

*The Killing Age*  
*How Violence Made the Modern World*  
Clifton Crais  
London: Picador, 2025, £30, h/b

**Bartholomew Steer**

**T**his is the life work of American historian Clifton Crais. I had never heard of him before, but he seems to have had a fruitful career, latterly as a Professor of History at Emory College, specializing in African and comparative history.<sup>1</sup> The book has been hailed by others in the field and reviewed extensively since publication in September 2025.<sup>2</sup> In the words of the dust jacket:

. . . it is a radical rethinking of modernity in which Professor Crais argues that the era between 1750 and the early 1900's – seen by many as the birth of the Anthropocene – should instead be known as the Mortacene: The age of Killing.

Killing brought the world together and tore it apart, as violence and commerce converged to create a new and terrible world order that drove the world of global capitalism. Profiteering warlords left a trail of devastation across Africa, Asia, and the Americas, committing mass-scale slaughter of humans and animals, and sparking an environmental crisis that remains the most pressing threat facing the world today.

It will not be everyone's cup of tea. It brings home all those things that used to go on in the far reaches of the British Empire, at the frontiers of settler communities and elsewhere. It contradicts the notion of the civilising mission of western expansion, and rather than suggesting that the industrial revolution was the vehicle for the expansion of the West's influence, it argues that it was the barrel of the gun that made possible the expansion of looting and the imposition of asymmetric terms of trade.

It was arms that allowed for the trade in slaves, facilitated by selling weapons to local war lords (on credit), with credit control and usurious interest rates underpinned by recourse to the British Navy's cannons. Equally, arms

---

<sup>1</sup> See <<https://history.emory.edu/people/bios/faculty-bios/crais-clifton.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> It is 532 pages, 28 pages of appendices, 85 pages of notes, an index of 45 pages and a website for readers to consult if they want more. <<https://www.thekillingage.com/>>

supported the establishment of settler communities in America, Australia and Canada, and trading posts across the world. Free trade it was not. Arms also enabled plantations, served by slaves, as supply lines in a globalised trading system benefitting the suppliers of arms.

The genius of the arms trade, however, was that it allowed local warlords, with weapons supplied by the arms trader, to do most of the dirty work of capturing and processing of slaves for onward transmission. Arms propped up local nabobs who organised the tax collection that was at the root of the looting in India. But let's recap on the contents of the book before entering a discussion.

It starts with a description of the birth of the arms industry in the Netherlands, which facilitated the growth of their mercantile empire and led to the Netherlands being the richest place on Earth. The British were quick to emulate them. Starting in the East End of London, production expanded to Birmingham which became the gun manufacturing capital of the world.

This was accompanied by the rise of financial institutions to manage this trade. Banks, standardised currencies, stock exchanges, bonds, insurance companies, loans and mortgages, new accounting practices, patent laws and laws all played a part. Lloyd's Bank was formed from an offshoot of an iron and gun trading family. Galton's, one of England's most important eighteenth-century gun manufacturers, apart from being involved in the slave trade, was intermarried with the Barclay's banking family and invested in an array of financial institutions. Great Britain became an industrial and financial behemoth which linked a 'world of guns, violence and commerce'. (p. 65) Between 1700 and 1790 British exports to 'east India' rose by a factor of eighteen, while British trade with Europe fell by half between 1700 and 1772.

Part two describes what it terms African Holocausts. This was the process by which slaves were captured, sold and traded across Africa to supply the newly developing Americas and to serve plantations across the world and in Africa itself. Only broad estimates of the killing and enslavement are provided: the number of slaves taken range from 10 to 36 million and losses in population from 19 to 48 million. This was made possible by the sale of guns to local warlords who did the dirty work. And as the pressure to repay loans increased, the warlords intensified their operations. Later the killing extended to elephants, valuable for their ivory but essential to clear land for settlers and plantations. Unfortunately, the regrowth of the bush that elephants had cleared brought the Tse fly, malaria and more deaths.

The author displays his familiarity with African history with details of the

Nigerian and Congo traders, rulers and the impact on local communities and cultures.

The enslavement of coastal people became pervasive. Kidnapping abounded. The result was a kind of persistent low-level banditry fed by weapons and the voracious demand for more slaves. (p. 125)

Things were no better in East Africa, as the Nile slave trade is described and the Zanzibar connection to it revealed.

Part three describes 'Pirates, Indians and Gentleman warlords'. Again, it was the Dutch who were the pioneers with the Dutch East India Company, but the British followed aggressively in the form of the British East India Company (BEIC). He describes the fall of the Mughal and Maratha empires as the BEIC expanded its range and penetration. What drove development was the emergence of new and better guns. Eventually the advent of the gatling gun and machine guns led to the Treaty of Brussels in 1890 and the limitation of guns in private hands, with the nation state assuming the monopoly on the use of violence. Hitherto:

Warlordism had been at the heart of settler communities and colonial societies, which then sought independence for the freedom to kill everything that opposed their pursuit of profit. (p. 202)

Part Four is entitled 'The American ways of killing' and starts with the extermination of much of the whale population, promoted by the high demand for whale oil. This was the best lighting fuel before the electric light was invented, and needed to light the new factories that were powered 24 hours per day. Every sperm whale would generate enough oil to keep a factory going for a year. But it didn't stop there: the cold North American winters, made worse by the mini-ice age at the time, generated an insatiable demand for pelts. Thus the native American Indians were enrolled in the great beaver and buffalo exterminations to satisfy this demand by the simple method of selling them guns, traps and axes.

Settlers then found the country easier to penetrate as rivers drained the land more quickly with fewer beavers and the plains became useable for livestock, agriculture and cotton and tobacco plantations. This in turn led to the desire to wipe out the indigenous Indian population, or at least to send them to Oklahoma, creating the *res nullis* upon which the liberal myth of America is based: that settlers moved into empty land as 'God's gift'. British settlers, forced out by the enclosures of UK land,<sup>3</sup> knew that this was a once in a lifetime chance to join the landowner class and took it.

---

<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/short-history-enclosure-britain>>

The story is illuminated by the success of John Jacob Astor, who rose by way of being a fur trader, Indian trading post pioneer selling guns, railroad investor and importer of coolies from China, real estate investor and banker in Manhattan, to becoming one of the richest men in the USA. But the saddest story relates to the deliberate extermination of the herds of buffalo. This was a win-win. There were the furs, hides, meat and bones; but the main benefits were in clearing the land for settlement and clearing the Indians who were deprived of their food and livelihood. It was made possible by the improvements in armaments, notably the Winchester rifle.



BISON BONES. ROUGEVILLE, MICHIGAN, 1892 (DETROIT PUBLIC LIBRARY).

Part five then describes the history of the cotton plantations, slavery and even the complicity of the Sioux in procuring slaves. 750,000 people died in the American Civil War as the South fought for the continuation of the plantation system.

While on the topic of cotton, the story diverges to encompass cotton growing in Egypt, slaving in the Sudan and debt crises. The Egyptian debt crisis was managed by Lord Cromer, Evelyn Baring, of Baring Bank fame, who

called for the British Navy to bombard Alexandria in 1882 and reconquer Egypt.

From Egypt it's a short hop to India, the opium trade and the warlords who enforced it. But then the expansion of cotton plantations in India occurred as the world market boomed, in part because of the American civil war. But the booms were followed by busts, famines, disease and tens of millions of deaths. Not least because cotton plantations depleted the soils and forests and made the land susceptible to flooding and drought. The author speculates that famines of the late Victorian era may have been caused by the early stages of the global warming caused by industrialisation, but the major cause of death and suffering was the indifference of governors intent on securing cheap sources of tea, opium and cotton.

Another diversion takes us to the links between the development of the railways, steam engines and the urgent need for lubricants to keep the wheels and axles turning. The solution devised was west African palm oil. This led in turn to another bout of land clearance for plantations, needing slaves and warlords to enforce capture and discipline.

Part six is called 'Empire and the twilight of the warlords'. It tells the story of the scramble for Africa by the European powers, but pre-eminently by Great Britain which expanded its empire by 4.5 million square miles between 1871 and 1901. But more broadly, between the 1840s and the outbreak of World War 1, Europe turned 9 million square miles into colonial possessions. Although much of the hard work had been done by private companies (BEIC) and the equivalents in Holland, France, Spain and Russia, gradually the chaos caused and the opportunities created for nations meant that the might of state-led armies usurped and replaced the warlords.

The chaos and violence unleashed by warlords had resulted in hundreds of millions of deaths and empires, but the eventual triumph of the state brought stability and a decline in violence. Up to a point that is, as discipline had to be maintained: in India notoriously at the barrel of a cannon. Nonetheless the author claims 'both Empire and the nation-state brought an end to the era of warlordism that had thrived for 150 years as guns manufactured in the West spread across the globe'.

But violence there was a-plenty, as the careers of Cecil Rhodes and King Leopold of Belgium attest. Electricity stimulated a need for copper, and it was discovered in huge quantities in the Congo and East Africa. In the space of ten years Rhodesia's African population halved as Rhodes' British South African Company (BSAC) colonised and looted the country.

Chapters follow on the 'Savageries of the New Imperialism in India',

including the indifference to famines that killed million and the terrors of free trade in China, including the fomenting of the Taiping rebellion to undermine the Qing Empire and bolster the opium and arms trades. A chapter on 'New World Empires' describes how the USA spread to the West coast, defeating Spain; warlordism spread into Mexico and the Americas; whilst Brazil, Argentina and other Latin American countries engaged in the establishment of oligarchic power over estates, plantations and mines, and in inflicting violence on native Indians.

'Great Lands of the Dead' summaries the extent of killing and savagery on which the United States is built. It uses colourful language: 'Gun-toting and slave-owning Andrew Jackson, who served as President from 1829 to 1837, had set out a brutalist vision of ethnic cleansing and of opening up the South to plantation slavery . . .'. Native American populations had declined by 90%. But it didn't stop there. The Mexican-American wars annexed the west of America to what are now its borders, killed 40,000, and set the scene for the Civil War over debates about the extension of slavery into Texas, California and Arizona. A policy of 'extermination of the natives' followed as settlers moved west.

A short epilogue mentions the fact that the killing did not stop with warlords as nation states took up guns with a vengeance in WW1 and WW2 before warlordism became resurgent in Cambodia, Kazakhstan, the Niger Delta and Congo (and, I might add, the Middle East). As it was almost 200 years ago, warlords now provide some of the world's most important resources. Although worldwide rearmament and nuclear weapons have kept wars offshore for western nations, it didn't stop wars in Indochina, Nigeria, Ghana, and various civil wars in Central America. All these wars thrive on the availability of armaments and the arms trade.

On the whole though, things became more peaceable in the Americas, life expectancy increased, incomes and literacy rates improved. India had 50,000 miles of railroad and even in Africa thousands of miles of tracks opened the interior. The world had turned to establishing 'resource empires' based on oil, coal and trade routes that distributed these and other goods and minerals to markets around the world. By the burning of fossil fuels it had also triggered global warming and climate change, threatening the very viability of life in parts of the world.

He concludes that none of this was the result of the Industrial Revolution, but what he terms:

a sustained and deliberate decision by human beings to pursue and fall in love with violence. Greed and killing brought the world together and

tore it apart, from the enslavement and exploitation of people to the mass destruction of mammals.

He doesn't sound too convinced it's going to stop.

The book is therefore not a comfortable read, although it holds a certain ghoulis fascination as anecdotes and statistics accumulate to reinforce the author's story and arguments.

## Reviews

Reviews have been mixed. *The Times* review<sup>4</sup> notes that Steven Pinker, in *Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, demonstrates that the world is getting less violent not more so and benefitting greatly everyone as a result. The reviewer points out that much violence has been off-shored as tyrannical working conditions and slavery still persist in many parts of the world, reinforced by arms if required. But the reviewer also complains about exaggerating the role of slavery in the rise of America; the overuse of the term warlord to group together a set of disparate villains; and the term 'Mortecene' – the age of death and Killing (1750-1900) to juxtapose to the 'Anthropocene' – the modern age starting with the industrial revolution. Despite these quibbles the reviewer seems to enjoy the stories and sketches ('commodity histories') of the whaling industry, the buffalo and palm oil plantations. And tellingly he says, 'Crais is good when tracing the spread of weapons and the anarchy that followed in their wake', which I think is Crais's point.

John Gray in *The New Statesman*<sup>5</sup> accuses Crais of parochialism in omitting the French revolution, as if a progressive cause couldn't equally be guilty of mass murder and Terror. Similarly, he thinks the timeframe of 1750-1900 was constructed to exclude the Russian revolution and Mao. As if only capitalist exploitation can grow out of the barrel of a gun. He appears to accuse Crais of pursuing the market in anti-western propaganda rather than providing a comprehensive history of violence. Again, it is the role of armaments since 1750 that is Crais's focus. Although he dwells on the UK's role at the heart of the industrial revolution, Crais's argument is not resting on this: it is rather that armaments and the arms trade had an independent role, regardless of the warlord or specific location or cause involved. It's the technology rather than the ideology that is the topic of the book.

*The Wall Street Journal* review<sup>6</sup> again denigrates the work as a lost

---

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.thetimes.com/culture/books/article/killing-age-how-violence-made-modern-world-clifton-crais-review-9bjl92gqt?>>

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2026/02/the-dark-side-of-the-enlightenment>>

<sup>6</sup> <<https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/books/the-killing-age-review-born-in-bullets-ad48492d?>>

opportunity to properly understand the world remade by the advent of guns. Crais is accused of hyperbole and of depicting cartoonish simplifications. Crais is not helped by being quoted in the *Journal* as follows:

He argues that guns created slavery and slavery created capitalism, which 'emerged out of nothing less and nothing more than the globalized use of violence to make money'. His central claim isn't subtle. 'Destruction,' says Mr. Crais, 'made the modern world.'

Crais is interviewed and provides his own reflections in *Unseen Histories*.<sup>7</sup> What strikes me is he identifies the role of complicity in the spread of greed and violence accompanying the technology of death being sold around the world. A lot of people had a hand in it.

So, my considered opinion is that the timeframe chosen by Crais is no accident, as it focusses on the contribution America makes to the world, alongside the British who drove the Industrial Revolution at the time. It does not pretend to a panoptic history of violence or a full world history of the period. It does what it says on the cover and 'shows how killing shaped who we are, what we value, what we fear and the precarious planet we must now confront'. It's an uncomfortable perspective and critics seek to deflect the criticism it implies by calling for the book to be different.

For my part it helps explain the emergence of the military-industrial-complex; the use of warlords and arms sales to further corporate and national strategic interests; and how technology forces the pace as new generations of weapons supersede the last. It shows that the mindset of settler communities, whether they be in the 'Wild West' of America, Israel, South Africa or Australia, can lead to horrendous outcomes.

It will fall to a new generation of historians to write the history of killing since 1900 to the present day. It will be another thick book, but it will again show how the technology and commerce of killing have a self-propelling force, irrespective of the local circumstances, wishful thinking, or all the other factors in play.

Again, there are many who wish to resile from such evidence, seeking comfort in ideologies that justify the means by the ends achieved, or merely that such acts are granted immunity by God's grace and the ability to withdraw from the strictures of international law. But they cannot escape from complicity and discomfort, even if they can avoid guilt and prosecution.

---

<sup>7</sup> <<https://www.unseenhistories.com/the-killing-age-interview-with-clifton-crais/>>