

2 **Demonic Transitions**

How Ordinary People Can Commit Extraordinary Evil

Christophe Busch

Collective violence is a man-made event. The organized exclusion, persecution, and murder of thousands of victims is not a chance occurrence that suddenly erupts within a society. On the contrary, these episodes of violence are often well planned, prepared, and executed. Several actors play a crucial role in this process, sometimes steered by an authority, sometimes initiated within the killing fields itself. But all these actors have their own attitudes, fields of interest, maneuverability, and individual responsibilities. This heterogeneous perpetrator group, which has continuously expanded over time and research, can be divided into various categories or typologies.¹ Consider, for instance, the organizers (desk murderers), the ideologists, the architects, the executioners, and so on. In my opinion, these typologies are building blocks to grasp the heterogeneity of the perpetrator group and the complexity of the process of becoming a perpetrator. Describing these building blocks is one matter, but the interactions, the social contagion, or reciprocal mechanisms of influence is quite a different one. Supposing that we want to understand these processes and mechanisms that lead people to become entangled in the collective violence, we need to (clinically) focus on the system around the perpetrator and the relational aspects within his criminogenesis. From this perspective, we can compare collective violence to a murderous knot, an influential network of destructive (f)actors.

Yet the public at large sees the origin of these crimes as less complicated. Although there is a desire to understand how it is humanly possible to commit these horrendous crimes, the attribution of the destructive behavior is invariably black and white. One divides the community into a group of “others” with a murderous disposition on the one hand and on the other a group of “ours” with a charitable disposition. This dichotomy between good and evil – or ‘us’ and ‘them’ – does violence to the truth. It is a dual

¹ Alette Smeulders, *Perpetrators of international crimes: Towards a typology*. Supranational Criminology: towards a criminology of international crimes (Antwerp: Intersentia, 2008), 233-265. Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul, ed., *Karrieren der Gewalt: nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004), 17-18. Johannes Houwink ten Cate, “The Enlargement of the Circle of Perpetrators of the Holocaust,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 20, no. 3-4 (2008): 51-72.

and Manichaeism view that finds its origin in the complex character of collective violence and the unwillingness to face up to one's own destructive potential. In other words, people want simple explanations for such behavior that do not displace them from their comfort zone. Christopher Browning translated it as such: 'We look for flaws in others, not latent potentials within ourselves. For surely "we" and "our" society could not do what the perpetrators and their societies have done.'² Robert Jay Lifton came to the same conclusion after his encounters with various Nazi camp doctors. In a conversation with a friend and Holocaust survivor, he replied that 'it is demonic that they were not demonic'.³ It is indeed disturbing that these mass murderers cannot be distinguished on the basis of their upbringing, personality, political persuasion, or specific behavioral patterns.⁴ An explanation for their destructive behavior cannot be associated with some sort of psychopathology or other abnormality. The 'mad or bad' hypothesis turns out to be a rather popular defense mechanism for our self-image than a valid explanation for perpetrator behaviour. The harsh reality is that collective violence is planned and executed by ordinary men.⁵ These perpetrators are truly 'unremarkable people set apart only by their lethal activities'.⁶ Lifton called these perpetrators banal, referring to the concept of the 'banality of evil' by Hannah Arendt.⁷ But the crimes committed and the choices they made cannot in the least be called banal. So he described them as banal people who committed demonic crimes.

Man is neither good nor evil. If one believes in the goodness of man as the only potentiality, one will be forced into rosy falsifications of the facts, or end up in bitter disillusionment. If one believes in the other extreme, one will end up as a cynic and be blind to the many possibilities for good in others and in oneself. A realistic view sees both possibilities as real

2 Christopher R. Browning, Foreword to *Becoming Evil, How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, by James Waller (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

3 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors. Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 5.

4 James Waller, *Becoming Evil, How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8.

5 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).

6 Alex Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 7.

7 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963).

potentialities, and studies the conditions for the development of either of them.⁸

Erich Fromm summarizes it concisely when he states that people have the capacity for both good and evil. He calls for an analysis into the conditions that spawn these powers. Understanding this transition and acknowledging the malicious potentials of people is the aim of this article. To this end, I will focus on those elements that gradually draw people into the process of collective violence. Their road to hell is often paved with the ambition to do good. What is more, these perpetrators themselves change during the execution or involvement in these crimes. They learn by doing, by using their destructive potential for the purpose of terror and torture. They learned something that most people didn't know they were capable of. Geoffrey Nice, prosecuting attorney of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, puts it clearly that 'all of these men had been changed completely from what they were to what they became in what would appear to be the space of a few days'.⁹

This transitional process has been described by a number of authors in several fields of study, for example: 'continuum of destruction' by Ervin Staub, 'cumulative radicalization' by Hans Mommsen, or 'continuum of otherisation' by Kathleen Taylor.¹⁰

Ervin Staub portrays this evolution as follows: 'there is a progression along a continuum of destruction. People learn and change by doing, by participation, as a consequence of their own actions. Small seemingly insignificant acts can involve a person with a destructive system: for example, accepting benefits provided by the system or even using a required greeting, such as "Heil Hitler". Initial acts that cause limited harm result in psychological changes that make further destructive actions possible.¹¹ As a result, most perpetrator narratives show that their involvement in the destruction process is mainly a process of gradation and less disposition. It is as the forensic psychiatrist Robert Simon

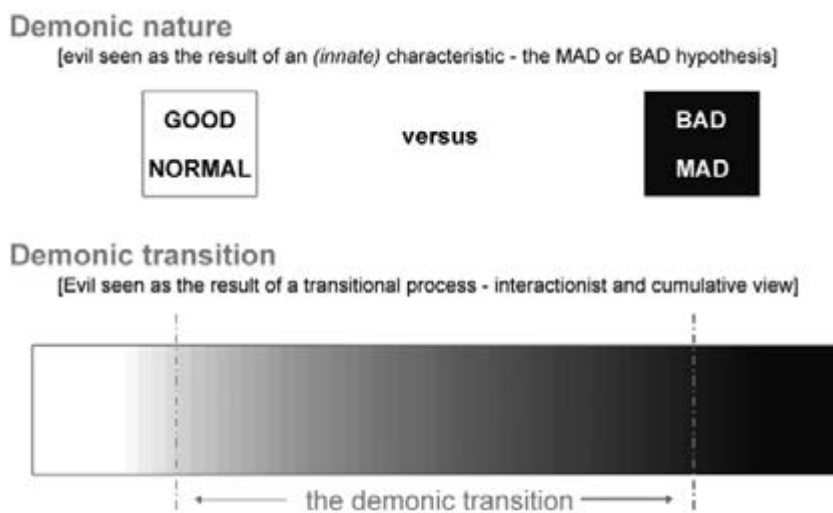
8 Erich Fromm, "The Heart of Man: It's Genius for Good and Evil," quoted in James Waller, *Becoming Evil*, 137.

9 Nanci Adler, ed., *Genocide and Accountability* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2004), 33.

10 Kathleen Taylor, *Cruelty: Human Evil and the Human Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Hans Mommsen, "From Cumulative radicalisation and progressive Self-destruction as structural determinants of Nazi dictatorship," in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, ed. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75-87. Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

11 Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil*, 17.

Figure 2.1 The gray zone of the demonic transition (nature versus transition)

explains with the illuminating title of his book *Bad men do what good men dream*.¹² It is not the person who is demonic but rather the transitional process these perpetrators complete. A demonic transition!

Perpetrators of collective violence are indeed 'citizens of death's grey land'. They arrived at 'a confusing, emotional and moral no man's land'.¹³ Christopher Browning formulates it unambiguously and borrows the concept 'grey zone' from Primo Levi. He refers to 'that dark world of mixed motives, conflicting emotions and priorities, reluctantly made choices, opportunism and acting out of self-interest combined with self-deception and denial – a world so human and universal'.¹⁴ Within this deadly 'grey zone' lies the answer on how ordinary people are capable of committing extra-ordinary evil. The development of perpetrators is a gradual learning process. In small and often insignificant steps and influenced by a complex interplay of actors and factors, the perpetrator evolves on this continuum of destruction. A murderous network of (f)actors.

12 Robert I Simon, *Bad men do what good men dream: A Forensic Psychiatrist Illuminates the Darker Side of Human Behavior* (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996).

13 Philip Caputo, *A rumor of war* (New York: Owl Books, 1996), 350.

14 Christopher R Browning, "From *Daniel Goldhagens gewillige beulen*," in *Wiens schuld? De impact van Daniel Jonah Goldhagen op het holocaustdebat*, ed. Rolf Binner, Jan-Willem Bos and Otto Van Der Haar (Antwerp: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1997), 72.

L'enfer C'est Les Autres: Transitional Actors

What we commonly mean by 'understand' coincides with 'simplify': without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema. [...] Nevertheless, perhaps for reasons that go back to our origins as social animals, the need to divide the field into 'we' and 'they' is so strong that this pattern, this bipartition – friend/enemy – prevails over all others.¹⁵

"'Understand' coincides with 'simplify'", postulates Primo Levi. Our ordinary lives are indeed extraordinarily complex. It is in this complexity and the social layeredness that evil lurks. This complexity and the necessary reduction to grasp our world can instigate the collective violence that we are studying. It is a universal story of 'we' and 'they', friend and enemy, good and evil, Übermensch and Untermensch, or Hutu and Tutsi. From a micro perspective one can observe that perpetrators possess innumerable possible motives for destructive behavior (status, power, dominance, self-interest, profit-seeking...). It was Rudolf Höss himself as camp commander of Auschwitz-Birkenau who reminded us that the life of prisoners depended on the behavior and mentality of several camp guards in spite of all rules and agreements.¹⁶ People give meaning to their environment and behave themselves within social and cultural frames of reference.¹⁷

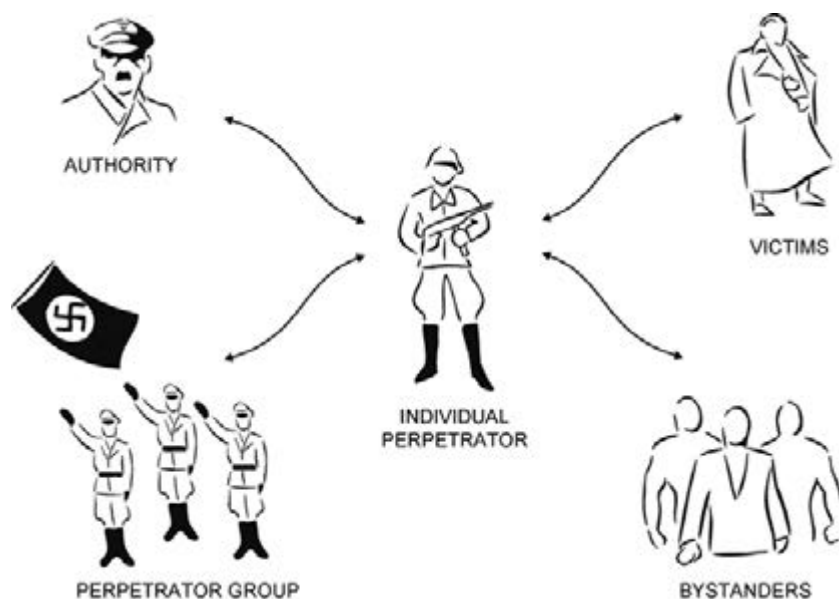
In my opinion, it is impossible to explain violent behavior merely as a result of ideological fanaticism – *the believers* – or obedience to authority – *the obedient*.¹⁸ Even though both factors play a crucial role in the process, such a reduction to only one specific factor does not do justice to the complexity of human behavior. Therefore, it is necessary to outline these processes and (f)actors that increase the probability of genocidal behavior. There are risk factors on becoming entangled in the collective violence process; they recruit, motivate, and enable us to commit these acts. In an attempt to 'understand' the role and evolution of these (f)actors, I refer

15 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36-37.

16 Steven Paskuly, ed., *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz Rudolf Höss* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 91.

17 Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2005). Harald Welzer, "Mass murder and moral code: some thoughts on an easily misunderstood subject," *History of the Human Sciences*, no. 2-3 (2004): 15-32.

18 Cf. the Goldhagen-Browning debate.

Figure 2.2 A graphic representation of the actors of destruction

to insights from several disciplines such as social psychology, sociology, biology, historiography, and – last but not least – criminology.¹⁹ My basic assumption for this explanatory model is the social nature of evil. Genocide and mass murder originate in the minds of people. They are configurations of collective violence that need to be planned, organized and executed by human hands and human thoughts. It is the result of interactions between groups of people with a deadly outcome. In other words, a large part of the explanation for this perpetrator behavior lies in the reciprocal interaction processes between these actors of destruction.

Within this simplified model of actors I distinguish five categories, namely: the authority, the perpetrator group, the individual perpetrator, the victims, and the bystanders. This model thus consists of three collectives and two specific individuals. On the one side, we have the authority possessing absolute power like Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Jozef Stalin, or Mao Zedong, and on the other side, the mass murderer himself as human being in a social and biological sense. Obviously, the boundaries between these collectives are diffuse and consist of subgroups and cliques. Even members from the

19 Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 39.

victim groups who are forced to participate in the destruction process or members of the perpetrator group who are trying to save people from their deaths show us that the boundary between perpetrators, bystanders, and victims is changeable over time.²⁰ History shows us a huge amount of narratives of shifts between these categories. But the point to be made here is that perpetrator behavior is influenced by the interactions within and between these three hierarchically structured collectives. Each individual (perpetrator, victim, or bystander) lives in specific networks with their own rules, practices, and traditions. People become influenced by all the (f)actors inside the networks they are a member of (in-group) but also by the 'networks from the other side' that they do not belong to (out-group). We need 'the others' as a mirror for our own perception and evaluation.

Perpetrators and victims are both active participants in this complex process of reciprocal interpretation, signification, and assessment of oneself, the situation, and the opposition.²¹ This circular process forms patterns of action and reaction that shape our world. A striking example of this is the testimony of Fritz Hensel, the brother-in-law of camp commander Rudolf Höss. Hensel resided about four weeks at his in-laws in the villa near the death camp. During a walk through the camp, Höss and Hensel ran into a lorry full of corpses. They both engaged in a conversation on the legal and moral aspects of the camp. Höss acknowledged the violent character of the place to his brother-in-law, who in turn emphasized that he could not understand it. According to Höss, this was 'because you come from the outside. Here we look at things differently'.²² Later that evening, Hensel asked him what they meant with the term 'Untermenschen'. Höss replied: 'They are not like you and me. You saw them yourself; they are different. They look different. They do not behave like human beings.'²³ His answer gives us an inkling of how he perceived his 'reality'. These victims were no (longer) human beings. After all, human beings would not live in such wretched conditions, nor would they submit so willingly to their fate. The outsider sees, of course, that these living conditions are created by the perpetrators and that the victims, in this stage of the persecution, have only very limited choices available.

20 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn suggested that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" [Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-56* (London: Harvill Press, 2003), 75].

21 Luc Reyckler, ed., *De volgende genocide* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 84.

22 Steven Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 198.

23 *Ibid.*, 198.

The interpretive frameworks play a crucial role or, in the words of Höss, 'we look at things differently'. People learn by doing and by imitation. The victims also learn from each other. In this light Luc Reyhler makes the following comparable observation: 'also they learn-by-doing and evolve on a continuum of victimhood to their final downfall. The further the destruction process has progressed, the more difficult it is to be halted, until the situation leaves no maneuverability for the victim.'²⁴ The victimology stresses this interactive involvement between the perpetrator and the victim. The vulnerability of the victim, the characteristics of the victims (in terms of difference), the relation between perpetrator and victim (conflicts or disputes), and the behavior of the victim can increase the possibility of victimhood.²⁵ A similar proposition does apply to direct or indirect bystanders. These bystanders are often *passive* actors of destruction. Their apathy can contribute to the further exclusion, persecution, and destruction of the victims. The perpetrators often see the absence of disapproval as a form of silent consent.

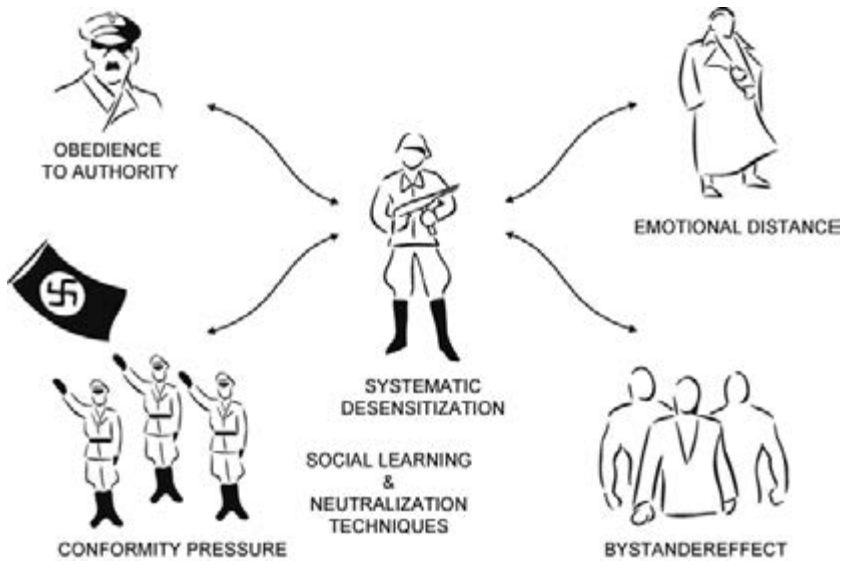
A Genocidal Knot: Transitional Factors

Human beings are first and foremost a social species. A large part of our evolutionary fitness can be attributed to our cooperation in tribes or networks. We continuously interact with each other both consciously or unconsciously. Who we are and what we do cannot be studied in a social vacuum. The individual mass murderer or genocidal perpetrator can therefore not be disconnected from their genocidal network, which encompasses a wider net of actors (one authority, the perpetrator group, the victims, and the bystanders). He resides in a murderous habitat, which in a horrific way is searching for its balance. Genocide, therefore, is a socially constructed event. It involves groups of individuals, people of flesh and blood, who are the basic cause of the creation and further evolution of collective violence. Some social psychological and biological dynamics become clearly visible within these actors of destruction. Think, for example, of the obedience to authority, group conformity, and biological reluctance to use deadly force. In all this, it is striking that it is not only all these diverse actors but also the processes that occur that are mutually related. A representation in pictures of these actors of destruction is a theoretical division where

²⁴ Luc Reyhler, *De volgende genocide*, 87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89-93.

Figure 2.3 A graphic representation of the transitional factors



not only groups but dynamics also overlap each other. The distance to the victim for example can have an impact on the level of obedience and the other way around, just like with the aspiration for conformity. Any passive behavior of the bystanders can only reinforce this whole dynamic. We can safely say that we are dealing here with a web or 'knot' of actors and dynamics that are in constant interaction (circularity). The complexity of the human behavior is therefore impossible to represent clearly. There exists a kind of indivisibility of all the numerous interwoven factors. It is my aim to highlight those factors that recruit, motivate, and enable people to commit extraordinary crimes. I aim to deal with those factors that frequently play a role in the transitional process of becoming a perpetrator, namely *the risk factors for collective violence*.

In this case also, understanding shall mean simplifying a bit, knowing that in reality genocide does not consist of a cocktail of three or four ingredients. Each factor separately does not happen in isolation from the others. Just like the actors, these transitional factors are also continuously mutually interacting. And although we will study four clusters of risk factors, we must stress that the destructive power is situated mainly in the combination or rather interaction between these factors. The whole is definitely more than the sum of its parts. In order to grasp this complexity, I will cluster these transitional factors into four categories: 1) Influences from the perpetrator

group (obedience and conformity), 2) Emotional distance to the victim, 3) Systematic desensitization, and 4) Social learning amongst perpetrators.

These are the factors that have an important transitional influence on the individual perpetrator, his reference framework, and the behavioral choices he makes therein. It is not the sum of these risk (f)actors but their mutual interactions that will have a multiplication effect. The perpetrator's world is rational, logically constructed, and makes sense from his point of view. According to him, 'good' means killing 'the other'. It is thus the circular interaction between these transitional factors that can address our destructive potential and nullify our biological reluctance to kill. Transitional factors operate somewhere in between black and white, in the middle of that grey zone of the perpetrator's behavior. They shape a bounded rationality that can result in the gradual entanglement to the collective violence process.

Influences from the Perpetrator Group (Obedience and Conformity)

As far as the perpetrator group is concerned, I would like to mainly focus on the situational aspects. It is obvious that each individual has their own peculiarities, characteristics, empathic ability, and the like. And although these numerous personal traits and dispositions always play a role, it would divert me too much if I were to treat them within the scope of this article. In this instance, I would like to mainly focus on the transitions that happen to people and the mechanisms often involved in them. It is in the same vein that the social-psychologist Leonard Newman highlights the artificial discussion between situation and disposition: "The battle over which variables account for more variance in behavior, personality traits or social contexts – was actually abandoned a long time ago. It has long been recognized that people and their traits and the situations in which they find themselves *interact*. In other words, not only are stable dispositions and situational influences both important causes of behavior, but more than that, people and situations combine to elicit behavior in complicated ways, and even have the potential to transform each other."²⁶

²⁶ Leonard S Newman, "From *Beyond situationism: The social psychology of genocide and mass killing*," In *NS-Täter aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive*, by Helgard Kramer, ed. (München: Meidenbauer, 2006), 110.

So, if we want to look for a (situational) explanation for the perpetrator's behavior, we must first listen to what the perpetrators themselves have to say about their actions. Interpreting these eyewitness statements is often made more difficult because certain interests such as prosecution, social acceptance, or exactly the opposite, rejection, can be attached to it. It is in this framework that Jean Hatzfeld states that the perpetrator will first deny the facts and then lie about them.²⁷ It was during the post-war court cases such as the Nuremberg or Eichmann trials that many perpetrators declared to be not guilty of the acts they were accused of. Time and time again, the Nazi elite pleaded 'ich bekenne mich im Sinne der Anklage nicht schuldig'.²⁸ As grounds for pleading not guilty, they steadfastly used the known defense mechanisms such as: negating their knowledge, negating their responsibility, or the 'tu quoque' argument.²⁹ The story of the perpetrators could usually be simplified to the following two premises. On the one hand, they used the 'wir haben es nicht gewußt' line and on the other 'Befehl is Befehl'. They resolutely pushed all responsibility in the direction of the Führer, who of course had committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin.

Although these arguments do not make sense when trying to prove their innocence, they do say something about what influenced their behavior. In reply to the question by Leon M. Goldensohn, prison psychiatrist from January 1946 until July 1946 in Nuremberg, whether the murder of 2.5 million people did not get to him sometimes, Camp Commander Rudolf Höss replied:

I thought I was doing the right thing. I was following orders and now of course I understand that that was wrong and unnecessary. However, I do not understand what you mean with 'does it get to me', because personally I never killed anybody. I was only the leader of the Auschwitz destruction programme. It was Hitler who, through Himmler, gave the order and it was Eichmann who gave me the order regarding the transports.³⁰

It transpired that the executioners of the violence relied on the military command structure, as if committing a crime because a higher authority

27 Jean Hatzfeld, *Seizoen van de Machetes: Het verhaal van de daders* (Amsterdam: De bezige bij, 2004), 54.

28 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis: Psychologie van de menselijke wreedheid* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2004), 242.

29 The 'tu quoque' argument is similar to the neutralizing technique 'condemnation of those who condemn' (supra).

30 Robert Gellately and Leon Goldensohn, *Neurenberggesprekken: Nazi's en hun psychiater Leon Goldensohn* (Amsterdam: JM Meulenhoff, 2004), 345.

ordered you to is no longer a crime. Our initial astonishment about this excuse must, however, not stand in the way of critical reflection. We must ask ourselves whether or not it is possible for people to barely register any subjective guilt when they commit crimes ordered by a legitimate authority.³¹ Is it plausible to think that the perpetrators of the violence can appease their conscience by believing that it wasn't them but the Führer who had taken the decision to exterminate? Herbert Jaeger called these crimes therefore "Massenmordes ohne schuldgefühl" (mass murder without the guilt).³² The question remains whether this excuse was only legitimately used within the framework of a court case in order to escape prosecution, or whether this mechanism of shifting responsibility was also active within the killing fields themselves?

The man who focused on *the individual in a social world* and the mechanism of shifting responsibility was a young psychology professor at Yale University.³³

Stanley Milgram wanted to know if people were capable, when ordered by a legitimate authority, of torturing a fellow human being by applying electric shocks. Would these guinea pigs, Joe Bloggs, obey the morally unacceptable orders of this authority? Milgram organized an experiment, using the pretext that he was executing research into the effects of punishment on learning and memory.

With his notorious experiment, Milgram proved that *no less than 62.5% of his test subjects obeyed his orders*. It transpired that a majority of people were capable, when ordered by the test authority, of applying painful shocks to fellow human beings, regardless of cries for help and pleas by the victims. The results of his experiment shocked the world. Although his findings were rather overwhelming, we must also point out that 37.5% of his test subjects did not obey the orders. More than one-third was able to resist the pressure of the experimental setting and quit during the course of the experiment. It is equally important to refrain from considering the people who obeyed as monstrous people or sociopaths. Everybody who has read Milgram's detailed research reports or who has attentively watched the experiment's documentary will know that the test subjects (teachers) were exposed to

31 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 243.

32 Herbert Jäger, *Makrokriminalität: Studien zur Kriminologie kollektiver Gewalt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 9.

33 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1974). Thomas Blass, ed., *Stanley Milgram: The individual in a social world Essays and experiments* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2010). Thomas Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

an enormous level of stress. In 1963, Milgram reported extensively about the stress these people had experienced.

In a large number of cases, the degree of tension reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies. Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh. These were characteristic rather than exceptional responses to the experiment. [...] At one point he [one of the participants] pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: "Oh God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end. [...] I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes, he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse.³⁴

The test subjects that obeyed were ordinary people progressing on a continuum of destruction. The question, however, remains: what made them obey? In order to clarify things, I have clustered the variables that influence obedience into four categories, namely: the direct legitimate authority, the agentic nature of obedience, the sequential nature of obedience, and the distance to the victim. These four clusters together contain the variables that influence the level of destructive obedience to an authority.

The first variable is the authority itself. It is very clear that this has a crucial place within these obedience studies. The test subjects' aggression – the application of electric shocks – is of the instrumental kind. In other words, the test subjects were not intrinsically motivated, by hate for example, to torture their victims. On the contrary, the only reason they obeyed was to avoid conflict with the test leader, the authority.³⁵ The presence and immediate control of this authority is therefore of the utmost importance and seems to be an important factor in obedience.

Apart from that, the authority itself is also important. It must be a legitimate authority. We have learned to obey people with the power and function of an authority. A uniform or a similar symbol usually expresses their power. Milgram also proved that apart from the perception

34 Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral study of obedience," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, no. 67 (1963), 375-377. Arthur G. Miller, "From *What can the Milgram Obedience Experiments Tell Us about the Holocaust? Generalizing from the Social Psychology Laboratory*," in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, by Arthur G. Miller, ed., (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 196.

35 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 253-254.

and interpretation of these power symbols, the monopolistic source of authority is important.³⁶ Blind obedience requires one voice, one power, one authority. Or, in the words of the Nazis: 'ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer.' These forms of monolithic authority are frequently found in cases of mass murders or genocides, where we are usually dealing with a totalitarian state or organization which does not allow for any opposition or autonomy and whose rulers usually employ 'supra-individual fictional slogans' such as: in the name of 'our homeland', 'God', 'the nation', 'honor', or 'the race'. People usually are overawed by the supra-individual fictional slogans and treat them with respect and idolatry. Rummel translated it in his famous maxim 'power kills, absolute power kills absolutely'.³⁷

A second important variable is the agentic situation in which our test subjects were put. 'Moved into the agentic state, the person becomes something different from his former self, with new properties not easily traced to his usual personality', Milgram declared.³⁸ It is a situation whereby the test subject sees himself as an instrument of somebody else's wishes. He concentrates on his situation and lets his behavior be controlled by the authority present. He has the feeling of not acting independently anymore but rather of being the extension of the authority's will (test leader). Zygmunt Bauman calls this agentic situation the opposite of the autonomous situation.³⁹ Perpetrators talk about a sort of loss of freedom. They feel as if they are not free to act as they see fit. In their own words, they act according to the real or perceived threat emanating from the authority (putative coercion). In military power relations, it is certainly conceivable for disobedience to be punished.⁴⁰ From this perspective, disobedience or desertion is a violation of the rules and must be 'corrected'. Such a threat of punishment will drastically increase obedience. Milgram proved with his experiment that it is not about *what* the test subjects do but *whom* they are doing it for. He revealed the mechanism of shifting responsibility.⁴¹ The test subject recognizes the legitimacy of the authority and gives it the right to give him orders, which he follows willingly. The responsibility for the order lies then with the legitimate authority and not with the actor or test subject himself. Bauman further builds on this and says:

36 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd en de Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1998), 199-201.

37 Rudolph J Rummel, *Statistics of Democide: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (Münster: Lit, 1998), 1.

38 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 143.

39 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd*, 198.

40 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 263.

41 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd*, 197-198.

We may surmise that the overall effect of such a continuous and ubiquitous responsibility shifting would be a free-floating responsibility, a situation in which each and every member of the organization is convinced, and would say so if asked, that he has been at someone else's beck and call, but the members pointed to by others as the bearers of responsibility would pass the buck to someone else again. One can say that the organization as a whole is an instrument to obliterate responsibility. The causal links in co-ordinated actions are masked, and the very fact of being masked is a most powerful factor of their effectiveness.⁴²

We also need to take into account the fact that there is rarely a one-on-one relation between the authority and the obeying person. It usually is a group or entity of perpetrators, and it is exactly this collective aspect of the crimes that increases the relative ease with which they are committed. The responsibility becomes, in fact, elusive because an indirect involvement is what we are dealing with here.⁴³

A third variable is the gradual or sequential nature of obedience. During the experiment, obedience was slowly built up step by step. Gradually, ever stronger shocks (in steps of 15 volt) were applied, concurrently increasing the gradual psychological dependence on the authority.⁴⁴ Bauman used the swamp metaphor to explain this mechanism:

Everyone who once inadvertently stepped into a bog knows only too well that getting oneself out of the trouble was difficult mostly because every effort to get out resulted in one's sinking deeper into the mire. One can even define the swamp as a kind of ingenious system so constructed that however the objects immersed into it move, their movements always add to the 'sucking power' of the system.⁴⁵

In Milgram's experiment, the test subjects did not find it difficult to apply the first shocks. But as these and the social counter-pressure increased, their application became ever more horrifying. Likewise, the costs of withdrawal increase dramatically. The situational obligation locks the test subject in his position: in other words, the fact that the test subject has already obeyed in the past will dictate his future behavior of obedience.

42 Ibid, 198. (English edition, 163)

43 Ibid., 198.

44 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 260.

45 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd*, 192. (English edition, 157.)

Milgram called it the 'binding factor'. Bauman highlights the paradox of this sequential action.⁴⁶ The test subject becomes a slave of his previous actions, because there is a gradual obligation to apply the next shock. If indeed this shock is not acceptable, what can possibly justify the preceding slightly lighter shock? This means that you can not possibly stop now without admitting that the previous shocks were also unacceptable. 'You can't clean without getting yourself dirty. In order to hide the dirt, you need to keep muddling on'.⁴⁷ Perpetrators of genocidal violence show the same gradual involvement.

The fourth important variable detected by Milgram is the distance to the victim or the suffering caused. The willingness to commit cruelties is inversely proportional to the distance to the victim.⁴⁸ In several forms of the experiment, Milgram examined how the variable 'distance-closeness' influenced the obedience percentage. Milgram states: 'If in this study an anonymous experimenter could successfully command adults to subdue a fifty-year old man, and force on him painful electric shocks against his protests, one can only wonder what government, with its vastly greater authority and prestige, can command of its subjects.'⁴⁹ With this remark, Milgram touched upon a very important subject, namely: what is the generalizability of the experiment? Because the experiment was an artificial and finely tuned research project, when compared to real-life situations, two big differences immediately become apparent.⁵⁰ First, the relational aspect was very short and ad hoc. The test subjects did not know the test leader and their pseudo test subjects beforehand. They had simply replied to an ad in a newspaper and took part for only one hour in the experiment. Second, the experiment usually consisted of a test leader, the authority, who very purposefully and consistently interacted with the test subject. These two aspects are very rarely found in real-life situations, where behavior is influenced and guided by incalculable specific (f)actors. For there is a whole set of interacting variables that could have influenced the perpetrators' choices and their resulting behavior. Bauman names a few factors that were lacking in Milgram's experiment but that are always present in relationships stretching over a certain period. He indicates factors such as solidarity and the feeling of mutual obligation but also the diffuse

46 Ibid., 192-194.

47 Ibid., 193.

48 Ibid., 189.

49 Stanley Milgram, "Some conditions of obedience and disobedience to authority." *Human Relations*, no. 18 (1965), 75. Arthur G. Miller, ed., *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, 193.

50 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd*, 199.

reciprocity, the routine, and the multiple sources of authority.⁵¹ Reality, it seems, is much more complex than the re-enactment in Milgram's lab. And although obedience to an authority seems to be a powerful force, it does not seem to be in its own right a real motivation for genocide or mass murder. Ervin Staub states that the motivation to obey is often a result of the desire to follow the leader, to be an excellent member of the group, or to show respect for the authority.⁵² Obedience to an authority does play an important part, but it takes more than that to explain perpetrator behavior during genocides and mass murders. The perpetrator group is not only influenced by authority but also by the numerous variables within and outside of the group. 'A society's strong respect for authority is *one* source of genocidal violence. A tendency to like and obey authority is one characteristic of perpetrators.'⁵³

In other words, 'the others' or the perpetrator group plays an important role in the transformation into a perpetrator. It is this perpetrator group that enables people to commit extraordinary evil. The tribal pressure resulting from these fatal friendships can enable people to execute behavior they individually would abhor. Gustave Le Bon analysed the Parisian street gangs during the French Revolution. In his book *La Psychologie des Foules* from 1895, he notes that aggression increased significantly when people were part of these anonymous groups.⁵⁴ The crowd has a life of its own, as it were, its own thinking and its own (more aggressive) behavior. He also mentioned 'un esprit collectif', a kind of collective spirit that captured all members of the group. Membership of a group indeed also includes a form of psychological protection. 'The crowd will protect its members by making them unidentifiable,' according to Jan De Laender. The anonymity in a group takes away the fear of punishment or retribution. The actions of one individual are only one link in a whole chain of connected actions. The 'Schreibtischtäter' who edits the transport lists to Auschwitz-Birkenau does not feel any responsibility for the ensuing mass murder. The divisional organisation of the genocide dissolves the feeling of responsibility. The large distance created between the action and its eventual effect restricts our moral sensitivity. The extraordinary evil is being segmented and hidden in long causal chains. This in turn creates a diffuse responsibility or in other

51 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd*, 199-200.

52 Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil*, 29.

53 Ibid., 30.

54 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 71-72. James Waller, *Becoming Evil*, 29-30.

words a 'free-floating responsibility'.⁵⁵ This is what Werner Dubois⁵⁶ said as a witness during his trial in the 1960s about his role as guard in Sobibor:

I know very well that the extermination camps were used to commit murder. What I did was participate in it. If I get sentenced, I will have deserved it. Murder is still murder. When evaluating guilt, I think the actual job in the camp is of no importance. Wherever we were employed, we all were just as guilty as the next man. The camp worked in a chain of jobs. Should one link in that chain break, the whole enterprise would collapse.⁵⁷

Loyalty within the group, the well-known band of brothers, was therefore of the utmost importance to keep the chain of murders going. Research and experience show us, however, how difficult it is to leave a group. This tribal pressure has convincingly been indicated by the conformity experiments by Solomon Asch.⁵⁸ But recent biological research by Paul Zak on *the moral molecule* or the hormone oxytocin also shows us the biological basis of these tightly knit groups, the perpetrator super organism.⁵⁹

'We called them cockroaches' (Emotional Distance to the Victim)

It is our empathic and physical distance to the victim that will mainly influence our perception, our emotional experience, and our resulting behavior. Aggression becomes significantly easier to execute when it can be done from a distance. The greater the physical distance to the victim, the more the reality level of killing decreases. Increasing this distance is not just a physical matter, expressed for example in meters. The distance between the perpetrator and the victim can be increased by accentuating the mutual differences or by intentionally increasing the causal chain of

55 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 75-76.

56 Werner Dubois was a guard at Vernichtungslager Sobibor. He was present during the uprising in October 1943.

57 Raul Hilberg, *Daders Slachtoffers Omstanders: De joodse catastrofie 1933-1945* (Haarlem: Becht, 2004), 31. Jules Schelvis, *Vernietigingskamp Sobibor* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 2004), 285.

58 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 292. Roel W. Meertens, Yvonne R.A. Prins, and Bertjan Doosje, *In iedereen schuilt een terrorist. Een sociaal-psychologische analyse van terroristische sekten en aanslagen* (Schiedam: Scriptum, 2006) 56-58.

59 Paul J. Zak, *The Moral Molecule: The New Science of What Makes us Good or Evil* (London: Bantam Press, 2012).

responsibilities within the perpetrator group. Distance is therefore not just a physical matter. Dave Grossman describes four kinds of emotional distance which, as far as killing a fellow human being are concerned, are just as efficient as physical distance.⁶⁰ These four are cultural distance, moral distance, social distance, and mechanical distance. These four kinds deal mainly with the emotional involvement and identification with the victim. Emotional withdrawal seems to be the core in each of these cases. According to Erich Fromm, there is a clear link between this withdrawal and the prevention of destructive aggression: "There is good clinical evidence for the assumption that destructive aggression occurs, at least to a large degree, in conjunction with a momentary or chronic emotional withdrawal."⁶¹

This process of labeling and evaluation is decisive in the first kind of emotional distance, namely cultural distance.⁶² Creating cultural distance is an often-used tactic when conditioning and systematically desensitizing future genocidal perpetrators, usually by means of incendiary media like radio and/or film. The enemy is presented as an inferior form of life, who is a threat to the group that needs protecting. Examples of this tactic are the incendiary radio programs of the Rwandan radio station *Radio Mille Collines* which, during the genocide, incited the population to exterminate the Tutsi cockroaches as well as the 'documentary' entitled *Der ewige Jude* construed by the Nazis. All genocides know descriptions where, after a process of otherization, the victim group is dehumanized. This feeds one of our motivations, namely creating and maintaining a positive image of ourselves. If the other party is disease-spreading vermin, then I am not. This is a lesson that is pretty amenable to learn. To call the victim group an inferior breed of animal is a very recognizable part of the socialization process of the perpetrator. Not unimportant is the style in which this happens, because words here are the carriers of the actions.⁶³ In other words, it is the language used in order to create cultural distance which is of remarkable importance. Our perception of reality, for example, is created by the use of language, whereby content is dictated by the cultural, social, and political context. This also means that nobody escapes the tyranny of the linguistic conditioning. In this context, it is important to note that languages can be a powerful cultural and political weapon, of which C.

60 Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996), 158-170.

61 Erich Fromm quoted in *On Killing*, by David Grossman, 160.

62 Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, 160-164.

63 Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 98.

Wright Mills said: 'we must approach linguistic behavior, not by referring it to private states in individuals, but by observing its social function of coordinating diverse actions.'⁶⁴

From a transitional point of view, we cannot underestimate the influence of language on the creation of cultural distance. Grossman, for example, states that when you treat and kill people like cattle, you will consider them cattle,⁶⁵ something that was abundantly clear in Gitta Sereny's book about camp commander Franz Stangl. Sereny interviewed Stangl for several days and noticed his aberrant perception of the thousands of victims:

I wanted to get him to speak more directly about the people, and asked where the people were who had come on the transport. His answer continued to be evasive; he still avoided referring to them as 'people'.

'Oh, by that time of the morning everything was pretty much finished in the lower camp. A transport was normally dealt with in two or three hours. At 12 I had lunch – yes, we usually had meat, potatoes, some fresh vegetables such as cauliflowers – we grew them ourselves quite soon – and after lunch I had about half an hour's rest. Then another round and more work in the office.'⁶⁶

'So, you didn't feel they were human beings?'

'Cargo,' he said tonelessly. '*They were cargo*.'⁶⁷

A second form of emotional distance is, according to Grossmann, the moral distance to the victim,⁶⁸ by which he means the intense belief in moral superiority with regards to the victims. Not only are the perpetrators superior, their purposes have also been declared sacrosanct. Several Nazis boasted of their loyalty to the homeland and their National Socialist ideology.

Camp commander Rudolf Höß, for example, wrote in his autobiography after the war: 'My tremendous love for my country and my feeling for everything German brought me into the NSDAP and into the SS. I believed that the National Socialist world philosophy was the only one that suited the German people. The SS was, in my opinion, the most energetic defender of this philosophy, and the only one capable of leading the German people

64 Ibid., 98.

65 Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, 161.

66 Gitta Sereny, *De duisternis tegemoet: Bekentenissen van Franz Stangl, commandant van Treblinka* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 2001), 171. (English edition, 170)

67 Gitta Sereny, *De duisternis tegemoet*, 205. (English edition, 205)

68 Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, 164-167.

back to a life more in keeping with its character.’⁶⁹ This dynamic of moral distance works in two ways. On the one hand, it firmly records the fault of the enemy where, after a condemnation, punishment or revenge is called for. And on the other hand, it confirms the legality of the higher purpose and the resulting individual actions.

Grossman calls social distance⁷⁰ the third form of emotional distance, with which he means that one specific class of society will over a long time be regarded as inferior within a socially stratified society. This form of thinking in classes can be called universal and creates its own pecking order. The lowest social classes are therefore attributed with the most negative characteristics such as stupidity or parasitism. Sometimes the class differences are actually structurally defined. From 1933 onwards, when the Nazis took power, anti-Jewish laws gradually created social exclusion. An example of these were the 1935 Nuremberg laws, denying Jews German citizenship and forbidding marriage between Jews and ‘Aryan people’. This social stratification – and the distance that was created as a result – allowed the perpetrator group to shift the responsibility for ordering or executing it to another social class of co-perpetrators. This is what Hannah Arendt wrote about Adolf Eichmann in *Essays in Understanding*: ‘When his occupation forces him to murder people, he does not regard himself as a murderer because he has not done it out of inclination but in his professional capacity. Out of sheer passion he would never do harm to a fly.’⁷¹

The fourth and last form of emotional distance is perhaps the most obvious one, namely the mechanical distance to the victim. Grossman mentions the mechanical buffer that allows the perpetrator to push the human aspect of the victim into the background.⁷² He cites the example of the Nintendo-like way of modern-day warfare. Jan De Laender remarks that human aggression is a specific kind of aggression, because we are the only species that uses artificial weapons. Those weapons have a multiplication effect, increasing and multiplying the aggression. The most important effect is that the mechanical distance created by these new sophisticated weapons very accurately undermines any natural inhibitions. We only have to think of the shock generator in the Milgram experiment, located literally in between the pupil and the master. A clear example of this is the ‘cockpit

69 Steven Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 185.

70 Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, 167-169.

71 Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1994), 130. Also: Hannah Arendt quoted in *Ze zouden nog geen vlieg kwaad doen*, by Slavenka Draulic, (Breda: De Geus, 2003) 4.

72 Dave Grossman, *On Killing*, 169-170.

isolation' phenomenon experienced by pilots. They seldom see their victims or the destruction they inflict. Their helmet and built-in headphones also give them auditory protection. One of the pilots called it 'the calm and silence of a computer room'.⁷³ Such a mechanical isolation makes the feeling of guilt melt like snow under the sun. Bauman talks in this situation about 'the substitution of the content's morale by the technology's morale'.⁷⁴ He notes the positive dependence relationship between the efficiency of this substitution and the distance to the consequences of his actions. Bauman also concludes that: 'the causal relationship between his actions and the suffering of his victims fades away and becomes very easy to ignore.'⁷⁵

Summarising, we can say that creating emotional distance to the victim is an important transitional factor with perpetrators of collective violence. Moreover, the four forms of emotional distance described by Dave Grossmann (cultural, moral, social, and mechanical) do not operate independently, they are interwoven. In a genocidal context, we can see that perpetrators of mass murders undergo a chronic process of emotional withdrawal. It is this emotional distance that enables them to suppress their conscience and act from an agentic condition. It causes the biological unwillingness to kill members of the same species to be partially neutralized.

Lethal Tolerance (Systematic Desensitization)

All the men coped with the tough physical stress well. No less considerable were the extreme psychological demands made on them by the large number of liquidations. The morale and self-possession of the men was kept up by personally reminding them constantly of the political necessity [of what they were doing].

Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht, No. 1, 31 July 1941

The picture painted here is the end phase of the transition, the point at which the perpetrator has no more inhibitions that would prevent him from executing his deadly violence, sometimes with much cruelty. More important to us, however, is the preceding evolution, namely the growing process of the destructive behavior. This process includes, in my opinion, three discernible phases: initiation, routinization, and brutalization. It is a

73 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 57.

74 Zygmunt Bauman, *De moderne tijd*, 196.

75 Ibid., 196.

process of growth that consists of small steps but that does have some clear key moments or transitional acts. One of the most common of those acts is the act of the 'first time' or 'first kill'. The common aspect of these three phases is the mechanism of tolerance and habituation, or in other words, a systematic desensitization.

Initiation

For starters, we must again conclude that the perpetrators of collective violence are usually normal people, which means that they are no stranger to the typical human reactions to extreme circumstances. Everybody pays a price when subjected to terror, destruction, and death, even our perpetrators. In the long run, this can cause extreme brutalization, of which more later. In the short term, this exposure is important during the initiation to the process of murder.

This gradual form of desensitization recalls the gradual or sequential aspects of Milgram's famous experiment. Milgram called it the binding factor, of which Bauman said: 'in order to hide the dirt, you have to keep muddling on'.⁷⁶ Figuratively speaking, we could say that these perpetrators bury themselves in the swamp. Each action, each movement sucks them deeper into the swamp of death and destruction, a gradual continuation on the continuum of destruction.

We have to eat and drink well because of the nature of our work. ... Otherwise we would crack up. ... It's not very pleasant stuff... It is a weakness not to be able to stand the sight of dead people; the best way to overcome it is to do it more often. Then it becomes a habit. ... [T]he more one thinks about the whole business, the more one comes to the conclusion that it's the only thing we can do to safeguard unconditionally the security of our people and our future. I do not therefore want to think and write about it any further. ... [E]verywhere we go we are looked upon with some degree of suspicion. That should not divert us from the knowledge that what we are doing is necessary.⁷⁷

This member of the SS discloses, probably unconsciously, the root of the initiation, routinization, and brutalization process. He highlights the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 193.

⁷⁷ Quoted in: Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions*, 47. Quoted in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Ries, eds., *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1998), 168-171.

abhorrent content of the job but states that killing even more makes it all the more bearable. The systematic and numerous cases of exposure desensitizes the perpetrator from the consequences of his actions. He also mentions the ideological necessity of the murderous actions and calls them 'the only thing we can do to safeguard unconditionally the security of our people and our future'. This member of the SS thereby indirectly also accentuates the importance of the group dynamics. He says that everywhere they go, people look at them with suspicion. In other words, the perpetrator group is isolated from the rest, who do not judge them explicitly but still approach them with a degree of suspicion. This creates a clear need for friendship, secrecy, and social cohesion within the perpetrator group.

Routinization

A significant amount of training, during which much experience is gained, helps us to get used to the challenges we have to face. A similar process of routinization is also visible with our perpetrators of extraordinary evil. Training and experience usually create a higher resistance against the impact of the murder process. It seems, therefore, that it is the frequent exposure to everyday terror that makes people more or less used to it. A likewise feeling of numbness is described by a survivor of Treblinka:

Did we become hardened, callous to the suffering, the horror around us? Well, one can't generalize; as with everything in life, people reacted differently. One did, I think, develop a kind of dullness, a numbness where the daily nightmarish events became a kind of routine, and only special horrors aroused us, reminded us of normal feelings; sometimes this would be connected with specific and special people, sometimes with special events.⁷⁸

This routinization also seems to occur along the same lines within the perpetrator group. Stangl, the Treblinka camp commander, spoke about the routinization of and the habituation to the terror during an interview with Gitta Sereny. He also mentioned an aid commonly used to take one's mind off of the horror.

'Would it be true to say that you got used to the liquidations?'
He thought for a moment. 'To tell the truth,' he then said, slowly and thoughtfully, 'one did become used to it.'

78 Richard Glazar quoted in *De duisternis tegemoet*, by Gitta Sereny, 196. (English edition, 192)

'In days? Weeks? Months?'

'Months. It was months before I could look one of them in the eye. I repressed it all by trying to create a special place: gardens, new barracks, new kitchens, new everything; barbers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters. There were hundreds of ways to take one's mind off it; I used them all.'

'Even so, if you felt that strongly, there had to be times, perhaps at night, in the dark, when you couldn't avoid thinking about it?'

'In the end, the only way to deal with it was to drink. I took a large glass of brandy to bed with me each night and I drank.'⁷⁹

The use of alcohol therefore seems to be very functional for mass murderers. It dampens the feeling of pity and the physical abhorrence when killing. It makes killing easier. The use of alcohol reduces our feelings of fear and our awareness. It has a very specific impact on our nerve system, suppressing the activity of the prefrontal and orbital lobes of the brain. And it is exactly those two lobes that cause feelings of shame, pity, or abhorrence.⁸⁰ Jan De Laender draws a comparison which cannot be misunderstood between the effects of large doses of alcohol and the effect of orbital and prefrontal brain lobes. 'People with injuries in those lobes become rude, without shame and careless. They lose the capacity to have pity, they transgress social rules and strangely enough they even become indifferent to physical pain. [...] No wonder the Einsatzgruppen readily took to the bottle.'⁸¹

Brutalization

To reduce the tension between cognition and behavior, the perpetrator undergoes several cognitive shifts, each time overcoming his (moral) biological inhibitions. The ever-increasing desensitization causes the psycho-social dissonance or psychological unease that is experienced to become ever smaller.⁸² And it is exactly this reducing of the psychological unease that will cause further brutalization, a brutalization usually expressed very

79 Gitta Sereny, *De duisternis tegemoet*, 204-205. (English edition, 200)

80 Jan De Laender, *Het hart van de duisternis*, 300.

81 Ibid., 300.

82 The theory of psychosocial dissonance is an extension of the cognitive dissonance theory of Leon Festinger. It is a refinement that includes the anthropological perspective on culture, motivation, contextual variables, the self, and emotion. At the individual level, Alex Hinton argues that the psychological discomfort is reduced by cognitive shifts (moves) through which one is transformed into agents of death. See: Alexander Laban Hinton, "Agents of Death: Explaining the Cambodian Genocide in Terms of Psychosocial Dissonance", *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 4 (1996): 818-831.

individually and 'creatively'. In other words, the brutalized murder process is no longer a routine, a mechanical and passionless event. It has now become a lethal game that receives a personal touch from the mass murderer himself. I believe it is in this transitional stage that the dynamics appear that Hinton refers to as 'genocidal bricolage'. 'Like all human beings, genocidal perpetrators are active meaning-makers, for whom the act of killing is often highly symbolic, ontologically resonant, and suffused with meaning. They are "genocidal bricoleurs" who draw on a large "toolkit" of personal and cultural knowledge to carry out the task at hand, often asserting their identity in the process.'⁸³ It is in this human cruelty that the perpetrator shows off his ingenuity. In this last stage (initiation, routinization and *brutalization*), the perpetrator enters a kind of intoxication by killing – an intoxication or addiction to the murder process. This is often called 'the joy of slaughter'.⁸⁴ Brutalization is not necessarily the last phase in the continuum of destruction. It is also not the case that each and every mass murderer reaches this extreme, because the behavior of each individual perpetrator differs because of individual traits. Wolfgang Sofsky dedicated a complete chapter to the violent excesses in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps in his book *The Order of Terror*. He indicates that extreme violence was an everyday occurrence in those camps. But he considers this cruelty to be more of a specific way of behavior within a complex power structure rather than an unbridled explosion caused by the physical necessity of the individual.⁸⁵ He says:

In excess, power runs riot, letting off steam through the outlet of the defenseless. It is rooted in a situation of omnipotence. In excess, the perpetrators demonstrate their triumph over the other. They show just how free they are. Excess is violent force for its own sake: terror per se. It has no goal; it is not a means to an end. Cruelty wills nothing but itself, the absolute freedom of arbitrary action, which it realizes by countless new ideas and variations.⁸⁶

83 Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why did they kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 289.

84 Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books 1999), 19.

85 Wolfgang Sofsky, *The order of terror: The Concentration Camp* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997), 225.

86 Wolfgang Sofsky, *The order of terror*, 224.

It is in this context that Sofsky talks about the five conditions for cruelty, in particular:

- 1 the institutionalization of terror;
- 2 the specialization in terror;
- 3 group conformity;
- 4 the diffusion of responsibility; and
- 5 the extreme distance between the perpetrator and the victim.⁸⁷

The Womb of Evil: Social Learning amongst Perpetrators

Herbert Hirsch rightly points out that people are not born with a memory or with specific political ideas. On the contrary, people are born into a particular environment and undergo a process of cultural transmission through interaction with their surroundings. This is a process of continuous socialization realized by one's family, relatives, learning system, the media, belief system, youth movement, and countless other networks of which one can be a member.⁸⁸ It is in such an ingenious way that the fear of the Jewish threat was socially constructed; and although this was a non-existent threat, it was taken for real. It was Epictetus who asserted already in the first century BC that it is not things themselves that cause us distress but rather the opinion we hold of these things. In other words, reality consists of what a large group of people decide to call reality. This is what social psychologists call social proof.⁸⁹

It is from this point of view that we can understand why anti-Semitism was at a high, although we need to add here that people do not only learn from books. On the contrary, the majority of what we learn comes from observing, imitating, or doing. The whole of German society was penetrated by a virulent anti-Semitism. Newspapers, radios, films, and even carnival floats all carried this racial message. And although this cultural transmission of anti-Semitism can be an important feeding ground for our perpetrators, it certainly is not enough of a motivation to commit extraordinary evil. It is indeed often the case that we can speak of an attitude-behavior consistency. In other words, if I truly hated Jews, my behavior towards them will more likely be discriminatory. However, such a negative attitude towards a

87 Ibid., 223-240.

88 Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory*, 109.

89 Paul Watzlawick, John H. Weakland and Richard Fish, *Het kan anders, over het onderkennen en oplossen van menselijke problemen* (Houten/Diegem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 2002) 116-117.

specific group cannot be so strong that it readily pushes aside our natural inhibition to kill, although it can possibly help in doing so. So, in spite of Goldhagen's theory and his eliminationist anti-Semitism, I believe that if one is to become a mass murderer, one would need to learn an awful lot more and also in a very specific way (conditioning). What does this learning consist of? Or rather, how do you condition a normal man to become a mass murderer?

One point of view that could help us answer these questions is that of criminologists and their criminal learning theories. Our starting point is the argument I already mentioned, namely that people are learning organisms throughout their entire lifetime. A human being does not stay the same during his lifetime. Based on new experiences and understandings, a new layer is formed on top of already existing ones. Within the framework of this research, we can say that a perpetrator has created several layers to reach a final destructive phase. It is therefore important to go and study the content of the learning process and the way in which it was administered. The criminologist Edwin Sutherland formulated one of the first theories about it in 1939. He considered criminal behavior to be part of human behavior, placing deviant behavior within the larger framework within which all human behavior is explained. Sutherland argued:

The processes which result in systematic criminal behavior are fundamentally the same in form as the processes which result in systematic lawful behavior. ... Criminal behavior differs from lawful behavior in the standards by which it is judged but not in the principles of the genetic [causal] processes.⁹⁰

The basic principle of his differential association theory is that criminal behavior is learned just like all other human behavior. The source of deviance is to be found within the intimate social networks of individuals. He argued that individuals who selectively, or differentially, associate themselves with deviant members of society will more than likely behave themselves in the same way, i.e. deviantly. Criminal behavior from this point of view is therefore learned behavior. It is learned from others by 'face-to-face' interaction in small, intimate groups. The content of this learning process includes not only the techniques to commit these crimes but also the attitudes

90 Edwin Sutherland quoted in *Companions in Crime: The Social Aspects of Criminal Conduct*, by Mark Warr (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 75.

(motivation) necessary.⁹¹ Sutherland described his theory⁹² by way of the following statements:

- 1 Criminal behavior is learned.
- 2 Criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication.
- 3 The principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups.
- 4 When criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes techniques of committing the crime, which are sometimes very complicated, sometimes simple and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes.
- 5 The specific direction of motives and drives is learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable or unfavorable.
- 6 A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law.
- 7 Differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority, and intensity.
- 8 The process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning.
- 9 While criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those needs and values, since non-criminal behavior is an expression of the same needs and values.⁹³

Besides these nine statements, Sutherland also remarks that the likelihood that individuals will participate in criminal activity increases when they are exposed – early in their lives, in relatively frequent intervals, over a long period of time and by a source they respect and recognize – to definitions (attitudes) that advocate transgressing the rule of law. It is quite remarkable in this aspect that we see so many similarities between numerous perpetrators' witness statements and the criminological learning theory Sutherland developed in 1939. First of all, Sutherland does not regard perpetrators as a separate category of people. On the contrary, he focuses on the interactional

91 Sutherland called this 'definitions favorable to violation of law'.

92 Francis T Cullen and Robert Agnew, eds., *Criminological Theory: Past to Present* (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2006), 122-124 & 134-138.

93 Sutherland pointed out that these needs can also form the basis of non-criminal behavior. So, in order to get money, for instance, one can either steal or go to work.

dynamics and learning process that every human being undergoes. This mechanism of differential association is the same for perpetrators as for non-deviant individuals. Only the content is different because of positive or negative definitions with regards to crime.

Although the similarities are remarkable, we still need to pay critical attention to the specific character of criminal behavior. Sutherland mentions, for example, definitions that could possibly cause a transgression of the penal code. Collective violence, however, is often not against local legislation. In most cases, this violence is demanded and organized by or with the knowledge of the authorities or the ruling elite. What it boils down to is that mass murderers, in contrast to perpetrators of normal offences, will more likely have the perspective that they are behaving just as the authorities expect them to. Within criminal theory, two major areas of criticism have been formulated against the differential association theory. First, it is claimed that Sutherland does not give a decent description of 'definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime'. Several criminologists have tried to describe the nature of these theoretical definitions. For example, Sykes and Matza have described five neutralization techniques in this field. Their theory has given more clarity to the nature of the definitions described by Sutherland and also provided a very useful point of view within this perpetrator study. I will go into this in more detail further on in this study.

Second, it is said that the differential association theory fails to describe the full process by which crime is taught. The theory only states that certain definitions (for or against crime) are taught but does not go into detail as to how.⁹⁴ It was the criminologists Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers who in 1966 reformulated the differential association theory using the terminology of operant conditioning. This fast-growing branch of behavioral psychology, with B.F. Skinner as its figurehead, stressed the relationship between behavior and validation. Based partly on experimental understandings, Akers developed and tested a social learning theory to explain criminality. And by following these principles of operant conditioning, he stressed the role of a positive and negative validation of deviant behavior.⁹⁵

Whether individuals will refrain from or initiate, continue committing, or desist from criminal and deviant acts depend on the relative frequency,

94 Although in my opinion, some variables related to the learning process were already named by Sutherland, such as duration, frequency, and intensity.

95 Mark Warr, *Companions in Crime*, 77.

amount, and probability of past, present, and anticipated rewards and punishments perceived to be attached to the behavior.⁹⁶

Akers argued that crime is taught using three processes:

- 1 Individuals learn the convictions that define crime as desired, justified, or mitigating in certain situations.
- 2 Individuals will partake in crime because they are differentially validated by and through criminal behaviour. This validation can be both positive (financial gain, social justification) and negative (no longer excluded).
- 3 Individuals will partake in crime because they imitate the criminal behavior of others, more specifically respected others whose criminal behaviour has already been validated.⁹⁷

As with Sutherland, this social learning theory can be applied to both deviant and non-deviant behavior. That is why Mark Warr declares quite frankly: 'much of the beauty and elegance of social learning theory lies in its generality'.⁹⁸ With this, Akers gives a clear answer to the unanswered question of how the learning process works exactly. This inter-personal learning mechanism by imitation and direct or indirect⁹⁹ validation is a process each and every single one of us knows through and through. Harald Welzer notes hereby that the perpetrators were capable of killing because they kept seeing themselves as individuals who acted with an unblemished moral code.¹⁰⁰ This social code during the years of National Socialism consisted of degrading and persecuting 'the others'. From the point of view of this moral code, it was 'OK' for the perpetrators to kill.

Gresham Sykes and David Matza stressed in their theory the importance of the perpetrator's morally consistent self-image. Their neutralization techniques work perfectly because they allow perpetrators to maintain a non-criminal self-image, notwithstanding their participation in certain crimes.¹⁰¹ Sykes and Matza found in their research into youth criminality, for

96 Ronald L Akers, "Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance," (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), 66; quoted in Mark Warr, *Companions in Crime*, 77.

97 Francis T Cullen and Robert Agnew, eds., *Criminological Theory*, 116.

98 Mark Warr, *Companions in Crime*, 78.

99 'Indirect' refers to seeing how others' behavior is reinforced.

100 Harald Welzer, "Mass murder and moral code", 16-17.

101 Volkan Topalli, 'When being good is bad: An expansion of Neutralization Theory', *Criminology* 43, no. 3 (2005), p. 800.

example, that there are ways in which normal people define their behavior, or the situation in which they find themselves, so that it does not conflict with the prevailing moral code, something that is clearly at work in the case of perpetrators of extraordinary evil. Tzvetan Todorov also stresses the presence of a moral code in the perpetrators while noting that its perception is different.

Guards who committed atrocities never stopped distinguishing between good and evil. Their moral faculty had not withered away. They simply believed that the “atrocious” was in fact a good thing and thus not an atrocity at all – because the state, custodian of the standards of good and evil, told them so. The guards were not deprived of a moral sensibility but provided with a new one.¹⁰²

The provision of a new moral standard also forms the core of Sykes and Matza’s neutralization techniques. Values are re-defined in order to neutralize the normative dissonance.¹⁰³ This enables the removal of natural (moral) inhibitions, causing pity and empathy to be applied selectively and depending on the situation. In their famous 1957 article, *Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency*, they stress that many cases of delinquency are based on an expansion of the defensive techniques (rationalizations) used by perpetrators.

It is our argument that much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large.¹⁰⁴

Crucially, they remark that these justifications (rationalizations) are made not only after the criminal activity and therefore AFTER the criminal behavior; there are reasons to believe that these justifications are taught BEFORE the deviant behavior occurs. The justifications precede the delinquent behavior, which in fact enables the deviant behavior. These

102 Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, 129. Also: Tzvetan Todorov quoted in *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide*, by Alex Alvarez, 113.

103 As a result, the theory of neutralization techniques provides an answer to the criticism formulated at the differential association of Sutherland’s theory – namely, the content of the “definitions in favor of or against the law”.

104 Gresham M. Sykes, David Matza, “Techniques of Neutralization: A theory of Delinquency”, *American Sociological Review* 22, no. 6 (1957), 666.

defences neutralize the values and standards towards the victim group in question. The perpetrators can then participate in destructive behavior that is otherwise considered unacceptable by them. This causes the moral code to remain intact but redefined in such a way that the psychological unease caused by going against the natural inhibitions is paralyzed, so to speak. Sykes and Matza also point to the importance of the perpetrator group in this redefining process. People will not only use individual arguments to use these justifications. It is usually the socially constructed reality by the group that will influence the individuals to redefine and neutralize their standards. It will be exactly these techniques and not the exactly opposite standard that the perpetrators will learn from each other. Sykes and Matza wrote:

We call these justifications of deviant behavior techniques of neutralization; and we believe these techniques make up a crucial component of Sutherland's "definitions favorable to violation of law." It is by learning these techniques that the juvenile becomes delinquent, rather than by learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in direct contradiction to those of the dominant society.¹⁰⁵

Sykes and Matza classified their neutralization techniques in five types: negation of responsibility, negation of damage or disadvantage, negation of a victim, condemnation of those who condemn, and appeal to a higher moral allegiance. Alexander Alvarez, one of the few criminologists who actually introduced a criminological point of view into the field of genocide studies, added a sixth neutralization technique to this: the negation of any humanity or dehumanization.¹⁰⁶

Sutherland's differential association theory and Sykes and Matza's neutralization techniques are fundamental to understanding how normal people can be made to neutralize their natural inhibitions against murder and violence. It clarifies the mechanism that enables perpetrators to commit crimes of obedience, which is a category that includes the large majority of perpetrators. It is only a small minority of perpetrators that actually transgresses into crimes of initiative.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 667.

¹⁰⁶ Alex Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide*, 125-129.

¹⁰⁷ I use the terminology described by Hamilton and Kelman and further refined by Kressel in his book *Mass Hate*. Herbert C Kelman and V Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Neil J Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror* (New York: Westview Press, 2002).

Final Remarks

'Man is God nor devil but an earthly in-between being which tentatively searches its way in a complex and imperfect world,'¹⁰⁸ according to Jet Isarin in her essay about *Het kwaad en de gedachteloosheid* (*Evil and thoughtlessness*). Tzvetan Todorov makes a similar statement accentuating the transformations or demonic transitions of those thousands of individuals as the crucial factor that undeniably enables genocide or mass murder.

I have placed my focus on those risk factors that recruit, motivate, and enable people to apply such genocidal violence. The starting point of my explanation model is the social nature of evil. This means that a mass murder or genocide happens because of the thinking and acting of numerous people. Perpetrators, victims and bystanders are all part of a complex circular interaction process that influences and guides them. Perpetrators make choices along the way (key moments) from good to bad, and they are influenced by the behavior of 'the others' (co-perpetrators, victims and bystanders). And although they are never directly forced to partake in the murderous activities, they are under pressure by a few (f)actors. The complexity lies in the indivisibility of the numerous (f)actors which are interwoven in a real knot. Not only the groups (actors) but also the dynamics (factors) overlap each other. Social reality cannot simply be described as a clear and theoretical divisible event but rather as a complex and imperfect process that whimsically searches its own way.

¹⁰⁸ Jet Isarin, *Het kwaad en de gedachteloosheid: Een beschouwing over de holocaust* (Baarn: Ambo 1994), 23.