

What makes such an atrocious crime like genocide possible?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, first of all, genocide as a term will be defined and explained according to different scholars. After that, the path which lead to genocide will be attempted to determine from a variety of perspectives. Additionally, owing to importance of covering human side of the act, the social and psychological conditions of perpetrators will be looked at while trying to answer how ordinary people can convert to executioners. Throughout the essay, it will be argued that conflicts which can lead to atrocity do not just occur because of differences unless there is an important interest to obtain by great powers. In order to support this argument, variety of historical examples of genocide and empirical studies on the issue will be examined. Finally, it will be concluded that in such great crimes like genocide, autocratic states and corrupted state agents that hold power seems to have a part.

Keywords: Genocide, international crimes, state crime, corruption.

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INTRODUCTION

Genocide; is one of the greatest tragedies of all times which can be claimed to be mostly committed by state actors. For many, it is a structural and systematic destruction of civilians by state instruments (Simon, 1996). For centuries, we have seen it practised worldwide, from the most paradigmatic examples, namely the Holocaust, to current cases, such as in Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Sudan and Darfur. As it is underlined, although "the word is new, the concept is ancient" (Leo Kuper, 1981 cited in Jones, 2006, p.3). What seems more striking about genocide though, not only the mass killings of millions of men, women and children, but its demonstration of what human kind is capable of and the unimaginable characteristics of the motives behind such an act. How could it be possible to destroy all members of a nation, an ethnic, a politic or a social group just because of their appearance or ideologies or cultural backgrounds? In other words, we need to ask while trying to understand the path to genocide, how was it humanly possible and how is it historically intelligible? (Browning, 1992, p. x).

In this essay, first, it will be defined, according to different scholars, what genocide is. After that, it will be determined what the reasons which lead to genocide are, from different perspectives. Additionally, the social and psychological conditions of perpetrators will be tackled, owing to importance of covering human side of the act while answering how ordinary people can convert to executioners. To conclude, it will be argued that conflicts, which can lead to such an atrocity, do not just occur because of differences unless there is an interest to obtain. As it is highlighted, "...genocide has an underlying rationale, a rationale that include state-sponsored rules, edicts, and proclamations. Acts of genocide do not occur randomly, accidentally, or indiscriminately" (Simon, 1996, p.250). In parallel with this, the argument which defines genocide as a strategy of a state that is ready to create clashes on divisions to keep itself in power, by basically avoiding its duty to protect all citizens, will be pursued. According to Smith, "the most frequent source of genocide in the 20th century has been the monopolization of power" (1996, p.7), that is, the question of "who will have power and who will rule" (Staub, 2000, p.369). On this account, it can be safely argued that even such a cruel deed like genocide is possible to commit when the balance of powers in a state are not well observed and checked as well as communities remain bystander

to dark side of human kind that embraced by greed.

DEFINITION

It is important to examine what 'genocide' means as a term before elaborating the roots of it. Although genocide has been practised brutally in history, it was unnamed until the Second World War. Literally, 'genocide' word is a combination of the Greek 'genos', meaning 'race, nation, or tribe' and the Latin 'caedere', meaning 'to kill'. The term is firstly coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, and then his interpretation is developed in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, that came in to force in 1951.

The convention defines genocide in its Article II as following;

"...genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a) Killing members of the group;*
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
- d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
- e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group"*

Despite of the fact that the convention excludes the political, economic or social groups, doctrinally some of the scholars, for instance, Thomas W. Simon (1996) and Ervin Staub (2000), include those groups too in the term of genocide. Simon argues that instead of classifying the groups, perpetrator's negative definition of the group need to be paid attention. He assigns genocide as "...the intentional killing of members a group, negatively identified by perpetrators, because of their actual or perceived group affiliation" (1996, p.244). Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn support Simon's interpretation by defining genocide as "a form of one-

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sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator" (1990 cited in Simon, 1996, p.246).

Another important point which we understand from the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide is that it is not necessary to kill even a single person to commit genocide. As in the case of Australia; 'preventing births or transferring children between groups' is also considered as genocide. However, in this paper, despite of accepting the frame of genocide in general, mass killing of millions of people will be the focus due to unjustifiableness and the atrociousness of the deed. The final definition which is worth to consider is Fein's; she states that "genocide is sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim" (1999, p.157). In addition, genocides are divided into different types by scholars, depending on their main motives that lead to violence. According to Smith, there are five types of genocide, namely, "retributive, institutional, utilitarian, monopolistic, and ideological", nevertheless, it is evident that, influences and motives that result in genocide are usually diversified and can cover different motives together (1999, p.7). Therefore, it is far more efficient to not to classify it. Having considered some of the interpretations of the term, it is time to think on the question of why and how to commit the crime of genocide.

THE PATH

First and foremost, it is fatal to understand genocide and its origins in order to see whether or not humanity will continue to experience it. With regards to understanding of genocide, the causes of it may vary according to the different approaches. Some of them will be mentioned here while trying to answer the question of what makes genocide possible.

As a launching point, Staub lists the origins of mass violence in detail, from a general perspective;

"(1) Instigators; such as, difficult life conditions in a society, group

- conflict and self-interest.*
- (2) *Difficult life conditions and their psychological and social effects.*
- (3) *Cultural characteristics.*
- (4) *The role of bystanders"*
- (2000, pp. 369-371).

Instead of the type and structure of the state, Staub (2000) focuses on social and cultural effects and divisions which could be considered as a foundation for genocide. Relating to bystanders, the role of them in assisting genocide is outstandingly explained by Fein; she convincingly argues that "Genocide depends on the toleration of bystander states to succeed. It is repeated by states so often because it succeeds. It succeeds because the great powers either practise it, arm or tolerate the perpetrators" (1999, p.159). An example of this kind of facilitating and provoking can be seen in Huggins's research (1998); she reports that during post-cold war period, between 1960s and 1980s, the United States has had a crucial role in supporting fascist governments formally and informally as long as they have preferred to adopt anti-communist beliefs, and has provided foreign aid, training and technical assistance for those nondemocratic governments in order to benefit in massacres that they committed (cited in Huggins et al., 2002). In the light of given information, it seems that remaining as a bystander to this kind of humanity crimes can be considered as evil as committing the crime itself.

Looking from another respect, in addition to general conditions, Fein (1999) further argues that state agents take the most important part in the tragedy of genocide. She suggests that genocide is a tactic of the governing class to solve interest conflicts between them and victims who are a group of people outside the perpetrator's 'universe of obligation', in circumstances such as war, challenges to the structure of domination, the threat of internal breakdown or social revolution and economic development. Moreover, she claims that war is mostly prior to genocide or a result of it. The most significant point that she makes is defining genocide as a strategy of the regime to deal with the problems. In addition, she stresses an important incitement that encourages the use of such a strategy, like genocide, as the belief of the perpetrators that the fact that they can keep

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continuing without being ceased or punished (Fein, 1999, 158). Staub (1989) and Taylor (1983) confirm this argument by emphasizing the effects of bystanders' passivity and even more their agreement which certify the ideologies and deeds of perpetrators.

Considering another point, by definition, the 'universe of obligation' demonstrates the separation of groups; according to Fein, pre-defined classes results in elimination of others and cause a fatal problem of living for those who are out of 'universe of obligation' (1993, p. 23). She argues that "...ethnic exclusion and discrimination, which are produced by invasion, occupation, colonialism or internal ethnic discrimination..." constitute challenges to the existing order and incite the ruling class to use of genocide and atrocity to keep power by killing, terrorizing and expelling the rebellious group (1999, p.158).

She also indicates four possible cause for genocide;

- "(1) Conflicts over solidarity and legitimacy,*
- (2) Increased polarization between groups,*
- (3) the exclusionary beliefs were expanded by ideologies of antagonism and blatant appeals to hatred which were broadcast in the mass media in the years prior to the genocide*
- (4) A set of non-exclusive attributes: threat to status, material interest, ideology, fear of revolt"*

(Fein, 1999, pp. 162-163).

The causes that she indicates demonstrate the significance of the actors who provoke genocide and obtain benefits from it.

Akin to Fein's perspective, Hintjens (2006) maintains that disintegration of the society was a conclusion of the systematic work to keep the power, with regards to the case of 1994 Rwandan genocide. Although it has been few years after the evil act, she was still not convinced about what commenced such a brutality in Rwanda, as even after many years there has been no agreement on the causes that result in execution of Jews and Gypsies by Nazis. Notwithstanding, she does not believe that ethnicity was the main cause of the Rwandan genocide or either was

the cause of it. On the contrary, Jones (2006) emphasizes that ethnicity is the most argued prime ideological catalyst of genocide. Speaking of ethnicity, by definition, ethnic identity has six principals; "(1) A collective proper name, (2) A myth of common ancestry, (3) Shared historical memories, (4) One or more differentiating elements of common culture, (5) An association with a specific 'homeland', (6) A sense of solidarity for significant sectors of population" (Smith, 1991, p.21). Still, knowing that every state, even the most unified ones contains at least two different ethnic identities, ethnic differences should not be the most compelling cause of genocide. However, Jones claims that having 'ethnic minorities' in a 'nation state' that is dominated by an 'ethnic collectivity' causes dilemmas in tackling with these 'out-groups' meanwhile accepting that ethnic minorities exist even in assumedly unified or organic nation-states, such as Japan (2006, p.292). In contrast, Hintjens competently argues that in Rwanda racist ideologies are created and structured by regime to cover government's uselessness under the pressure of socioeconomic problems. She also mentions the similar points between the Holocaust and Rwanda case, such as "...ideological and military preparation prior to genocide, and... use of conspiracy theories and myths..." to warrant hidden plans for annihilation (1999, p.242). According to her, "myths of racial and ethnic origins can come to be acted upon as if they were true; this does not make such myths any less mythical, but it does give them the power to fashion people's behaviour" (1999, p.251). She underlines the Jean-François Bayart's suggestion of not to overstate the significance of the ethnicity (1993, p.56). She convincingly argues that "such identities may be printed on people's papers, or may dominate people's perceptions of a conflict situation, but they cannot in and of themselves be the root cause of conflict or violence; they are the way that political conflicts are expressed" (1999, p.251).

Another point that Jones (2006) suggests is; genocides could be seen as an opportunity to 'redress' the economic imbalance by abducting the wealth and property of the victims by the dominant group if featured massive looting and plundering is considered along with mass murder. In parallel with the economic point that Jones makes, Hintjens (1999) also underlines the importance of being in a period of severe economic and social stress to explain why a state follows a way of mass destruction of millions as a solution to its problems, instead of considering to share power with opposition parties and raise funds from World

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Bank. It is obvious that the Rwandan genocide was a last effort of an autocratic and unpopular regime to keep the state power, whatever the costs for the population in general. In other words, "By mobilizing vertical social cleavages, racial and ethnic political ideologies can be particularly useful to failing regimes facing widespread opposition from within their own ranks." She claims that a variety of public and private agents planned the strategy of genocide and arranged its application by the involvement of Rwandans, concluding in the murder of a noteworthy minority (Hintjens, 1999, p.242). Interestingly, as Paul R. Brass mentions the inciting role of 'violence specialists' operating within institutionalized systems of violence generation should be noticed. These specialists namely, "politicians, businessmen, religious leaders, university professors" and others, who profit from such occasions are "the leading agents provocateurs of genocide" (1996, p.12 cited in Jones, pp. 293, 294). As Bauman (1989) affirms, on the one hand modern genocides are differentiated by an absence of spontaneity; on the other hand, they are noticeably designed and rationally calculated. They are clearly independent from group emotions and personal motives.

Jones (2006) links the Holocaust to the German's defeat in the First World War and weakened and humiliated German society after it. It is known that fascism alone is not necessarily genocidal. Therefore, the Holocaust is tried to be explained by the trauma of defeat in the First World War and nationalism (Green & Ward, 2004). In addition, Jones (2006) states that post war conditions of economic chaos and extensive unemployment resulted in 'political extremism' in Germany. Taken this into account, there is no doubt that political and economic conditions of the state have effects on the path to genocide. Yet, it is still not convincing that these conditions can encourage a state to murder its citizens alone.

It can be said that the Holocaust is the most studied case of genocide scholars due to being the most notorious case of genocide. Concerning the Holocaust, there are two main groups of theorists who explain the motives of it from different point of views; 'the intentionalist' and 'the functionalist'. The intentionalists focus on the Jews-hatred of Hitler whereas the functionalists interpret the genocide as a result of an uncontrolled decision-making process of the regime. It is highly convincing

that the Holocaust ought to be the consequence of more than a person's deviant mind. As a Holocaust survivor, Harold Gordon enumerates the indicators of Holocaust to occur; "(1) radical anti-Semitism of the Nazi type, transformation of that anti-Semitism into the practical policy of a powerful, centralized state, (3) that state being in command of a huge, efficient bureaucratic apparatus, (4) an extraordinary, wartime condition (5) the passive acceptance of those things by the population at large" (cited in Bauman, 1989, p.94). What makes Bauman (1989) worried about the repeat of the Holocaust is excluding the wartime condition, existence of the factors which Gordon lists in every modern civilization. Bauman defines modern culture as a garden culture which sees "...itself as the design for an ideal life and a perfect arrangement of human conditions and ...weeding out is a creative, not a destructive activity". According to him, the victims of Stalin and Hitler were not murdered as a consequence of hatred but because of not fitting the frame of excellent society (1989, p.92). Remarkably similar to Bauman's garden example, according to Prunier's report, in Rwandan genocide for the killers chopping up men was "bush clearing" and slaughtering women and children was "pulling out the roots of the bad weeds" (1995, pp. 138-142). It is worth thinking that what Bauman (1989) warns, he argues that genocide is possible because of the social norms and institutions of modernity. Furthermore, he states that genocide was not feasible without modern civilization. As in the statement of him, mass killing is naturally dreadful deed and unimaginable without advantages of modern bureaucracy such as, great deal of resources, their mobilization and planned distribution, skills of splitting the overall task into a great number of partial and specialized functions and skills to co-ordinate their performance. Similar to Bauman, Barta also blames the capitalist system instead of individuals for killings of indigenous peoples in the case of Australian's genocidal act of taking lives of more than 20.000 Aboriginals (1987 cited in Simon, 1996, p.249).

Nevertheless, Jones alleges the Rwanda case as a counterargument against "modernity-of-genocide thesis" of Bauman. He claims that in Rwanda, approximately one million people were destructed in twelve weeks by face-to-face conducts without a sign of modern bureaucracy (Jones, 2006, p.290). On the other hand, according to Hintjens, the 1994 Rwandan genocide was the result of a "highly efficient machinery of government that enabled implementation of a complex genocide plan in a short time span, using highly effective propaganda

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techniques and with a high degree of military preparedness" (1999, p.271). Despite of not being as industrialized as 1940s Germany, Rwanda also used systematic and well-structured techniques when it comes to governing and keeping power.

Mentioning the techniques, Hintjens (1999) suggests that in the 1994 Rwandan case, the regime and its advocates used some sophisticated techniques to create panic among civilian, for instance, fictitious bombings and tales of revenging women and children. Another technique to obtain the obedience of many of those firstly disagreed to the massacres was propaganda leaflets, and hate speech on the radio and in villages. Killers were also promised rewards that vary from alcohol to the belongings of the dead (Prunier, 1995, pp. 137-8). Moreover, the threat of being killed if they do not kill was another cogent reason to obey. As Sofsky (1997) puts it, in the Holocaust case, the prisoner doctors and attendants must select at least the prescribed number of the critically ill for the lethal list, otherwise they were taken instead of prisoners. Furthermore, again in the Holocaust case, as Jones (2006) points out, gas chambers are used to provide sufficient distance between the killers and the victims psychologically. What Jones attempts to explain finds its spirit in Sofsky's words; "...a cool, objective operation... mechanically mediated...a deed performed at a distance, one whose effects the perpetrator did not see..." (1997, p.264). This shows us the effectiveness of the techniques which are used commonly by the state agents to intimate and force citizens to do evil.

PERPETRATORS

As it is truly stated, understanding genocide needs understanding the perpetrators' mentality. 'Narcissism, greed, fear and humiliation' are considered to be the emotions that behind the genocidal acts (Jones, 2006, p.161). In contrary to expectations, actors of genocides do not have sadistic impulses or a background of disturbing life experiences (Huggins et al., 2002). Jones (2006) also mentions the thesis of Goldhagen who argues that Germans were willing to execute as a result of historically strong anti-Semitism. However, he supports Browning who accepts the role of anti-Semitism in the case of Germans' transformation to killers, but also adds the importance of other influences. Both Browning and Goldhagen

wrote on Reserve Police Battalion 101, during 1941-42 in occupied Poland. In his work, Goldhagen argued that Germans was willing to kill Jews owing to their 'common sense' of 'eliminationist anti-semitism' and having the opportunity led them to commit genocide (1997, pp.227, 446). Meanwhile, Browning ratifies that, in addition to hatred of Jews, there were other fatal factors such as "...conformity to the group, mutually intensifying effects of war and racism and threat of isolation" (1998, pp. 184-186). Viewing both sides and considering other countries which anti-semitism was historically stronger than Germany, Jones (2006) convincingly refutes the case of Goldhagen; simply by underlining that hatred was not enough to engender genocide. In his studies, Milgram (1995) illustrates what ordinary men are capable of by an experiment. In his summary of conclusions, he interprets that ordinary men can basically participate in a deadly task under an authority without necessarily feeling hatred to their victims. His experiment shows that despite of their disagreement, participants behaviourally comply with authority under the pressure of situational and environmental factors (Milgram, 1974; Blass, 2000 cited in Huggins et al., 2002, pp. 252-253).

In the book of 'Violence Workers', the process of creating killers is given a place in detail. Torturers and executioners are called 'violence workers' in the book and according to this book of Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo, there are three grounds that mutually related dynamics of continuing brutality are based on; "(1) the politics of an internal security ideology, (2) the specialized hierarchy and competitive organization of social control units, the associated social psychology of deindividuation, obedience, dehumanization, modelling violence's acceptability, and moral disengagement" (2002, p.161). As it is asserted in the book, the conversions in violence workers' values, attitudes, perceptions, and lifestyles are the result of a complicated network of historical, political, sociological, and psychological processes (Huggins et. al., 2002, p.235).

Starting to examine this complex system of transforming the ordinary men to the violence workers, it should be first looked into historical and political impacts. If a country has a history of violence and/or has being governed by a charismatic or feared leaders with a political ideology of national security which creates new antagonists and views those people as they are threats to the interests of the

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country, and has a bureaucratic structure and supplies to dispense as an award, in addition to punishments, this could easily provide an atmosphere for a good person to act in opposite to moral standards of his or others' (Huggins et al., 2002, pp. 243-245). Creating enemies is one of the motives which lead to genocide that Hintjens (1999) mentions and points out that the hatred between the groups might be sometimes possible and could be manipulated, however it is more likely that such hatred is created intentionally as a political ideology in order to assist massacres. Moving to social and organizational impacts, in the example of Brazil, initially, observation of conduct between security forces and citizens was made easier by tightly controlled institutional bureaucracies which were transformed from police departments (Huggins et al., 2002, p.245). A similar example is given by Hintjens from the 1994 Rwandan case, she suggests that "...orderliness and tight social control" which are strengthened by "...intense family socialisation, and intrusive state regulations into every sphere of daily life..." helps to keep genocide plans as a secret and to ensure extensively participation in the application of genocide (1999, pp. 248-249).

The third stage of the processes is psychological impacts. At this process, what makes possible for good citizens to do evil can be listed as; overruled moral considerations, authorized blind compliance, dehumanized victims and neutralized personal and social liability. It is stated that generally we do not act monstrously owing to our personal standards which are developed during socialization period by incorporating a positive moral code. Nevertheless, the hierarchical structure of authority and the tasks that are given by this authority deter individuals from taking a decision and so make them unliable (Huggins et al., 2002, pp. 250,251). As Eric Fromm states "my obedience makes me part of the power I worship... I can make no error, since it decides for me" (1984, p.6). Explaining the effects of dehumanization process, the most striking perception of this is given by the example of 'an annoying insect'; it is true that nobody feels moral hesitations while killing an insect. In the case of the Holocaust, Hitler used films and posters to show Jews and anti-Nazis as they are less than human. Another method which was used in Brazil was 'deindividuation' that serves to neutralize executioners' responsibility. Deindividuation makes you unidentified among others, therefore, you do not have social concerns and accountability as in the situation of choirboys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1959) who were

unable to kill pigs to eat for surviving until painting their faces and becoming unidentified. This series of psychological processes is called 'moral disengagement'. Briefly, it was the process of moral disengagement, dehumanization and deindividuation that transformed college boys to violent guards in the Stanford's prison experiment (1971) (cited in Huggins et al., 2002, pp. 255-258).

Turning to the role of the state, Harrf has some empirical work on the possibility of genocide. According to the her article which is based on her work, "empirically, all but one of the 37 genocides and politicides (political mass murder) that began between 1955 and 1988 occurred during or immediately after political upheavals...24 coincided with ethnic wars, 14 coincided with revolutionary wars, and 14 followed the occurrence of adverse regime changes", "the greater the magnitude of previous internal wars and regime crises, summed over the preceding 15 years, the more likely that a new state failure will lead to geno-/politicide". Additionally, Harrf concludes that the risks of new genocides were more likely when states fail in countries that experienced 'geno-/politicides' before, countries which their governing class followed an exclusionary philosophy were more likely to have state failures causing to geno-/politicide and lastly, the possibility of geno-/politicide were two and a half times more likely in countries where the ruling elite was formed primarily on an ethnic minority. Especially democratic institutions –even partial ones deteriorate the probability of armed conflict and defeat the risk of "geno-/politicide" (Harrf, 2003, p.62).

Harrf's conclusions support the 'Power Principle' of Rummel. "The more power a government has, the more it can act arbitrarily according to the whims and desires of the elite, and the more it will make war on others and murder its foreign and domestic subjects. The more constrained the power of governments, the more power is diffused, checked, and balanced, the less it will aggress on others and commit democide (state originated mass murder)" (Rummel, 1994, pp.1-2). Supportively, Huggins et al. (2002) state that dictatorships, owing to their less concern about citizen opposition, provide conditions for genocide more directly than democracies. Moreover, Fein maintains that according to studies "genocide is most apt to be practised by authoritarian states and specially by one-party

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communist states, which were more than four times as likely to have committed genocide since 1945 than other unfree states were" (1999, p.159).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, after have been concerning the variety of genocide definitions and summarizing different approaches that explaining the path to genocide and then, considering the conditions and techniques which affect the morality of individuals, now it could be evaluated what makes genocide possible. Answering in the light of contrasting interpretations of different scholars, it might be said that the combination of varying conditions and circumstances have made such an unimaginable crime possible in the diverging cases. However, there is one certain condition, which is similar in all cases that has been discussed; is autocratic state. It has been argued that state has the most crucial part in the preparation and implementation stages of genocide. The other motives that have been mentioned, such as, ethnic, racial or ideological excursions could exist in any state without causing genocidal deeds. Although it can be claimed that political, economic and social conditions of the time period and the state could have an impact on the path to genocide, in this essay it has been argued that the state agents are the ones to blame for choosing the way of evil to deal with the conjuncture of the country. It is important to answer to the question of what makes genocide possible in order to prevent such brutality from the future of humanity. Therefore, also we are the ones to blame as bystanders because of allowing mass killings of fascist regimes as a result of having relationship with those regimes based on interests. States should not misuse their sovereignty, like they have a right to commit genocide or murder their citizens in order to provide so-called national security or create an ideal state. Unless ensuring that they will be stopped when it is needed to do so, autocratic states which possess great power may continue to have potentiality for genocidal acts. Looking back to history, the examples of atrocious crimes and studies on the matter, it might be concluded that nothing is unimaginable to do for human beings if the required atmosphere is created. In the end, what we need to understand is, it seems the greediness of our kind makes such an atrocious crime like genocide possible.

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