

Correspondence

Anna Simons

The Dynamics of Internal Conflict

John Mueller

To the Editors:

John Mueller's recent argument about the banality of "ethnic war" contains a curious glitch.¹ Mueller would lead us to believe that the large-scale killings in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s "could happen just about anywhere" (p. 67), without acknowledging that what took place in both countries has occurred repeatedly in each. By failing to adequately consider past events, he then cannot satisfactorily explain why those he labels "thugs" preferentially target only certain categories of fellow citizens, or how interethnic violence can lead to what he is so anxious to dismiss—namely, ethnic war.

This omission is unfortunate because Mueller is correct in his general observation: "Small groups of armed thugs" do play a catalytic role in intrastate violence.² Also, he is astute to lump together Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, because in neither place did the state per se fail (though it did neglect to protect members of particular groups). Violence did not spread to the center from the peripheries, as it did in Somalia and Sierra Leone, two other countries torn asunder by ethnic conflict in the 1990s.³ Nor was it the goal of disaffected citizens to capture (or destroy) the seat of government. Rather, as Mueller points out, the governments helped direct Hutu and Serb perpetrators to pilage, rape, and murder, but always with an unmistakably ethnic bias.

As Mueller himself points out, the thugs could have gone after left-handers or right-handers, or people of a different class or ideological allegiance. But they did not. Instead they were directed to selectively terrorize the populace. In Mueller's view, they were unleashed and allowed to wreak havoc on those who "were on the wrong side of

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1. John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War,'" *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 42–70. Additional references are in parentheses in the text.

2. For examples of this phenomenon, see Alison Des Forges, "Leave None to Tell the Story": *Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, "The Spread of Political Violence in Congo-Brazzaville," *African Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 390 (January 1999), pp. 37–55; Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); and Ali El-Kenz, "Youth and Violence," in Stephen Ellis, ed., *Africa Now: People, Policies, and Institutions* (London: Heinemann, 1996).

3. For an analysis of events in Sierra Leone, see Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth, and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996). On the Somali case, see Anna Simons, *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995).

the political fence" (p. 60). But although the Interahamwe's hatchet men did kill moderates of all stripes in Rwanda, all Tutsis were considered fair game. Nor was this the first time that Tutsis had been collectively targeted simply for being Tutsi. Modern Rwanda has known a succession of ethnic massacres, beginning in 1959, spiking in 1963–64, and resuming in 1990.⁴ So has neighboring Burundi: in 1965, 1972, 1988, 1989, and 1993.⁵ In fact, the timing of events in Rwanda cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the ebb and flow of interethnic relations throughout East-Central Africa. Refugee flows from Tutsi-ruled Burundi have always heightened tensions in Rwanda.⁶ But even domestic Ugandan politics figured into the 1994 genocide, as the formerly Uganda-based Rwanda Patriotic Front (considered a predominantly Tutsi army) launched a series of offensives against President Juvénal Habyarimana's forces in 1991, and then again in February 1994.⁷

Mueller ignores these and other historical and regional complexities. He may have to in order to knock down his straw man, which is the notion that ethnic war is a war of "all against all and neighbor against neighbor" (p. 42). It seems that for Mueller, ethnic conflict has to be grounded in mass hate; so long as "the vast majority" (p. 43) do not take up arms, the conflict cannot be considered ethnically motivated—never mind that most genocides have been perpetrated by a relative few supported by a willfully neglectful many,⁸ or that those who use thugs may have a cunning rationale because any undisciplined, armed gang is likely to generate fear.

Fear, not hatred, is the prime motivator in ethnic conflicts.⁹ People normally fear contamination, competition, and crime. Propaganda (like terrorism) feeds on this fear, and did so in both Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Whenever citizens feel threatened by too much insecurity, they seek protection from the state. Should the state fail them, because officials are either inept or corrupt, individuals then take matters into their own hands. We see this even in the United States in benighted neighborhoods, where heads of households install security systems, purchase guard dogs, and own guns. However,

4. See Catharine Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda," *Africa Today*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (January–March 1998), pp. 7–24; and Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

5. Peter Ulvin, "Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (April 1999), pp. 253–271.

6. As Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 198, remarks, "We have to remember that Rwanda and Burundi have been, since independence, the two opposite ends of a political seesaw. Their parallel—and at times common—past histories, their comparable social structures, their constant and almost obsessive mutual scrutiny, fated them to be natural mirrors of each other's hopes, woes and transformations." See also René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnocide as Discourse and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

7. See Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, pp. 71–74, for the impact of domestic Ugandan politics on the development of the Rwanda Patriotic Front, and pp. 174–186, on what Prunier calls "the February war."

8. See, for instance, Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996)—a work that, tellingly, Mueller does not cite; and Neil J. Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror* (New York: Plenum, 1996).

9. See, for instance, Sarah Kenyon Lischer, "Causes of Communal War: Fear and Feasibility," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1999), pp. 331–355; P.H. Liotta and Anna Simons, "Thicker than Water? Kin, Religion, and Conflict in the Balkans," *Parameters*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Winter 1998–99), pp. 11–27; and Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda," p. 17.

the signals sent (and received) when members of only certain groups are being consistently and systematically singled out for persecution or neglect puts the lie to equal opportunity lawlessness. When perpetrators selectively target the descendants of those who drew their parents' or grandparents' blood, history is evoked. Likewise, for citizens who routinely read the social landscape through ethnic (religious, linguistic, or regional) lenses and parse all political announcements for hidden meanings, "criminals and sadists" do not merely "debase the conditions of life" (p. 67). They also tweak latent phobias, reinvigorate paranoia, shatter faith in the state, and wreck the future.

The twist that Mueller misses is the extent to which thugs in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia made history count and ethnicity matter. As he points out, Slobodan Milošević could not rely on Serb soldiers, many of whom were members of the former Yugoslav army, to do his bidding. Mueller views their recalcitrance as proof that most Serbs were not out to cleanse non-Serbs. But there could be another reason so many Serbs in uniform refused to engage in domestic terrorism. The army was Yugoslavia's most nationalist institution.¹⁰ There is every indication that significant numbers of soldiers viewed themselves not as Serbs first (at least not initially), but as Yugoslavs; their loyalties were to a Yugoslav and not a Serb or Croat nation.¹¹ Ergo the need for thugs.

Deploying an untrained, and untrainable, rabble offers leaders two advantages. Hooligans do not bother to distinguish between (unarmed) civilians and (unarmed) noncivilians. And they engage in crude behavior. The terror they spread is a fear multiplier. Beheadings, mutilations, immolations, and other gruesome acts may incite universal horror, but they also call to mind previous episodes of barbarism.¹² People automatically make the link between who did what to whom in the past and who is doing what to whom in the present; the extent to which history is being repeated is duly noted, and itself becomes a factor in convincing people that nothing is random. Also, in places where people have only one another to rely on—in rural areas and villages (and in dysfunctional states)—knowing whom to trust or not to trust is of vital importance. Betrayals have long been catalogued. And because neighbors make their history in common, mutual suspicions are continually being stoked.¹³

Mistrust does not mean that neighbors necessarily hate one another, or that they are itching to right past wrongs and seek revenge. According to Mueller, once most ordinary Hutus and Serbs realized that crimes were being committed in their collective names, their overwhelming response was bewilderment and paralysis. These are not, he notes, the hallmarks of hate. But they could denote fear of future retribution or the wearisome realization that the cycle of violence is revving up again. Alternatively, they might reflect people's sheer indifference. After all, just knowing that the violence is not random may be the only thing that most people care about, especially when the state signals that it will still protect you.

10. Chuck Sudetic, *Blood and Vengeance: One Family's Story of the War in Bosnia* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 48–49.

11. Dusko Doder and Louise Branson, *Milosevic: Portrait of a Tyrant* (New York: Free Press, 1999), pp. 97–99; and Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: TV Books, 1996).

12. See Christopher Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

13. For examples, see Sudetic, *Blood and Vengeance*.

Mueller's ahistoricism prevents him from probing very far beneath the surface of recent events. Worse, there is a practical danger associated with his argument. Although his article makes a compelling case for paying more careful attention to state sponsorship of thugs as harbingers of violence yet to come, his proffered solution—intervention by an outside police force—is no kind of fix. Not only does the temporary restoration of security by an outside police force do nothing to change people's memories or alter their reasons for mutual mistrust, but police can do nothing to reverse or alleviate demographic imbalances. The fact that in many countries there are simply too many frustrated (unemployed, underemployed, semi-educated, or barely skilled) males presents huge challenges.¹⁴ So too does the existence of deep local knowledge, which people plumb to make sense of the world around them.

In the end, it may be how—and not what—we think that mires certain groups again and again in conflict. As humans, none of us may be able to help ourselves from alternately dreaming about and fearing the future, or reaching backward and using history as a guide. The key is to purge the viciousness from that cycle, a task that requires something more pervasive and permanent than fleeting interventions.

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The Author Replies:

I would like to make four comments in response to Anna Simons's thoughtful critique. First, I do not think that the notions that ethnic wars emerge out of primordial or politician-stoked hatreds and that these wars are essentially deep-seated conflicts of all against all or neighbor against neighbor are straw man arguments. That perspective is easily the most prominent one among journalistic accounts of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and it is substantially embraced in many academic assessments.¹ In addition, it is overwhelmingly the image projected in discussions of the genocide in Rwanda.² More broadly, it is a conception that Thomas Hobbes developed for the religious civil wars of his period, a perspective that has, to say the least, generated a sub-

14. See Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*; Bazenguissa-Ganga, "The Spread of Political Violence in Congo-Brazzaville"; Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*; and El-Kenz, "Youth and Violence." As if the present is not bad enough, Lionel Tiger alludes to an even grimmer future in *The Decline of Males* (New York: Golden Books, 1999).

1. The image clearly retains its journalistic appeal. David Rohde, a reporter highly experienced in the area, found that although some Albanians claimed that their Serb neighbors aided or joined the marauders during the Serb rampages in Kosovo in 1999, he could find no Albanians who were actually able to name a local Serb who had been involved. He also reports that local Serbs animatedly insisted that masked paramilitaries were to blame. Despite this, his article was given the headline, "Where Neighbors Attacked Neighbors, Justice Is Far from Easy," by his *New York Times* editors, June 23, 1999, p. A10.

2. For a rare but important exception, see René Lemarchand, "U.S. Policy in the Great Lakes: A Critical Perspective," *Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1998), p. 42.

stantial literature and one that is often applied to ethnic war. Moreover, many analysts have documented the massive defections that took place in the Serbian army (hardly the bastion of cosmopolitanism that Simons contends) and the widespread draft dodging that occurred in Serbia itself, and it seems to me important to extrapolate from those facts to question the notion that Serbs and other Balkan peoples were seething with explosive hatreds.³

Second, I substantially agree with Simons's perspective on much of the mechanics of violence in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. As she points out, "Any undisciplined, armed gang is likely to generate fear," and it is precisely my point that this was the key dynamic in the thug-dominated wars in Yugoslavia and Rwanda. She is correct to note in addition that the thugs did not commit their depredations in a random manner (at least initially), but were sent into action with nationalism as an "ordering device" (in my terminology) or as a "cunning rationale" (in her nice characterization). And I certainly agree that it was the fear stirred up by these marauding gangs—not elemental, ancient, or newly stoked hatreds—that best explains what happened in these cases.

Third, my conclusion therefore is that such disasters could potentially (though not necessarily easily) occur almost anywhere. This is because deep hatred—ethnic or otherwise—is not required. What is required is the breakdown of police order and the mobilization by politicians with their own agenda of small numbers of murderous and opportunistic thugs—something that all nations have in ready supply. By contrast, Simons seems to want to conclude that such developments could happen only in places where massacres have occurred "repeatedly" or "again and again." She is, of course, correct to note that there have been several massacres of Hutus by Tutsis and Tutsis by Hutus over the last four decades (though there was little violence between them before 1959), but this is simply not true for Yugoslavia. Indeed, except during World War II,

3. Simons contends (and I substantially agree) that "most genocides have been perpetuated by a relative few supported by a willfully neglectful many." Curiously, however, she approvingly cites a book pointedly entitled *Mass Hate*, in which the author argues that the depredations in places such as Bosnia and Rwanda were "situations where large portions of nations or cultural groups have participated in mass murder, acts of terror, or other atrocities against unarmed civilians selected primarily because of their race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, or ideology." Neil J. Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror* (New York: Plenum, 1996), p. 2 (emphasis added). Simons also cites the work of Daniel Goldhagen. Although Goldhagen does not see Germany's Final Solution as a neighbor-against-neighbor process, he—like Robert Kaplan on Yugoslavia—does argue that Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jewish population stemmed from explosive mass hatred: There had long been, Goldhagen argues, a "pre-existing, pent-up antisemitism" in Germany that Hitler and the Nazis merely needed to "unshackle and thereby activate." Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), p. 443. For an excellent and broad-ranging analysis of the proposition that mass killings are perpetuated by the few rather than by the many, see Benjamin Valentino, "Final Solutions: The Causes of Genocide and Mass Killing," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 1–62; and, more extensively, Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming). See also John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War': Yugoslavia and Rwanda," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., August 31–September 3, 2000, <http://psweb.sbs.ohio-state.edu/faculty/jmueller/apsa2000.pdf>.

the episodes of violence between Serbs and Croats have been few.⁴ In fact, if intermarriage rates are indicative, Serbs and Croats got along considerably better than whites and blacks do in the United States.

There was little systematic violence against Jews in Germany before Adolf Hitler. The suggestion that ethnic killing can emerge only where it has before would have led one, using Simons's logic, to expect it in the countries to Germany's east.

Fourth, I argue that thug-dominated conflicts, like those in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, can be policed relatively easily (though not necessarily costlessly) by an organized, disciplined, and sizable army. Such an army could halt the violence because opportunistic bullies are unlikely to put up much of a fight. I do not contend, however, that this process can suddenly cause people to alter their memories, restore mutual trust, or purge all viciousness. But I do think that stopping people from killing one other is a notable, even admirable, achievement. To get them to love each other is, as Simons rightly suggests, a larger task, and one for which armies are not well suited. The peace they provide, however, does furnish an opportunity, though no guarantee, for deeper, longer-range healing from the ravages of war.

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4. Noel Malcolm, "Seeing Ghosts," *National Interest*, No. 32 (Summer 1993), pp. 83–88.