In Rwanda, just a few years ago, Hutus followed the instructions of government officials, who told them to start with a small Tutsi child, "continue with a pregnant woman, kill her with her husband, her in-laws, and all her families, eliminate them all, eat their things, and after you finish, take their land, take their cars."

And so, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen reminds us, although the Nazis were the most "omnivorous killers" of the modern age, exterminating the greatest number and the greatest variety of victims, genocide has visited all parts of the world. Since the 20th century began, mass murder (directly or through consciously induced famine) has been far more lethal than war.

A self-proclaimed adherent of "the ethics of human responsibility," Goldhagen argues in "Worse Than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity," as he did in his controversial book, "Hitler's Willing Executioners," that genocide happens "not through peer pressure, not through blind obedience to authority, not because modernity has transformed people into bureaucrats." It happens when political leaders encourage assaults; followers, motivated by their beliefs and values, willingly, and often enthusiastically, carry them out; and other nations and international organizations remain passive or paralyzed.

Although he is not a gifted writer, Goldhagen's analysis of the politics and psychology of mass murder -- and his propensity to ask tough questions -- should command the attention of anyone interested in understanding (and ending) this scourge of humanity.

Goldhagen's tell-it-like-it is tone often cuts to the chase. The concepts of nation-state sovereignty and national interest, he proclaims, permit politicians to give lip service to "human rights," while letting hundreds of thousands or even millions of people die, "without raising a hand, or even seriously considering doing
so." In Rwanda, President Clinton "made a calculated decision" to let the Hutu slaughter continue, "while covering his tracks by falsely portraying the all-out genocide as an ‘ethnic conflict,’" and what's more, but one among many.

At times, however, in his zeal to restore "human agency" to accounts of genocide, Goldhagen goes further than his evidence should take him. Is the postulate that many people obey state authority out of fear or obligation "stunning" in its "sheer implausibility"? Do a large percentage of perpetrators go beyond their instructions, taunting and torturing their victims? Is it "abundantly clear that most people in the perpetrators' communities" would brutalize, incarcerate, expel and kill if asked to do so?

"Worse Than War" concludes with a passionate, if not always practical, program to reverse the "near total permissiveness" of genocide. Goldhagen recommends that the world's most powerful countries provide an "ironclad guarantee" that they would attack any country engaged in mass murder or elimination -- but does not specify the conditions that would warrant an intervention. He wants international courts to administer swift and certain punishment to the leaders who order it -- but does not reveal whether he thinks Henry Kissinger, Dick Cheney or, for that matter, Harry Truman, are appropriate candidates for prosecution. And he advocates replacing the "illegitimate, ineffectual and corrupt" United Nations with a more powerful United Democratic Nations -- but does not indicate how much power member states would cede to it.

Goldhagen, however, is right to warn against succumbing to cynicism. Even if the solutions are far more complicated than he implies, a substantive commitment by democratic nations to a world free of the politics of genocide is long overdue. Despite its flaws, "Worse Than War" is a good place to start thinking through what that commitment might mean.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

WORSE THAN WAR
Daniel Jonah Goldhagen
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Reading: Goldhagen discusses "Worse Than War" at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 20, at Powell's Books at Cedar Hills Crossing, 3415 S.W. Cedar Hills Blvd., Beaverton.

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