

2008

## Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War

Robert L. Perry

Hugo Slim

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Perry, Robert L. and Slim, Hugo (2008) "Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 4 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss4/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

A cursory review of Scahill's online postings, blogs, and congressional testimony reveals a clear and evident bias. But hardly any reasonable military professional would argue that the actions of companies like Blackwater have not harmed the coalition forces' counterinsurgency effort in Iraq. Downstream and third-order effects of these sometimes reckless and frequently arrogant mercenaries are not part of the calculation—they get paid for keeping the principal alive and unharmed. On the other hand, Scahill's rejection of private security companies as a *concept* leaves little room for the possibility that companies like Blackwater could be useful in the national security apparatus if future administrations and Congress could muster the political will to control them under an effective and feasible system of accountability. Moreover, while there is plenty to condemn about Blackwater's legacy, tactics, and management, that is only half of Scahill's story. That Blackwater founder Erik Prince is a deeply and evidently religious conservative is *prima facie* evidence, according to Scahill, that he and his business is or should be thoroughly discredited.

Finally, Scahill laments that Blackwater has been able to recruit seasoned intelligence and operational professionals, such as Cofer Black, without acknowledging that it is a common practice for corporations to recruit talent from the government, and vice versa. He paints Black, in particular, as a sellout, when Black's hiring by Blackwater only follows the typical pattern of Washington professionals across many vocations. Faulting his decision to move to the private sector is shallow and naive.

The bottom line on *Blackwater* is that it is worth reading. The book is a useful

medium to take stock of the myriad issues that confront policy makers on this controversial subject. Yet Scahill's antipathy toward all things Bush, Republican, and the Christian right ultimately takes over. Coupled with untidy organization and the author's tendency to repeat himself, this renders his work less constructive and credible than it otherwise might have been.

R. G. BRACKNELL  
*Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army*  
*Regimental Judge Advocate,*  
*Regimental Combat Team 5, Al Asad, Iraq*



Slim, Hugo. *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008. 300pp. \$29.95

Hugo Slim has written a remarkable and disturbing book that everyone concerned with the safety of "civilians" should read—and then join the public debate about protecting them. Slim states that while the word "civilian" has long been an ambiguous concept, it is one we must do more to support because it is grounded in basic Western values. He encourages wide public discussion about defending and expanding the civilian concept in an age of terrorism, failing states, and ethnic strife. He has fulfilled this purpose admirably, with a deep and wide breadth of scholarship that should spark serious debate at all levels.

This book is remarkable because the author, who has worked in humanitarian assistance for more than twenty years, tells of the horrendous evil that men do with a dispassionate tone that allows both the deadly logic of civilian killing and its terrible results to seep into the reader's mind. It is disturbing. This

reader was taken aback to realize that rather than build revulsion, the accumulation of damning evidence created the same “not my job” effect that allows nations to ignore atrocities against whole peoples.

Slim describes in detail the “seven spheres of civilian suffering”: direct violence (murder, genocide, etc.), rape and sexual violence, forced movement, impoverishment, famine and disease, emotional suffering, and postwar suffering. The book’s most disturbing aspect is the six chapters that describe the painful details about civilian killing. Only one chapter is dedicated to promoting civilian protection. This offers practical expressions of philosopher Howard Gardner’s seven “levers” for changing human minds as Slim’s answer to the dilemma: reason, research, resonance (emotion and morality), representational redescription (shared identity), resources and rewards, real world events, and resistance. Oddly, Slim’s suggestions as to how to apply these levers, such as international criminal courts, fail to resonate with the same passion as the myriad justifications for civilian killing. But this may be the point: killing results from the strongest passions, while the act of sparing life results from the more enduring, yet more difficult to evoke, feelings of mercy, compassion, and love.

ROBERT L. PERRY  
Naval War College



Gati, Charles. *Failed Illusions: Moscow, Washington, Budapest, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolt*. Cold War International History Project. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006. 264pp. \$49.95

Historians are charged with applying twenty-twenty hindsight to incidents that, at the time, seem to be only a curious combination of blurring events. Charles Gati, a leading commentator on Central European history and politics, does just that in *Failed Illusions*, his study of the abortive Hungarian Revolution of 1956 against the Soviet Union. His book was fifty years in the making, partly because many of his primary sources have only recently been made available. Although he was a firsthand observer of events in Hungary in the 1950s, Gati delayed this work to ensure that it reflected an appropriate level of objectivity. Gati was in Budapest at the time of the revolution, having recently been fired from a state-run newspaper for no ostensible reason. While this made him sympathetic to the revolution, he readily admits to a certain naiveté about why it was happening. This work is largely a result of his personal quest to retrospectively understand this seminal event that shaped his life. He emigrated to the United States shortly after the revolution.

Imre Nagy, prime minister of Hungary and the leader of the revolution, is the story’s protagonist. Through superb usage of primary and personal sources, Gati humanizes this ultimately tragic figure. The book’s most profound insights are in its handling of the decision makers in Moscow and Washington. Moscow possessed the ultimate power and was responsible for the decisions that led to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956. However, Gati’s use of recently opened records proves conclusively that Soviet leadership was not “trigger happy.” It is eye opening to see just how close the Soviet politburo came to allowing Hungary to