



2008.05.04

Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008. Pp. ix, 390. ISBN 978-0-674-02175-4.

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To military planners or professional soldiers on campaign, civilians are often an afterthought or a nuisance, “internally displaced” refugees who get in the way and consume energy and resources; they are unfortunates who live too close to enemy strongholds and thus complicate efforts to kill that enemy while minimizing “collateral damage.” Indeed, the military’s unease and even impatience with civilians are captured by such euphemisms.

Due to their vulnerability, civilians, not professional soldiers, usually suffer the most from war. They are, in fact, “the forgotten victim[s]” of war.<sup>1</sup> Take today’s war and occupation in Iraq: whereas the U.S. military has lost about four thousand troops killed, the war and its resulting social and political chaos have caused at least 100,000 Iraqi civilian deaths (some estimates are higher by a factor of five or more<sup>2</sup>). The wide variance in estimates for Iraqi civilian deaths in itself indicates the physical and moral messiness of modern wars (as well as the political agendas of the estimators). And, naturally, militaries count and commemorate their own dead more assiduously than those of civilians caught in the crossfire of combat.

Hugo Slim’s discerning and accessible study looks not only at wars where the killing of civilians has been an unintended byproduct of conflict, but more specifically those where such killing is the very essence of the fighting. He first discusses philosophies of war, contrasting limited versus limitless wars, as well as “no war” philosophies (pacifism). He usefully defines limited war as “an ideology of restraint and protection that is respectful of as much human life *as possible*” (23). Here he asserts that “the moral importance of winning” a necessary war “can excuse the killing and hurting of civilians if all possible precautions to protect them were taken and if safer ways of fighting were explored but found wanting” (22).

Next, Slim details the “seven spheres of civilian suffering” in war, including genocide, massacre, torture, mass rape and sexual violence, involuntary movement, impoverishment, famine, disease, and emotional distress. His accounts are informed by historical examples as well as his own experiences working in humanitarian relief efforts in West and Central Africa. He reminds us that civilians often suffer long after wars are over, whether from psychological issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or such detritus of war as unexploded munitions and mines.

Most civilians, Slim notes, “die *from war* rather than *in battle*”—with loss of identity and livelihood ultimately proving more deadly in the aggregate than bullets and bombs

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Richard Shelly Hartigan, *The Forgotten Victim: A History of the Civilian* (Chicago, IL: Precedent Publ, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Gilbert Burnham, et al., “Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-sectional Cluster Sample Survey,” *TheLancet.com* (11 Oct 2006) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0804.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0804.htm)>.

(91). His emphasis on loss of identity is especially telling. In war, people “lose themselves. Socially and personally, they are no longer the people they were . . . . If destitution, personal injury or rape has humiliated them and brought them very low, they may have lost that essential dignity and self-esteem which was the anchor of their sense of self and gave them the confidence with which to take their place in the world” (109-10). They have become strangers to themselves, and estranged as well from traditional communal networks of support.

After describing civilian pain and suffering, Slim asks why militaries kill civilians, whether purposely or almost in a fit of absentmindedness, stressing the ambiguous and culturally contingent nature of the term “civilian.” Obviously, if warring militiamen consider all people, armed or unarmed, male or female, old or young, as in some sense “the enemy” or as a resource to be exploited, there is little reason to extend mercy or compassion to “innocents” because they literally see none.

After devoting a full chapter to the ambiguity of “civilian” as a special category in war, Slim turns to the ways soldiers are recruited and trained to kill, even when those to be killed are unarmed women and children. His analysis here is informed by works like Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*,<sup>3</sup> on Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland and the USSR, and Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Blood Rites*,<sup>4</sup> on the human propensity for war and killing. He concludes with a chapter that calls for a strengthening of our collective sense of responsibility to protect civilians from the horrors of war.

Slim ultimately calls for a reinvigorated idea of limited war (assuming conflict to be unavoidable), one where the protection of innocent civilians is the top priority. Seeking to change the mindset of militaries, he asks us to think of civilians not in impersonal or categorical terms (as enemy non-combatants or as refugees, for example) but as individuals. That old lady could be your grandmother; that young girl could be your baby sister. Such an approach, he argues, is far more likely to generate compassion and tolerance, and to limit violence to those capable of and intent upon resisting.

Slim well recognizes that thinking in such personal and empathetic terms poses a major challenge to militaries operating under stress and often in culturally foreign lands. It is far easier to kill a person without a name, family, or shared sense of humanity. Can the bonds of affection linking a warrior “band of brothers” truly be extended to include unfamiliar civilians in a hostile or alien environment? Slim does not quite answer this question, but he does suggest that only by extending our thinking about civilians beyond purely instrumental or legalistic terms can we truly limit the atrocities committed against them in war.

Pro-civilian advocates, Slim notes, must go beyond merely telling transgressors that “Civilian suffering is wrong because it is illegal and it is illegal because it is wrong” (259). Citing Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner,<sup>5</sup> he suggests that “Telling and embodying a stronger and more resonant story about civilians than anti-civilian ideologues is really the major challenge in promoting the protection of civilians in war” (256).

But Slim knows we need more than a change in narrative. He insists that appeals to self-interest, power, and authority are needed to protect civilian lives. Those in power and

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<sup>3</sup> *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (NY: Holt, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publ, 2006).

those with the weapons must be convinced that mercy and restraint are both more honorable and more effective than ruthless exploitation of innocents. Here he echoes, but does not cite, Michael Ignatieff's thesis in *The Warrior's Honour*.<sup>6</sup> A sense of humanity, proportion, and restraint must be instilled in seemingly lawless militias, and perhaps the most direct way of doing so is to appeal to self-interest, even when "self-interest" refers to the very image and soul of the individual warrior.

Here Slim has practical advice to offer. Moments ripe for soul-searching and change usually do not come during routine classroom lectures, but rather "when an armed unit is relaxed and on its own, when some particular atrocity comes to light and gives pause for thought, or when a turn in military fortunes presents new options for a change of strategy and tactics" (289). In promoting pro-civilian behavior, timing is (almost) everything—that, and resiliency, sensitivity, and persistence. And the burden for pro-civilian behavior does not fall solely on warriors; civilians too must hold up their end—they cannot claim protection as "civilians" and then renege on the bargain.

*Killing Civilians* is a provocative primer on the subject and will reward careful study and reflection. Slim's approach to this complex and agonistic topic is, in a word, pragmatic. He respects pacifism while recognizing its limitations. He understands that the legalities of international agreements safeguarding civilians are observed more often in the breach. He is alive to ambiguities, recognizing that it is easier to kill at a distance, whether with artillery or air power, but that to civilians on the receiving end, dead is dead, whether a missile is launched hundreds of miles away or a bayonet is thrust from arm's length.

Slim might have developed further the aspect of gender and war. He does devote an especially strong and harrowing section of his study to showing that rape "is often policy in war." Sexual violence humiliates, violates, de-nationalizes, dishonors, and disempowers a subject people. But here Slim misses a chance to explore in greater detail the highly gendered nature of warfare—the fact that, in a very powerful way, "The War against Women Never Ends," to quote the sobering title of Ann Jones's article on organized rapine and sexual violence against women in West Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Here in the West, we like to think that disciplined, professional, military forces do not routinely rape and kill the helpless. Yet a significant part of military training is breaking down a recruit's reluctance to commit violent acts. Basic training can be a degrading and depersonalizing experience—a realm of ritualized abuse and domination.<sup>8</sup> Such an approach may be effective in getting more soldiers to fire their weapons in combat, but breaking down inhibitions to kill carries a high psychological price.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (NY: Viking, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> "The War against Women: A Dispatch from the West African Front," *Tomdispatch.com* (17 Feb 2008) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0805.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0805.htm)>, rpt. *CommonDreams.org* <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0806.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0806.htm)>. See also "Côte d'Ivoire: Targeting Women: The Forgotten Victims of the Conquest," *Amnesty International* (15 Mar 2007) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0807.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0807.htm)>.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, basic training's primary intent is to create disciplined and cohesive combat teams. Led by the right officers and NCOs, troops become disciplined and discriminating users of deadly force, assuming the enemy is readily identifiable. If the enemy takes refuge among the civilian population; if they are indistinguishable from that population; and if the troops are exhausted, stressed out from combat, and vengeful for having lost comrades, the chances for atrocities against civilians increase greatly.

<sup>9</sup> See esp. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1995).

Few Western soldiers want to admit contemplating, let alone actually committing, acts of violence against women and children. A contemporary American soldier, disillusioned by the war in Iraq, recalls a barracks' ditty sung to the tune of "Jesus Loves the Little Children": "napalm sticks to little children/ all the children of the world/ red and yellow, black and white/ they all scream when they ignite." An inside joke was to ask a recruit, "What's the heel of the boot for?" Recruits quickly learned that "crushing baby skulls" was the expected response.

What are we to make of this? Is this harmless posturing, a type of locker-room braggadocio associated with insecure males jockeying for authority and respect? Or is it more than this? For the soldier, it is not simply ribald humor but psychological conditioning, a "constant barrage of songs, chants, and slogans about killing, stabbing and firing at human-shaped targets, making a joke out of killing babies, women and children—these are what make a trained killer."<sup>10</sup>

This is not to deny that today's militaries often try very hard, through restrictive rules of engagement (ROEs), to protect civilians from the worst excesses of war in part because mistreatment of civilians can create cycles of revenge, terrorism, and violent retribution that are nearly impossible to break. Indeed, in some cases, producing a Hobbesian state of brutality and violence is precisely the goal of militias and terrorists that feed on chaos and war.

Encouraging mercy and tolerance toward civilians under such conditions may seem futile, but Slim never loses hope. *Killing Civilians* offers a hard-hitting, ultimately optimistic consideration of one of the supreme challenges facing us in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Sullivan, "Hindsight of a Trained Killer," *Iraq Veterans Against the War* (18 Apr 2008) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0808.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0808.htm)>.