

## **Soul Murder, Social Death, and Humiliation: Consequences of State-sponsored Rape**

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### **Abstract**

Rape and sexual violence occur in war and genocide. Historically, rape in this context is viewed as a “natural” consequence of the violent, chaotic, testosterone-driven atmosphere of war. Moving beyond this stereotype in an attempt to understand the intent and motivation of the perpetrator(s) of war and genocidal rape, this article will discuss the emotional (individual and social) consequences of such state-sponsored violence. Borrowing the concepts of “soul murder” from Anselm von Feuerbach and “social death” from Orlando Patterson, I will discuss how rape humiliates not only the victim but the victim’s entire society using historical examples such as the Rape of Nanking, the Holocaust, and the systematic rape of Bosnian women by Serbian soldiers in 1992.

### **Introduction**

In war and genocide, states often use sexual assault and rape against civilians. Great plays of power are now associated with levels of humiliation and social damage, not only political or military strength. Attacks on civilians can come in a myriad of forms, sometimes involving sexual intercourse (vaginal penetration) and other times involving aggressive, physical acts of humiliation culminated by murder. Women in particular are targeted this way because women are symbols of society.<sup>1</sup> The symbol of woman is socially constructed as the human elements which create new life, nurture that life, and give it meaning. Women are the smallest symbolic unit of a community and humanity. Women care for the hearth and provide a warm, loving domicile for the other members of the family. If this symbol – this unit – is destroyed by your enemy,

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<sup>1</sup> New research has shown that this trend is changing – men are becoming victims of sexual assault in the Congo in increasing numbers (Gettleman 2009).

then you have been struck at the very core of your foundation. For this reason, the sexed bodies of innocent civilian women throughout the world have become targets of rape and sexual assault in the context of state-sponsored violence for the purpose of humiliation.

I will borrow two concepts in this paper: "soul murder" from Anselm von Feuerbach and "social death" from Orlando Patterson. Neither man had mass rape on his mind when he coined these phrases. Nevertheless, soul murder and social death, when applied to genocidal rape, can help us understand the consequences of rape when it has been committed on both a micro (individual) and macro (societal) level. When a woman is raped, she is laden with a burden that she will carry with her for the rest of her life. When a community of women is raped, that community will carry the burden of each individual woman and that of a dishonored society. Individually, this burden is soul murder; on the larger, communal scale, this burden is social death. Soul murder, the intentional destruction of an individual's self-concept and humanity, joined with social death and planned annihilation of a society, are the direct results of a massive, destructive, degrading assault on a community.

Before I go further in my discussion, I believe a specific note about state-sponsored violence is necessary. Although war and genocide are separate entities of organized destruction and chaos and are completely independent of each other, they are historically and consistently linked.<sup>2</sup> War does not generally lead to genocide, but genocide does lead to war; war does not need genocide to exist, but genocides have historically only existed in the context of war. Both are mass scale forces of destruction and inevitable chaos that are organized, perpetrated, and fueled by the state or a state organization (e.g., a military or political organization). Although my intent in this article is not to discuss the intrinsic relationship between war and genocide, it is worth noting that this connection is important to the discussion of war rape and genocidal rape. Whatever differences there may be, the intent of the perpetrator in both war and

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include the 1994 "civil war" in Rwanda as of a cover-up for the systematic genocidal slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis by a Hutu extremist para-military group; Nazis used World War II to cover the Holocaust; Serbians used the Yugoslavian civil war as a cover for the Bosnian genocide.

genocide are similarly derived to gain power (e.g., land, wealth, or political influence, however defined), thus further increasing the relationship between war and genocide. Women are attacked, sexually, in both war and genocide because they are women, and their weakness as such is a valuable weapon to use against the other's enemy. For the purposes of this article, I will use the phrase "state-sponsored violence" when discussing the context under which mass rape is committed as opposed to separating "war" and "genocide."

### **Humiliation as a Weapon**

Humiliation is an effective tool of war and genocide. It has a thorough impact on individuals and communities and is relatively simple to accomplish. Avishai Margalit (1996: 9) defined humiliation as "any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured." Although simple, this definition underscores how easily humiliation can be accomplished. Margalit contends that humiliation is rooted in the intention and behaviors of the humiliator, not the humiliated. Even though humiliation results from the dissemblance of a person's self-respect, it is the motivation and intent of the actor (or humiliator) that truly defines the act. Intent and motivation are important factors in war and genocide. In fact, it is intent that separates genocide from other forms of mass murder. Margalit also points out that a state is the single most controlling element of humiliation in any society. The state provides and defines the protection and value of an individual citizen's rights, dignity, and self-respect. Therefore, its ability to cause mass humiliation and societal destruction is quite far reaching.

The typical method of humiliation in this context is through sexual exploitation, assault, and emasculation. In most cases, the state intends degrading action to insult and humiliate men – whether individually or on a communal level – by targeting them intimately. Rape is the instrument of choice when the intention is to humiliate. Rape establishes a dominance hierarchy by subordinating the victim to the perpetrator; this is the first level of humiliation. Any additional derogatory act of aggression above the

sexual assault adds subsequent levels of humiliation.<sup>3</sup> Humiliation is not limited to language; in fact, women are often beaten and murdered, especially when rape is conducted on a mass scale. The psychological torture increases when women are meant to be humiliated through language, public humiliation, forced incest, and other derogatory sexual acts. Quite often the humiliation does not end with death, as the bodies of these female victims continue to be tortured. In Nanking, women's breasts were removed, women were decapitated postmortem, objects were shoved into their vagina, and often corpses would be displayed like trophies. This humiliation is meant to demonstrate dominance, power, and to ensure the victim understands that she is less than human.

In patriarchal societies where a woman's chastity is directly linked to her worth as a member of that society, rape is equivalent to her death. As far as the community is concerned, a raped woman's value is limited, if not rendering her completely worthless. Society reacts to individual victims focusing on how this will affect the community, not the victim. This consequence of rape is a severe reaction to the humiliation felt by society. In a poor attempt to protect their worth and their value as a community, they decisively reject the tainted female.

The attack on Nanking during World War II offers one of the greatest examples of humiliation through state-sponsored violence. The intent of the attack on Nanking was to humiliate and destroy Chinese culture, people, and their sense of self-worth as a community and as individuals. The Japanese army was looking for complete, total, and absolute destruction. Foreseeing the incoming Japanese attack, many members of the Nanking community fled. Only the weakest and most vulnerable members of the Nanking community were left – women, children, the sick, and the elderly. When the Japanese army arrived, they began collecting and slaughtering Nanking men, anyone between the ages of 13-65, especially soldiers, and those otherwise deemed a threat to the Japanese Army. The women and children were left to defend the city.

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<sup>3</sup> Mostly commonly, perpetrators will use abusive language towards their victims; in cases of genocide, this language will have a racial or ethnically derogatory tone. In the case the genocide in Darfur, when women are raped, their perpetrator will say "I'm doing this to you because you are black," or "I will put an Arab baby in you, so no black man will want you" (Kristof 2005).

These women suffered a massive scale of humiliation. Not only were they raped and sexually assaulted, but pregnant women were disemboweled (their fetuses removed, sometimes squirming on the ground); women were penetrated with sticks, swords, anything the Japanese army could get their hands on (Brownmiller 1975). One witness reported Japanese soldiers raping a barber's wife then stuffing her vagina with firecrackers. Women were tied to chairs, naked, and positioned specifically so that multiple soldiers could rape them repeatedly, making them "permanent fixtures for rape" (Chang 1997: 93). Many of these sexual assaults occurred in public – outside the home, in a town square, or in front of the remaining Nanking community – as live pornography. It is clear the intent of the Japanese army was to destroy Nanking in every possible way that a community can be destroyed; in this case, through murder, physical destruction, emotional destruction, and annihilation of anything that remained of a community.

Thus, on multiple levels, Nanking was destroyed. Rape and humiliation were instrumental to this destruction. Relationships between members of the society were destroyed and the women of Nanking were emotionally destroyed by the attack, as their suffering reflected great consequences to the well being of their society. While the physical elements of Nanking were rebuilt, emotional destruction and personal relationships were not so easily salvaged.

### **Soul Murder**

Anselm von Feuerbach coined the term "soul murder" while discussing the mystery of Kaspar Hauser, the young German man who allegedly had been locked in a basement for most of his life (Masson 1996). Feuerbach discussed this concept as it related to child abuse, child negligence, and feral children. It was his contention that victims of soul murder could only be children who had suffered the same experience as Hauser. Only individuals who had been so unfortunate as to experience neglect from an early age or be deprived of human contact could possibly experience this level of trauma. Feuerbach believed any human who had the ability to develop in a healthy environment prior to any traumatic experience could not become a victim of soul

murder. His argument seems to indicate that once a human's soul has developed, it could not be destroyed. Feuerbach leads us to believe that adults raised in normal social constructs are somehow protected from this level of human destruction. Although children may be more vulnerable and perhaps less capable of recovery than adults, no human is protected from neglect, humiliation, and dehumanization.

According to Feuerbach's concept, soul murder is not itself a physical crime, rather it is a crime against a person's intimate self concept. What Feuerbach is trying to describe closely relates to what occurs when an individual's personal self-concept is destroyed. Imagine an individual so violently attacked that physical recognition as a human is virtually impossible. Soul murder is the emotional, mental equivalent of this kind of physical assault. To destroy this part of a person limits their development and capacity for human character and human interaction. The fact that Hauser had maintained any kind of recognizable human characteristics was astounding to Feuerbach. The intentional neglect and attack on Hauser's soul was an attempt to destroy him as a human.

Soul murder has been used in other wars and genocides, albeit in different forms, because internal destruction is a valuable tactic for combatants to use against their enemy. During World War II, the treatment of prisoners in the concentration camp in Poland and Germany were specifically designed to deconstruct the human qualities of the prisoners up to and including death.<sup>4</sup> Simply killing their enemy was not enough for the Nazis. They needed to destroy every living element of their enemy down to the very qualities that would make them human. For instance, the beginning of internment in a concentration camp started with the replacement of name with a number. A person was no longer human, no longer a unique individual, but just one of 11 million potential victims.

The inhuman condition was so prominent in concentration camp life that inmates gave a name to this state of being – *muselmen*. Although extreme, the *muselmen*

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<sup>4</sup> This treatment was allotted to all victims of the Nazi Regime, though most specifically to the Jewish prisoners. Also to be considered is the fact that the conditions with which prisoners had to endure were designed prior to the establishment of gas chambers and absolute enemy destruction.

represents an ultimate example of Feuerbach's soul murder. Suffering from extreme starvation, physical, and mental exhaustion, these *muselmen* became completely apathetic to their situation and the world around them. These zombie-like creatures no longer maintained basic standards of hygiene nor did they care for their fate, they were animated bodies without a soul. Primo Levi (1958: 90), in his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, describes the *muselmen* as the ultimate physical example of evil: "if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which was familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen."

What is important to note here is that the intent of the perpetrator(s) of mass rape is soul murder. To internally destroy the enemy includes removing the will or power to fight. This is the desired result of the rapist in war and genocide.

### **Social Death**

Orlando Patterson (1982: 41) describes social death on an individual level as "that of an insider who had fallen, one who ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in the community." As Patterson describes, the individual of the community becomes "fallen," no longer capable of relating or operating in "normal" society. When considering the scale of mass rape as suffered by an entire community, that community is fallen from humanity. Patterson's phrase becomes more literal: the death of a society. Before women are targeted for rape, men are killed and families are separated. The final assault is saved for the unprotected (without arms) and weak (elderly, sick) members of society. The single-minded attack on females leads to the destruction of the entire community. Their emotional, physical and mental incapacities internally destroy the foundation, the building blocks of that community. If all the females in a given society are constrained and their functions limited, the entire society can cease to function or die.

The opposite of social death would be what Claudia Card (2005: 238) describes as "social vitality" which "exists through relationships, contemporary and intergenerational, that create an identity that gives meaning to a life." Card suggests

that “major loss of social vitality is a loss of identity and consequently a serious loss of meaning for one’s existence.” The loss of social vitality is Patterson’s social death on a mass scale. Claudia Card contends social death is the central piece of genocide, in that social death is the intent of genocidal perpetrators when it is not enough to physically destroy a group; instead, their social integrity must be comprised. Again, this is what makes mass rape such a powerful weapon. The public and personal humiliation, destruction of relationships, and loss of public and personal identity destroy an individual and a community in one strike.

### **Soul Murder and Social Death: The Consequences of State-sponsored Rape**

When it comes to state-sponsored violence, women have been uniquely targeted for sexual assault and their bodies become weapons against their own people. Soul murder and social death are the consequences of such violence. Not only is the individual and their immediate circle of loved-ones affected, but an entire community is devastated. The long term affects of mass rape on a community can be dire or that community can regain its social vitality. In contemporary and modern warfare, there is no longer any such ideal as innocent civilians; rather, all living elements are either combatants or targets. Innocent civilians make for the most effective weapon against an enemy because an attack against your community, against your home, against your family can wipe the will out of your fighting.

If the concept of soul murder is a crime against the spiritual being of a person, then rape would be a physical method for conducting soul murder. Rape is a tool designed to destroy the enemy. Rape is a physical crime which has consequences that reach far beyond the physical act. Rape is not about sexual attraction, nor is it about the need for the perpetrator to find sexual relief. Rape is a weapon of humiliation and both mental and physical destruction. It is more than the physical trauma that a victim suffers; in fact, there is a psychological attack that occurs simultaneously with the physical attack. This severe psychological attack of rape results in soul murder – the murder of an individual’s human essence, just as Feuerbach described. An attack of such humiliation is intended to destroy the spirit of the victim, to take away their



personal self-concept, and ultimately destroy their humanity. While rape is a very personal, intimate attack on an individual (or group of individuals) its social consequences can be extensive. Outside of the victim's initial experience, there is also a shared experience of humiliation throughout the victim's community. This humiliation is more overtly shared when rape occurs on a mass scale perpetrated by the state in the context of war or genocide.

It is nearly impossible to protect all potential victims of warfare from the threat of death, kidnapping, or rape. However, harsher punishments and a greater will power behind international legislation would help. Additionally, more international aid needs to focus on the redevelopment of social vitality and community relations in post-conflict areas. Focus of such aid needs to be on rebuilding the society that was lost. Guided by the victims, we can establish centers to help them regain their confidence and power to rebuild their community. Social work programs, rehabilitation centers, and community workshops will bring individual victims together and unite their focus and determination to restore. In short, more needs to be done to help the victims of state-sponsored warfare. Simply providing food, medical help, and water will not bring back social life. Victims of violence and humiliation on a mass scale need a strong support system in order to rebuild their communities, their social institutions, and their relationships. Without social vitality, a community could be completely lost to war and genocide. While understanding that protection will be limited, support could always be stronger.

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