



# Democide and Disarmament

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A series of articles advocating small arms and light weapons disarmament appeared in early 2002 issues of the *SAIS Review* and the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*. These articles share a common vision: a utopia in which only the military, the police, and select civilians are armed. (Note that this response addresses only small arms. Civilian possession of rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and similar weapons is a very different matter.)

The most instructive of the *SAIS Review* and *Brown Journal* articles decries the incoherence of those seeking to restrict small arms ownership, pointing out that governments may endorse disarming their own people while still claiming the right to arm governments and dissidents in other nations.<sup>1</sup> Disarmament advocates have failed to learn the important lessons that the democides of the past one hundred years should have taught them. The term “democide,” as coined by Professor R. J. Rummell, refers to all kinds of governmental mass murder of citizens, including “politicide” (the murder of political opponents), genocide, etc.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as firearms have been crucial in democides, the killers have been armed either by governments or were government agents themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Prevailing arguments for disarmament are based on illogical foundations; when placed in the context of specific historical events, they often seem incoherent. The case of the Cambodian genocide illustrates how encouraging governments to limit small arms ownership can have terrible consequences. As the killing began, Cambodian soldiers undertook an extraordinary house-to-house search to confiscate weapons people could have used to defend themselves. A witness recounts that the soldiers would

knock on the doors and ask the people who answered if they had any weapons. “We are here now to protect you,” the soldiers said, “and no one has a need for a weapon any more.” People who said that they kept no weapons were [nevertheless] forced to stand aside and allow the soldiers to look for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

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Of course, the soldiers, unlike disarmament theorists, did not actually believe this and they proceeded to slaughter approximately two million Cambodians.

This example is not unique; all twentieth century democides involved civilians disarmed either by long-standing gun bans or ones specially adopted to facilitate the killing.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the concept of disarming everyone except the government is completely backwards. Not including wars, governments murdered more than 170 million disarmed civilians in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

The efforts of disarmament advocates to keep guns out of the hands of apolitical criminals seem misplaced, given the fact that the number of crime victims over the past one hundred years is only a fraction of the number of victims of government-sponsored violence. Unfortunately, it is exceedingly difficult to disarm homicidal, lawless governments. Restricting gun ownership among civilians, however, never reduces murder rates, because those who should be disarmed often ignore gun laws, which only operate against harmless, law-abiding citizens.<sup>7</sup> Anti-gun theorists evade this truth by perpetrating a further myth: most murderers were previously law abiding and killed only because of access to guns in a moment of ungovernable rage. But homicide studies from the United States and elsewhere uniformly show that murderers “almost always have a long history of involvement in criminal behavior,” and that “the vast majority of persons involved in life-threatening violence have a long criminal record with many prior contacts with the justice system.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, studies indicate that “in almost every case murderers are aberrants exhibiting life histories of violence and crime, psychopathology, substance abuse, and other dangerous behaviors.”<sup>9</sup>

Evidence shows that lowering rates of gun ownership does not lead to lower murder rates. For example, though murder rates are far higher among African-Americans than whites in the United States, the overall African-American gun ownership rate is lower.<sup>10</sup> The lesson here is that the low rate of gun possession by harmless African-Americans has no benefit because they do not murder. In addition, the low rate of gun ownership within the group as a whole does not prevent those members of the group who commit murder from possessing guns. Yes, homicidal people should be disarmed, but the difficulties of detecting disobedience make gun laws at most marginally more useful than the laws against murder that gun laws are supposed to augment.

Serious gun control advocates admit that domestic bans cannot disarm criminals or terrorists.<sup>11</sup> International action offers no more

hope. The abject failure of thirty years of effort by Great Britain (in Northern Ireland) to disarm homicidal extremists speaks for itself. Islands present the optimum case for enforced disarmament. Yet gun bans have failed not only against the IRA but also against Protestant extremists with no international allies from whom to obtain arms. Great Britain's own handgun ban disarmed law-abiding citizens but did not stop violent crime from increasing beyond U.S. levels, while illegal guns now far exceed the number legally owned prior to the ban.<sup>12</sup>

The real democide problem is not guns but lawless, "homicidal governments" (a term in which I include rebels seeking to replace a current regime with one of their own). Despite articles bemoaning evasion of the embargo on gun transfers to Rwanda,<sup>13</sup> guns were little involved in the democides there and in Burundi. The actual weapons were knives and agricultural implements wielded by civilians, as soldiers and police stood by encouraging them. The same can be said for the 500,000 to one million dissidents and ethnic Chinese murdered in Indonesia during the 1960s, the more than one million victims of Hindu-Muslim fighting following Indian independence, and the victims of many other mass murders.<sup>14</sup>

Guns are crucial to democide only in the rare situation where the killers represent a minority group. Consider East Timor, which, like Rwanda, Burundi, Cambodia, India, and Indonesia, epitomizes the anti-gun utopia where gun possession is limited strictly to the military and the police. Question: if actual voting showed that more than 70 percent of East Timorese wanted independence from Indonesia, why were they the ones getting killed? Answer: because they had no guns, while the Indonesians armed the opponents of independence and then stood by encouraging the murder of hundreds of independence activists.

The relevance of firearms to democide is the opposite of that argued by disarmament theorists, who are, for the most part, untouched by even the most basic knowledge of weapons and tactics. Firearms are among the few light weapons that favor victims. If fifty determined attackers with knives and agricultural implements attack a house occupied by ten similarly armed defenders, the defenders inevitably die while a few attackers are injured. But if both sides have guns, and equivalent skills, the attackers will most likely be shot down before reaching the house.<sup>15</sup> This example is regularly borne out by the results of situations in which democide victims did not have small arms versus the results when they did.<sup>16</sup>

Nowhere is this clearer than in the hideous failure of disarmament policies in Bosnia. The UN embargo on arms to the Muslims contributed to the killing of more than 100,000 Muslims by the Serbian Army and its civilian proxies. This Serbian-perpetrated slaughter ended only when Muslim nations, which lack the high-mindedness of disarmament theorists, smuggled hundreds of thousands of small arms into Bosnia.<sup>17</sup> Tellingly, the Serb attack on the Croats failed because the Croats were armed.

Law-abiding citizens do not misuse guns and thus do not require disarming. In fact, restrictions on gun ownership will fail to prevent criminals from obtaining guns while leaving law-abiding citizens more vulnerable to the worst perpetrators of violence: homicidal governments. Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to prevent violent regimes from attacking their people, so the people must be free to own guns to defend themselves.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Karp, "Laudable Failure," *SAIS Review* 22, no.1 (Winter-Spring 2002): 177-193. Note: all references herein to *SAIS Review* and *Brown Journal* are to articles in the Winter-Spring 2002 and Spring 2002 issues, respectively, of the *SAIS Review* and the *Brown Journal of World Affairs*.

<sup>2</sup> For the definition of democide, see R.J. Rummel, *Death By Government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1994). Also see Daniel D. Polsby and Don B. Kates, "Of Holocausts and Gun Control," *Washington University Law Quarterly* 75 (1998): 1237, footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Charli Wyatt, "The Forgotten Victims of Small Arms," *SAIS Review*; Paul Eavis, "Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region: Challenges and Ways Forward," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*. For more information on violence committed by governments against disarmed people, see Jayantha Dhanapala, "Multilateral Cooperation on Small Arms and Light Weapons: From Crisis to Collective Response," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*; Kathi Austin, "Illicit Arms Brokers: Aiding and Abetting Atrocities," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*; and Jeffrey Boutwell, "Weaponization of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process," *Brown Journal of World Affairs*.

<sup>4</sup> Alec Wilkinson, "A Changed Vision of God," *New Yorker*, 24 January 1994, 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Rummel, *Death by Government*; Aaron Zelman and Richard Stevens, *Death by Gun Control: The Human Cost of Victim Disarmament* (Milwaukee: Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Rummel, *Death by Government*; Zelman and Stevens, *Death by Gun Control*.

<sup>7</sup> Randy E. Barnett and Don B. Kates, "Under Fire: The New Consensus on the Second Amendment," *Emory University Law Journal* 45 (1996): 1234-1259; James B. Jacobs, *Can Gun Control Work?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Gary Kleck, *Targeting Guns: Firearms and Their Control* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997); Gary Kleck and Don B. Kates, *Armed: New Perspectives on Gun Control* (Columbus, OH: Prometheus Publishing, Inc., 2001); Joyce Lee Malcolm, *Guns and Violence: The*

*English Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); James D. Wright, Peter Rossi, and Kathleen Daly, *Under the Gun: Weapons, Crime, and Violence in the United States* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Delbert S. Elliott, "Life Threatening Violence is Primarily a Crime Problem: A Focus on Prevention," *Colorado Law Review* 69 (1998): 1089 and 1093.

<sup>9</sup> Kleck and Kates, *Armed: New Perspectives on Gun Control*, 22-23; Gerald D. Robin, *Violent Crime and Gun Control* (Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, 1991), 47. Non-American studies also find killers are extreme aberrants. See Paul R. Smit et al., "Homicide in the Netherlands: An Exploratory Study of the 1998 Cases," *Homicide Studies* 5 (2001): 293-310; Pekka Santilla and Jaana Haapasalo, "Neurological and Psychological Risk Factors Among Young Homicidal, Violent, and Nonviolent Offenders in Finland," *Homicide Studies* 1 (1997): 234; Sheilagh Hodgins, "Mental Disorder, Intellectual Deficiency, and Crime," *ARCH. GEN. PSYCHI.* 49 (1992): 476.

<sup>10</sup> Kleck and Kates, *Armed: New Perspectives on Gun Control*, 68-69.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Harding, "Firearms Ownership and Accidental Misuse in South Australia," *Adelaide Law Review* 6 (1978): 271-272; Amitai Etzioni and Richard Remp, *Technological Shortcuts for Social Change* (New York: Sage, 1973), 107; Franklin Zimring, "Is Gun Control Likely to Reduce Violent Killings?" *University of Chicago Law Review* 35 (1968): 721.

<sup>12</sup> David Leppard and Rachel Dobson, "Murder Rate Soars to Highest in a Century," *Sunday Times* (London), 13 October 2002; "Britain is Now the Crime Capital of the West," *Independent* (London), 14 July 2002, <<http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/crime/story.jsp?story=314832>> (1 December 2002). "It appears that anyone who wishes to obtain a firearm will have little difficulty in doing so." Quotation from the director of the English National Crime Intelligence Service, *Reuters*, 22 July 2002. See also "Killings Rise As Three Million Illegal Guns Flood Britain," *Times* (London), 16 January 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Wyatt, "The Forgotten Victims of Small Arms"; Kathi Austin, "Illicit Arms Brokers: Aiding and Abetting Atrocities."

<sup>14</sup> The foregoing, and my discussion of mass democide in general, are informed by personal communications from democide experts including Professors Ted Robert Gurr, Barbara Harff, and R. J. Rummel. See also Patrick Brogan, *World Conflicts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), 26 ff., 184 ff., and 205 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Polsby and Kates, "Of Holocausts and Gun Control," 1241-1242; personal communication in the author's file from Lt. Col. Dana Drenkowski, USAR, who cites the following as typical: a) three soldiers and three militia on the roof of a mud building escaped without casualty after beating off two days of attacks by 300 charging riflemen who suffered over 100 casualties, including sixty-eight killed; b) c. 200 gun-armed defenders in mud-walled buildings inside a fenced area were eventually overwhelmed by c. 6,000 gun-armed attackers, but only after thirteen days in which the attackers suffered c. 1,600 dead.

<sup>16</sup> See examples given in Polsby and Kates, "Of Holocausts and Gun Control" and Don B. Kates, "Reflections on Gun Control and Holocausts," Homepage, <<http://donkates.com>> (1 December 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Karp, "Laudable Failure," 185.