide, and areas at a high risk of genocide today, such as Burundi and Syria.

Decisions of killing are made involving, in part, a person’s personal morals and beliefs. Culture is one of the most influential factors that help determine how we think and how we act, even subconsciously. When societies view others as having

certain values differing from their own, categorizing a hierarchy of people becomes easier. When violent tendencies back up the categorizing, it can accelerate the slippery slope of genocide. When our military enters an area of atrocity to prevent genocide, they must know why the perpetrators act the way they do in order to respond effectively. They must be able to put their ethical beliefs aside to do this.

When attempting to fully understand an atrocity, one must be able to step into the cultural and ethical shoes of all of those involved, including the perpetrators and the victims. Social sciences today cannot be boiled down to statistics and interpretations from economic changes and other simple facts. One must look at the feelings and passions behind the numbers to understand what it is like to grow up under certain conditions and how the moral lessons placed at an early age is part of understanding perpetrators. Once a group of people is understood, then more accurate solutions can be implemented to deter violence and prevent genocide by our military.

Biography:

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The majority of people on earth are not considered evil, but all are capable of committing evil acts. However killing another person, typically seen as a natural crime, can be justified in many different ways. For example, self-defense and capital punishment involve killing someone, but it is justified. Justification is achieved through one's cultural perception of a certain situation. Manipulation of one's cultural beliefs can lead them into believing violence is logical, and the right thing to do. In the eyes of a culturally manipulated perpetrator, they are not killing the innocent, but instead solving a problem. Killing is not an immediate, normalized solution for most cultures, yet it happens often in cases of extreme violence. When a society is struggling, some cultural norms and values can be manipulated to perpetuate new extremist beliefs. Through this manipulation different cultures have used diverse avenues to achieve acts of genocide. The goal of this paper is to highlight certain cultural beliefs that helped justify genocide in the past and current beliefs that are threatening the future with genocides.

Individuals have free will, which makes it nearly impossible to know for sure what someone will do at any time. Though exact predictions are hard to evaluate, one can hypothesize what someone is capable of when the individual's culture is analyzed. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization."¹ One study by Hokkaido University documented the choice of some objects in comparison to the person's culture and society. They found that a person's culture creates incentives from a cultural perspective, which can guide an individual's behaviors.²As a person's culture has

influence on their choices, it can give validity to the predictions of the behavior of an entire group. Though the predictions of action will never be precise or exactly correct, it is an important step to help prevent future atrocity crimes, such as genocide, from being committed.

Culture is a factor that shapes and defines a society. It can be broken down in many different ways, from “Western Civilization Culture”(Westernization) to a specific neighborhood’s culture. Within each of these levels of culture, there are two sub-sections that are laid out, which are foundational and institutional sections of culture.

Foundational behaviors are the core values of a society that are taught from a young age which hold and create a person’s moral values. Ideas of right and wrong, a sense of justice and other opinions would be considered foundational culture. A leading group or person in governance forms the institutional behaviors. These behaviors serve the purpose to strengthen the group’s existence and their views to create rules and order. An example of this would be mala prohibita laws, like the criminalization of prostitution.

Institutional behaviors are often intertwined with foundational behaviors, which legitimizes institutional logic. When cultural ideals are broken down this way, one can see how and why a society acts certain ways.

One must look at different cultures objectively, in order to step into their shoes to get a better understanding of their actions, without ethnocentrism. There is no ultimate and supreme ‘right and wrong’ between all situations and cultures around the world. Therefore, no absolute judgment can be placed on the society’s views of their concept of right and wrong. Only understanding why people believe the way they do will help create a better sense on how mass atrocities are justified in the eyes of the perpetrating society.

It is important to remember that just because one culture has certain cultural tendencies, this does not guarantee or even allude to violent behavior.

Nazi Germany

The Holocaust is likely the first thing that comes to mind when discussing genocide. The Nazi party started as the National Socialist Workers Party around 1919 when it soon after transformed into the Nazi Party. Hitler and the Nazis took over land; they claimed it to be Aryan, without much conflict until they took Poland, and France and Britain declared war on September 3rd 1939. The Nazis perpetrated the deaths of up to six million Jews along with millions of other undesirable groups such as the Roma-Sinti (Gypsies), homosexuals, and political opponents among others. Victims suffered in different ways, but gassing victims in concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, was the preferred method of death by the Nazis. The Holocaust ended with the defeat of the Nazis in Berlin in 1945. The perpetrators started as ordinary people, whose views were then distorted by the Nazi regime.³

The Nazis were able to push their violent intentions into to the hearts of average people by abusing Germany's foundational culture of obedience and discipline. The end of the First World War had desensitized the German people of violence, as the country struggled economically after the war, mainly from the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles. In order to rebuild, certain liberties and choices of German citizens such as wages, strikes, press, and meetings were narrowed. Disobedience to the country was met with severe penalties.⁴ Discipline is still seen within Germany today with the importance of "keeping the trains on time" and formality still prevalent. It is easy to see how a society that values obedience can be manipulated into a tool for violence. Many of the

defendants of the Nuremberg trials claimed that they were not responsible because they were just following orders. This defense was discounted however when the International Military Tribunal (IMT) stated that Hitler and Nazi Party chieftains were not exclusively responsible for the wars and crimes of the Third Reich.⁵

ISIS

ISIS is one of the greatest threats facing the United States, and the rest of the modern world today. The group started as one of many rebel groups in the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011. They followed al-Qaeda's ideology and over time, merged with similar groups. Their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's extensions of groups angered al-Qaeda, thus led for ISIS to break away from the organization and become their own independent entity. ISIS has gained power and influence by robbing banks and taking over areas in both Iraq and Syria, including their now proclaimed capital Raqqa.⁶ One goal of ISIS proclaimed within their statements is to create a Caliphate. The Caliphate is an Islamic state, which follows Sharia Law under the Sunni ideology. ISIS has recently started attacking countries outside the Middle East. Recent cases including the attacks in Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino, which shows how ISIS is a worldwide terror group that seeks to destroy all who do not share their way of life.

Devout Muslims dominate the Middle East, and the Koran, and all other teachings of Islam, is what guides the way of life and their code of ethics. Just like every other major religion, such as Christianity, the teachings in their chosen word of God was written long ago and violence and wrath was used to explain and justify certain actions in order to defend the religion. ISIS, along with other extremists, uses these violent teachings in order to justify their violence. One major teaching in the Koran that is used

to manipulate people into violence is jihad. Jihad normally a term associated with the internal struggle to be a good Muslim, is used to justify a new Holy War and the establishment of the Caliphate. Videos released by ISIS claim, to fight for ISIS is the will of Allah, and any true Muslim is obligated to fight for the cause.⁷ To be clear, any implication that all Muslims are terrorists or are violent is not the intention in this section. The words of the Koran are being manipulated, as have the words of the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Bible in the past, in order to shift beliefs towards hate and violence. Faith in distorted Islam is the largest motivator for justification of violence and cannot be ignored.

Manipulation of foundational culture does not happen without a median or force by the perpetrating ideology. Once violent ideologies gain enough strength, they create a new sense of institutional culture. Nazi Germany and ISIS have achieved strength in a similar way, propaganda. These groups spread their message and mass reeducation through media. When one ideology controls the media, they can begin to manipulate average people's beliefs on certain subjects by publishing hate within multiple types of media and societal outlets, such as posters, film, speeches and control over published works. Propaganda is an important element in many other instances of mass atrocities and genocide, if not all of them. ISIS and Nazi Germany are being examined due to their relation of importance and similar use of modern media.

The Nazis placed great importance on propaganda of media, even creating a specific ministry for it. Next to Hitler, one of the most recognizable names of the Nazi regime was the minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels and the Ministry of Propaganda regulated and controlled all radio, press, and film services; deliberately

making sure it was uniform to Nazi ideology and distributed to even the smallest communities. Posters and news articles were widely distributed across Germany and Axis controlled areas. Most of these messages were designed to promote hatred of the Jews and the importance and superiority of the Aryan race.⁸ Multiple risk assessments call this discrimination a risk factor of genocide, including the UN's *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crime*.

Today, the reach of ISIS's hateful propaganda extends across the entire planet, mostly due to the Internet. Popular social media outlets, such as Facebook, have been used to spread ISIS's message along with other outlets that show videos of the group's power and successes. These videos vary in content ranging from preaching justification to executions of captured enemies. Interviews with ISIS individuals have also shown that within the controlled areas, they educate children at an early age to mold the interpretation of Islam that promotes the health and future of the established Caliphate. Through this propaganda, they use emotion to justify and defend their faith, because in their eyes, they are under attack from the rest of the world and Allah wants them to fight.⁹ These messages of honor and a better way of life help motivate individuals to potentially become future perpetrators.

One can look back at history to see what caused events to happen. The popular phrase, "history repeats itself" is true; the similar use of propaganda to promote hate is evidence of this. In both the Nazi regime and ISIS, an extremist group has gained power and if they wish to hold on to it, they require a large number of people to share and support the same views and actions. Both the Nazis and ISIS used modern and far-reaching sources of media to spread their messages and propaganda. This method is

extremely effective and is the only way for people outside their immediate control to support them. Mass propaganda with the spread of violent ideologies has the opportunity to justify genocide and other mass atrocities, in many people's cultural perception.

Cambodia

Cambodia suffered a mass atrocity under the fog of the Vietnam War. The Khmer Rouge was a communist group that forced their views onto the people with extreme force, and caused the atrocity of the 1970s. Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, gained strength in the poor countryside of Cambodia by preaching hate towards the more educated population within the cities with the intentions to keep the population pure. The victims were reeducated in labor camps, while others were accused of being spies and were tortured or killed in the infamous S-21 prison. Estimated death tolls state that over two million were killed during Pol Pot's reign. Many died from hunger, while others died from executions and torture. The Khmer Rouge lost power in 1978 when Cambodia was invaded by Vietnam ending their reign of terror.¹⁰

Violence was not a new subject for the people of Cambodia. The foundational culture of Cambodians reveals they hold a strong importance of grudges and revenge. If a Cambodian has been dishonored or has suffered in some way, they are likely to respond with *karsângsoek*, a disproportionate revenge. Rather than an eye for an eye, *karsângsoek* is a head for an eye. There is great desire to repay all deeds, regardless if they are good or bad and this moral obligation is partially responsible for the majority of violence in Cambodia. Alexander Hinton explains how rooted grudges are in Cambodian society when he shows the ties into Khmer, the Cambodian language. "The word *singsoek* literally means, "to pay back" (*sang*) "the enemy" (*soek*). A Cambodian bearing malice is

often said to be "tied, linked" (*ching*) to an enemy by anger or a grudge (*ching komhoeng, chang kumnum*)".¹¹

Burundi

Burundi has been in the news as of late and there is much concern, especially within the international community about where the current conflict, which some consider genocidal, is heading. Anger, violence, and frustrations have risen recently due to President Pierre Nkurunziza staying in office for a third. Currently, conflicts are between civilians and federal security forces, but there is worry that the anger has been shifting to ethnic lines. Burundi has a history of violence between ethnicities (Hutu and Tutsi), with perpetrators on both sides. Massacres of Hutu in 1972 and 1993 killings of Tutsi are fresh in the memory of Burundians and may be used as justification for further violence.

The Hutu and Tutsi divisions have existed for over two thousand years but turned ethnic when European powers took control of the country. Originally, the divisions were economic and were determined by the amount of cattle someone owned. When European powers entered Burundi to colonize, they began to make the divisions more permanent. Later the Belgians introduced ID cards in the 1930s that both legitimized and finalized the divisions. The Tutsis were historically in charge and yet were the minority of Burundi. Ethnic splits along with unequal power structures angered the majority Hutu to violence and the Tutsi responded with proclaimed self-defense to survive.¹² In the recent conflict, there have been reports on the ground about violence being targeted around ethnic lines, using the violence from the 1974 genocide, as justification believing that it was payback for the past atrocity.¹³

Governments and laws are a shadow of the beliefs and workings of the society that is under it. Changes within the governmental system can cause a change of belief within that society. These changes are not always smooth, nor are they honest. The citizens care deeply for their government and react to changes with passion. Even within the US, in this 2016 election year, almost everyone has an opinion on each candidate and can share strong beliefs on why they follow one particular person or party. Such deep roots of politics within society are why change of power is an institutional cultural aspect. Politics, as a branch of culture, are considered to be risk factors by some risk assessments, such as Dr. Barbra Harff's 'Risks of New Onsets of Genocide and Politicide in 2013' risk analysis, through her risks of regime changes and certain regime types. Cambodia faced an extreme political change right before the genocide and Burundi is currently in the middle of a change, or lack of change to be more precise, creating cultural struggles of legitimacy between the regime and their citizens.

Support for the Khmer Rouge started in the countryside, with the poor, less educated citizens who believed that they were being mistreated. Along with the difficult day-to-day lifestyle, the Vietnamese and the US bombing of the Ho Chi Min Trail were adding to the suffering of the rural Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge used the ideas of revenge and aimed it towards the people who lived in the city. After the initial violence as the Khmer Rouge took over the cities and evacuated the people into labor camps, forced reeducation, and conformity into the into the new norms resulted in swift punishment. New education created a greater importance of the State rather than the family, previously the most important group to a person. ¹⁴The quick change of proposed

institutional values of the Khmer Rouge resulted in defiance that would only be met with death.

No change in government can be as devastating as a quick change. President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third term has angered the public to the point of violence. Protests have ended in death, journalists are being targeted and beaten for opposing the government and the public is not happy with it. After a failed coup from Tutsi military leaders, security forces have been aggressively responding to any criticism of the government. One example of this was on December 11th 2015 in the capital, Bujumbura, when security forces had killed 79 people, most of who were Tutsi. Witnesses to these events report that some of the victims were children that were executed with a shot to the top of the head. It is estimated that since the early 1990s, around 300,000 people have been killed in Burundi and this number is estimated to rise.

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It is extremely important to learn about and compare genocides in order to learn how to prevent more in the future. In order to understand genocide, one must be able to understand the people, the perpetrators, behind it. Ordinary people can be manipulated to believe anything, including the belief that killing is a good thing. Foundational beliefs and behaviors of culture can be distorted and new institutional beliefs can be implemented in order to achieve this. The traits themselves are not what make a person commit evil acts; these traits do not make anyone a killer or ethically bad, if looked at through a cultural perspective. The previous cultural traits are just examples some of foundational and institutional beliefs of the past and the present that are used to shift

perceptions. When someone's upbringing and worldview is challenged or used in some way, then it makes that argument seem more valid.

¹ Culture [Def. 5c]. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>

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³ Dwork, D., & Pelt, R. J. (2002). *Holocaust: A history*. New York, NY: Norton.

⁴ Sorokin, P. (2010). Types and Fluctuation of the Systems of Social Relationships. In *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (Vol. 4, pp. 436-533). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction

⁵ Taylor, T., Brigadier General. (1997). *Final Report to the Secretary of the Army on the Nuernberg War Crimes Trials Under Control Council Law No. 10*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office. Retrieved from https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_final-report.pdf

⁶ Jawad al-Tamimi, A. (2014). The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 16, 5-15.

⁷ Bassiouni, M. C. (2007). Evolving Approaches to Jihad: From Self-Defense to Revolutionary and Regime-Change Political Violence. *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 8(1), 119-146.

⁸ Chief of Counsel For Prosecution of Axis Criminality. (1946). *Nazi Conspiracy and Agression* (Vol. 1). Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office. Retrieved from https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Nazi_Vol-I.pdf

⁹ Dairieh, M. (Vice News). (2014, August 14). *The Islamic State* (Video File). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUjHb4C7b94>

¹⁰ Kiernan, B. (2008). *The Pol Pot regime: Race, power, and genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (3rd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹¹ Hinton, A. L. (1998). A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide. *American Ethnologist*, 25(3), 352-377.

¹² Lemarchand, R. (1970). *Rwanda and Burundi*. New York: Praeger.

¹³ Gettleman, J. (2015, December 28). Burundi Crackdown Puts Hutus and Tutsis, and the West, on Edge. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/africa/burundi-crackdown-puts-hutus-and-tutsis-and-the-west-on-edge.html?_r=0

¹⁴ Kiernan, B. (2008). *The Pol Pot regime: Race, power, and genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (3rd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹⁵ Elgot, J. (2015, December 12). Burundi: 87 killed in worst violence since April coup attempt. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/12/burundi-bodies-found-worst-violence-since-april-coup>