

## RECOMMENDATIONS AS A TEACHING TEXT

### ***The Genocide Contagion: How We Commit and Confront Holocaust and Genocide* by Israel W. Charny -- awarded *Spirituality and Practice Book Award 2016***

**The book is unusual in its “deployment of a number of exercises (Independent Study questions) and thought experiments in which he invites the readers’ participation.”**

Excerpts from review by **Mark A. Drumbl**, Washington and Lee University Law School in the journal of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 11, Issue 1: 113-114

“Je Tue, donc Je Suis! / I kill, therefore I Am /  
I beat you, Descartes-Mine is more powerful / You die. I live.”

This book is a “courageous effort animated by the author’s desire to understand the perpetrator of atrocity. The *Genocide Contagion* is an attempt to grasp why people kill. The core contribution of Charny’s book is to examine the linkages between violence in “everyday life” and violence in extraordinary times. Charny guides his reader through the connections between the cruel spouse, the indifferent bureaucrat, the abusive parent, the smallminded boss, and the narcissistic academic on the one hand, and the functionary of atrocity on the other. By focusing on the harshness of human agency in the everyday, Charny calls in to question the uniqueness of genocide... Charny’s efforts are groundbreaking in coming to terms with the psychology of mass violence.”

The book is unusual in its “deployment of a number of exercises (independent study questions) and thought experiments in which he invites the readers’ participation. Delivered in lively, accessible, and approachable format, *The Genocide Contagion* is suitable for a broad array of audiences and learners. Charny neither minces words nor overloads (or overlords) with agony. His work is neither human rights stenography nor human rights pornography. Charny emphasizes the capacity of the human spirit to harm and to recover, to injure and to atone.”

**Presents a series of self-examination exercises, posing questions for the reader on a list of hypothetical but commonplace situations followed by questions for the readers to ask themselves: Would I like to set a clearer moral norm for myself with regard to what I will and will not permit myself to do...? Serious readers may well benefit from these exercises.**

Excerpts from review by **Peter Suedfeld**, a former president of the Canadian Psychological Association in review journal of the American Psychological Assoc.: Don’t Say “Never Again” Unless You Mean It. *PsycCRITIQUES*, Dec. 4, 2017, Vol. 62, No. 48, Article 1

The book takes on a daunting task in proposing that a dozen psychological factors can explain so many different kinds of abusive behavior, from minor slights to humanity’s worst crimes. The author’s propositions are persuasive. *The Genocide Contagion* is a valuable, thought-provoking contribution to our examination of this sad history and of our potential roles in continuing or ending it. The author is one of the earliest and one of the most thoughtful and dedicated of Holocaust scholars, concerned with what happens before the killing begins and why people in large numbers can be led to participate in it. He posits twelve “Foundations of Evil.” The core of the book consists of the chapters in which he analyzes each “Foundation,” discussing both its beneficial and malevolent sides. His approach combines constructs from depth psychology, especially Freud, and research data as well as theories from social psychology.

He presents a series of self-examination exercises, posing questions for the reader: for example, “How do you think you would react to witnessing the following?” on a list of seven hypothetical but commonplace, situations. These exercises are followed by some questions for the readers to ask themselves: Are there things I would like to change about my personality or the way I conduct my daily life? Would I like to set a clearer moral norm for myself with regard to what I will and will not permit myself to do...? Serious readers may well benefit from doing these exercises thoughtfully.

**I've found the book to be incredibly useful in the courses I teach on genocide and mass violence, especially when it comes to getting students to step into the shoes of the perpetrators.**

Excerpts from review by **Bradley J. Nichols**, Dept. of History, Virginia Tech - Personal Communication

I've found the book to be incredibly useful in the two courses I teach on genocide and mass violence, especially when it comes to getting students to step into the shoes of the perpetrators and understand their motivations (however uncomfortable that may be). As an instructor who has always stressed the importance of teaching history through role-playing, I think the immersion exercises offer an effective means of instilling students with a potent mix of empathy and revulsion, which in turn allows them to grasp why genocide occurs and how it can be prevented while simultaneously reacting to atrocities as any right-thinking person should. In that vein, the "minds-on" approach also makes it much easier to have them analyze these phenomena from a clear-headed perspective as opposed to getting bogged down in the tragic enormity of the events in question and resorting to empty explanatory cliches (i.e. "man's inhumanity to man"). In my estimation, *The Genocide Contagion* is particularly valuable because the learning exercises and independent studies provide an engaging counterpoint to victim narratives (important though these obviously are too), and students have repeatedly said as much in their teaching evaluations.

**Charny also delivers a needed reminder that while we may intellectualize about motivations for committing genocide, “we dare not forget the people who are sentenced to death.”**

Excerpts from review by **Tom Haward**, University College London, in *Holocaust Studies*, May 22, 2017  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2017.1327674>

Israel Charny sets out to illuminate “the basic everyday dynamics from which genocide evolves.” There is much to be admired in the author’s exposition. He has the ability to contextualize ways of looking at genocide and avoiding sweeping generalizations and grand narratives. He stresses the imperative of considering “the role of the people involved in the context of social institutions at work.” What is refreshing is Charny’s ability to avoid slipping into dogma and instead see the nuance and possibilities of alternative positions. Charny also delivers a needed dose of sobering humanism to remind us that while we may intellectualize about motivations for committing genocide, “we dare not forget the people who are sentenced to death.”

Response from **Steven Baum**, author of *The Psychology of Genocide* and Editor, *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*

A well-researched, well documented work coalescing divergent perspectives – a task that most genocide writers are unable to do. He also offers the reader personal and professional and research data to support his tenet which most of us are still reluctant to hear – how given the proper conditions, we all can become genocidalists. As a seasoned clinician and as someone who has spent much of his career trying to understand genocide, I.W. Charny continues to shed light on the oldest and darkest parts of human existence.

Response from **Steven Jacobs**, University of Alabama

This book is truly a cri de coeur – your concern that all life is sacred is a testimony to who and what you are. I do like the additions of the various quoted sources throughout and the exercises at the end, and I incorporate these when I teach my genocide course.

Response from **Robert Fisk** (September 25, 2018). Every time we witness genocide we say ‘never again’ – but human nature tell us something different: Holocaust expert Israel Charny’s new book makes uncomfortable reading, as he asks us to examine ‘a truth we haven’t faced fully enough. Charny’s most recent book, *The Genocide Contagion*, asks readers to reflect on their own reaction to a future genocide in their own lives. It makes uncomfortable reading. In today’s world, Charny says – slowly, carefully and with little forgiveness of us humanoids – he can see no “concerted political or culture-wide consciousness to take care of people”. On the contrary, “what I see is another replay of a truth that we haven’t faced fully enough. And this is that the human species – with all of its beauty – is a horrible, uncaring, destructive species that has delighted and excelled in the taking of human life for centuries. And there is no real addressing of this issue in our evolution that I know of.” *London Independent*. Reprinted in *California Courier*, January 4, 2019.