Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, our daily news is awash with bloody massacres. Not a day passes without some atrocity committed somewhere in the world. The painful memories of genocidal murders in Rwanda, Burundi, and Srebrenica, still vividly imprinted in our collective memories, are now crowded out by daily bombardment of news on atrocities in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the world. And the recent events in Newtown (Connecticut), Aurora (Colorado), and Tulsa (Oklahoma) demonstrate that, even the stable and ordered countries of the developed world are not immune to mass murders perpetrated by lone and grazed gunmen.

The study of human violence is a difficult subject to approach. The fact remains that, since the beginning of time, human beings have been involved in violence and their conflicts have often evoked acts of inhumanity that shock even hardened souls and are disheartening to confront. Such extreme violence raises disturbing questions about us as a species. Are massacres the outcome of nature or nurture? Are human beings predetermined to be violent as part of our biological make-up? What makes humans to suddenly turn on their neighbors and why do massacres occur at certain times and not others? Why do atrocities often involve the most appalling violence as in mutilation, disemboweling, cannibalism, or setting fire to victims? Are certain kinds of societies less or more predisposed to massacres happening?

Throughout their history, humans have been engaged in violent acts, often directed against innocent civilians or helpless prisoners. Large-scale massacres have been carried out for rather utilitarian ends motivated by lust for power and wealth. Archeologists have found, for example, a Neolithic mass burial in Talheim (Germany) where remains of thirty four victims of both gender, bound and killed with a blow to head, have been unearthed. Such finds suggest that as agricultural societies expanded in Neolithic times so too did conflicts over land and resources resulting in massacres. Around 1350 BCE, as the Old Testament recounts it, Joshua and the Israelites laid siege to Jericho and "utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both
man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword." In the 9th century BCE, the Assyrian King Ashur-nasir-pal bragged after one of his victories, “3000 of their combat troops I felled with weapons. . . . Many of the captives taken from them I burned in a fire. Many I took alive; from some of these I cut off their hands to the wrist, from others I cut off their noses, ears and fingers; I put out the eyes of many of the soldiers. . . . I burnt their young men and women to death.” Indeed, the Assyrians earned a notorious reputation for their treatment of their opponents, but we must also remember a rather calculated aspect to their actions. Knowing well the prolonged and costly business of conducting war, Assyrians preferred psychological warfare, seeking to intimidate their opponents into submission. When approaching a city, they usually offered its residents to surrender, presenting arguments why they should disobey their leaders and open the gates. If the city resisted, however, the defeated the population was subjected to horrible atrocities and slaughter: entire towns were torn down and burnt, people tortured and flayed, their skins prominently displayed, and corpses erected on stakes as gruesome testimony to what the Assyrians could do.

Neither were the later cultures any more different. In the Iliad, for example, King Agamemnon proclaims that the Greek goal in the Trojan War is the utter destruction of Troy, down to the tiniest child. “My dear Menelaus, why are you so chary of taking men’s lives? Did the Trojans treat you as handsomely as that when they stayed at your house? No, we are not going to leave a single one of them alive, down to the babies in their mother’s wombs. Not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them or shed a tear.” When Troy finally falls, Agamemnon’s intentions are indeed carried out—the city is sacked, its men and boys slain, women and girls taken as slaves. The Old Testament, the holy book for millions of Christians, contains numerous instances of what can be described as genocidal massacres by the Israelites of their opponents. Thus, in the Books of Joshua and Samuel, the Israelites are shown destroying towns in fulfillment of the divine injunction to kill the peoples of Canaan. Scholars often note that such claims were simply part of a tradition of genocidal discourse that existed among the ancient cultures—whether Greeks, Assyrians, Egyptians or Israelites, these cultures bragged about having slaughtered their foes, but that does not mean that they actually did it. Nevertheless, such discourse, especially in holy books, creates conditions conducive to genocidal massacres by the very assertion of their desirability. Indeed, religious ideals were (and still are) oftentimes used to justify violence and massacres. While the Old Testament contains many passages recounting genocidal slaughter, the Muslim holy book, Quran, contains verses that specifically address the concepts of fighting and violence, and have been conflictingly interpreted over the centuries.

But large-scale massacres were not limited to just pronouncements. The Ancient Greeks murdered each other with abandon during the 27-year-long Peloponnesian
Acqui Division, Massacre of the (1943)

The Massacre of the Acqui Division was the mass execution of the men of the Italian 33rd Acqui Infantry Division by the Germans on the island of Cephalonia, Greece, in September 1943, following the Italian armistice during the World War II. About 5,000 Italian soldiers were massacred at the hands of the German army’s XXII Mountain Corp.

In May 1943, the Acqui Division, consisting of 11,500 soldiers and 525 officers under the command of Gen. Antonio Gandin, were assigned the task of garrisoning the island of Cephalonia. The following month, 2,000 German soldiers under the command of Lt. Col. Johannes Barge were transferred to Cephalonia. The decision to post Germans on Cephalonia was part of a German High Command plan to reinforce Italian-occupied territories with German troops to prevent such territories from being used as springboards for the Allies to invade mainland Europe in the event that Italy brokered a separate peace. On September 11, three days after Italy surrendered, the Italian High Command instructed Gandin to view the German troops as hostiles, and that if they attempted to disarm his garrison, he was to resist at all costs. That same day, Barge handed Gandin an ultimatum—join the Nazis, surrender, or be destroyed. Believing that he had more time, Gandin decided to try to continue to negotiate with Barge. But, the Germans were not in a negotiating mood. On the morning of September 15, Barge, with reinforcements from the mainland, launched a surprise attack. After several days of brutal combat, Gandin ordered what remained of his division to surrender. As the Italians began filing out of their positions, the XXII Mountain Corp opened fire on them, following orders that they had received earlier stating that they were to take no prisoners. Those that were not shot outright were rounded up and marched to San Teodoro, where they were executed by eight member detachments. The bodies of some 5,000 men were disposed of in a variety of ways—some were cremated on massive wood pyres, while others were loaded upon ships and buried at sea.

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See also: World War II, Atrocities during.

Further Reading

