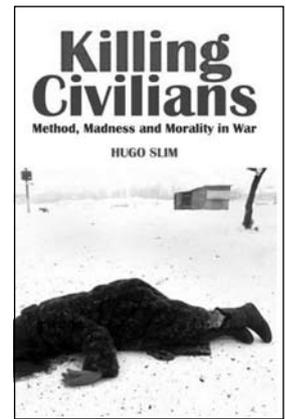


Killing Civilians: Method, Madness and Morality in War

Hugo Slim

A review essay by Dr Hugh Smith



This is an important book. Hugo Slim, a former academic and humanitarian aid worker in Africa and the Middle East, analyses the apparently simple idea that ‘there are certain groups of people who should be protected from the killing and wounding of war’. It is an idea almost as old as the actual practice of killing civilians in war.

The approach Slim takes is not the familiar one of the international laws of armed conflict which defines civilians in a negative way (ie. those not directly participating in combat), and sets out principles such as discrimination and proportionality which permit civilian death and suffering, albeit indirectly and regretfully. *Killing Civilians* looks beneath the surface to analyse why civilians are so often deliberately and directly attacked in war before suggesting ways in which the principle of civilian immunity might be more effectively promoted.

Certain armed forces, the ADF amongst them, can pride themselves on their long-standing practice of respect for the rights of civilians. But even for such forces it is important to understand why other armed groups with which they may have to contend often see the place of civilians in war quite differently. The book also serves as a reminder that even well-trained and disciplined forces can lapse into atrocity.

Slim’s comprehensive review of the extraordinary range of inhumanity that people inflict on civilians in war is quietly passionate and deeply disturbing. Within an analytic framework, the author presents vivid examples of murder, rape, deportation, starvation, humiliation and so on from his own and others’ experience, especially in Africa. But Slim is clear that the ‘seven spheres of civilian suffering’ are to be found in almost all wars regardless of place, time and the parties involved.

In explaining why and how civilians suffer Slim offers a two-level analysis. First he identifies ‘anti-civilian ideologies’ – sets of ideas that provide broad justification for attacking civilians. Some of this is familiar, such as the dualism of ‘us and them’; the urge to genocide when facing a group perceived as sub-human or simply inferior on grounds of race, religion or ethnicity; the lust for total power over an opponent through coercion, punishment or destruction; and the attraction of revenge on behalf of oneself, one’s nation or one’s God. Slim discusses these phenomena in clear, jargon-free fashion but also delves into more complex psychological currents in human affairs such as ‘sacrificial thinking’ whereby civilians themselves can, like soldiers, see their suffering as a sacrifice for the greater good. Civilian

suffering on both sides thus becomes an integral and accepted part of war.

The second level of analysis looks at the emotional, psychological and social forces that actually drive individuals to kill civilians. How do mostly ordinary people become killers? How are normal inhibitions overcome such that we feel permitted to do things we would not usually even contemplate? Demonisation of enemies, coercive authority, physically and emotionally distancing combatants from actual killing, mobilising grievances, ‘bloodied’ warriors with their first kill, creation of social bonds around killing, offering mechanisms of denial to minimise or eliminate guilt and shame, are all familiar culprits. Slim’s analysis, which makes good use of examples, is clear and persuasive.

It is the author’s recognition of the arguments for killing civilians that is perhaps the most valuable contribution of this book. There are, firstly, advantages in killing civilians. As strategy or as tactics it can get results. The so-called ‘strategic’ bombing of cities in World War II certainly hindered the German war effort (whether the resources allocated to Bomber Command could have been better employed is a different question). Suicide bombings and terrorist attacks are sometimes seen as the only tactic open to an oppressed and powerless people. For warlords, too, killing and maiming civilians can be an effective means of keeping power or simply making money.

Secondly, there is a need to recognise that civilians often do contribute to a group’s war effort. International law states that civilians who participate directly in conflicts lose their immunity, but this leaves a great deal of indirect participation that is permissible – such as paying taxes to support a war, providing labour for factories making items of all kinds used by military forces, running power stations or railway systems used by civilians and military alike, or trading with an occupying or insurgent force. Even vocal support for a war and encouragement of citizens to fight might be valuable contributions. And participation might extend, as it does in Osama bin Laden’s thinking, to every voter in a democratic state that has decided on war. The line between civilian and combatant, though easily defined in theory, is never easily drawn in practice.

Given these realities, it is not surprising that civilian immunity in war should always be precarious and frequently disregarded. At the extreme, some simply reject it as never appropriate or even glorify the ‘totality’ of war. States that support the principle often find it convenient to argue that

necessity justifies its suspension ‘for the duration’ – as Churchill did in relation to the bombing of enemy cities. (In the same way some now defend torture as a temporary response to global terrorism). And even rule-abiding armies can easily slip into lethal carelessness, indifference or recklessness in their dealing with civilians.

Slim’s conclusion is that these manifold pressures and arguments for drawing civilians into hostilities must be understood from the perspective of those within war. Those in danger naturally perceive a wide range of people as threatening and argue that hitting back at such people and their assets is a legitimate and necessary response. Effective constraints must therefore recognise the advantages of killing civilians and the inherent difficulty of distinguishing combatants and civilians. Attempts to limit attacks on civilians by simple appeals to principle or to international law are hollow and unconvincing.

As to the remedy, Slim is persuasive in his prescription but not necessarily convinced that it will be effective. It is necessary, first of all, to accept that the status of ‘civilian’ is inherently ambiguous in that most will be supporting a war in some way, however indirectly. Combatants need to accept that there is no such thing as a pure civilian who contributes nothing to a war – unless, perhaps, he or she is dead. Respecting civilian immunity will always entail the prospect of short-term disadvantage.

The key to change, secondly, is to get those involved in war to see enemy civilians as ‘people like them’. This does not necessarily mean eagerly embracing them; it is sufficient to tolerate their existence. You can still hate enemy civilians as long as you recognise, however grudgingly and resentfully, their right not to be abused. And for their part, Slim argues, civilians must recognise their obligation not to abuse their protected status – for example, by concealing arms in perfidious fashion.

Killing Civilians, finally, points to a wide range of methods to change people’s thinking which rely in varying degrees on reason, emotion and power. There are practical reasons not to harm civilians since such actions can provoke retaliation, increase resistance and undermine prospects for lasting peace. Factors such as respect for life, the exercise of mercy, and the maintenance of fairness in fighting help make war psychologically bearable to those engaged in an activity that can traumatise and shame participants. And there are powerful institutions – such as military training organisations, national and international courts of law, and governments that can persuade, pressure or punish individuals into observing civilian immunity.

Certain points in Slim’s analysis could be contested and others stand in need of expansion. Why, for example, does some dualist (us-them) thinking lead to extremes of violence but other cases do not? Is it enough simply to assert that, say, insurgents using civilians for cover must share some of the guilt for innocent deaths when retaliation is taken? Governments that take this line have a hard time. More could also be said about the notion of honour in war which for some armies at least creates a strong sense of obligation to fight fairly, mercifully and within the rules – and about why it is absent in other forces.

In addition, though the book occasionally refers to ‘limited war’, it might make more use of the extensive literature on this topic. There is, for example, an important sense in which limits on war can be arbitrary and need not refer to notions such as ‘innocence’ or ‘participation’. Geographically, warring parties may agree not to carry hostilities into certain areas. Militarily, the widespread and perhaps arbitrary reluctance to regard any nuclear weapon, whatever its size, as just another weapon has significantly helped to restrain violence in war. Sociologically, the substantial exclusion of women from combat forces for much of human history has been in some degree arbitrary – precisely the point argued by those who believe women should be allowed in all front-line combat.

But these are minor quibbles. Slim has performed a great service in providing a fresh and stimulating analysis of the idea that civilians ought to be protected in war – at a time when the idea is under great challenge – and in offering some proposals to help uphold the idea. He has seen enough of war and warriors to see the problem from the inside and to recognise that change will be difficult. His conclusion is difficult to fault: ‘Placing limits around violence remains ... one of the hardest challenges of the human condition’. ♦

Hugo Slim, ‘Killing Civilians: Method, Madness and Morality in War’, Hurst & Company, London, 2007, Casebound, viii + 319 pp., RRP \$A60.00.

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