

The Unkindest Cut of All Genocidal killing sprees have taken more than 100 million lives since the late 19th century—four times the toll of combatants in the ‘regular’ wars.

By Stephen Budiansky, Jan. 9, 2015 5:17 p.m. ET

Atrocity



Machetes abandoned by Hutu in 1994. In a period of 100 days earlier that year, Hutu extremists slaughtered some 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu. ©Gilles Peress / Magnum Photos

An objective future chronicler of violence in our period of human existence would be struck by one inescapable and overwhelming fact. The greatest toll in human lives over the past century came not from terrorism; not from conventional war, even with the industrialized battlefield slaughter that the machine gun and high-explosive shell of World War I made possible; not even from the mass aerial bombardment of civilians that World War II made commonplace, culminating in the weapons of mass destruction unleashed upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Add up all the casualties of wars and they remain dwarfed by a form of violence so horrific that it seems to defy description, much less comprehension: the deliberately executed mass murders of unarmed men, women and children.

The Killing Compartments

By Abram de Swaan, Yale, 344 pages, \$35

Genocidal killing sprees, by Abram de Swaan's calculation, have taken more than 100 million lives since the late 19th century, easily four times the toll of combatants in all "regular" wars of the same period. These paroxysms of annihilation are almost always aimed at a despised ethnic or social group; they are carried out in extreme and intimate brutality (usually accompanied by rape, torture and the mutilation of utterly defenseless victims); and they are conducted with the unabashed intent of exterminating an entire population. Scarcely a decade has passed without such a violent outburst: the mass murders of a million Congolese villagers by Belgian troops and mercenaries at the turn of the 20th century, the annihilation of millions in Stalin's Great Terror of the 1930s, the Rape of Nanjing, the Holocaust, the massacre of a million Hindu Bangladeshis by the Pakistani army in 1971, and more recent episodes of ethnic mass murder in Guatemala, Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. The reign of terror in North Korea, which has taken as many as 1.1 million lives since the mid-1990s, continues

to this day.

In the face of such unspeakable and seemingly inexplicable horrors, even scientifically minded researchers tend to grope for explanations, or even a vocabulary. Which makes it all the more extraordinary what Mr. de Swaan, a Dutch sociologist, has accomplished in this not overly long volume. With a steady gaze, a cool head and an incisive ability to express the most complex questions in simple and direct language, he has produced a powerful and convincing account of the peculiar social and psychological conditions that give rise to mass murder.

At the start, he quickly dispenses with two “easy answers” that have become fixed in public and professional opinion. “The first is that mass murderers are all beasts, monsters, or psychopaths. This is indeed the picture presented in war propaganda and sometimes in the popular mass media.” Mr. de Swaan notes that reputable scholars and available research are in near unanimous agreement (“a rare exception in the human sciences”) that the proportion of psychopaths among mass murderers is in fact no greater than in the rest of the population—about 5%. Before engaging in the brutal slaughter of unarmed civilians, most of the perpetrators “may not have ever harmed a living soul,” he writes. “Once it is over, most of them by far will never again physically hurt another person.” The men who carry out these acts (nearly all *genocidaires* are men) are fully functional members of their society before, after and even during their participation in the murders; they have normal friendships, are devoted fathers and loving husbands, are economically successful. They are, in psychological terms, mentally and socially “well integrated.”

Mr. de Swaan is equally dismissive, though, of what has become the prevailing perspective among social scientists, what he terms the “situationist view.” This, he notes with mild sarcasm, is invariably summarized by its proponents with the clichéd phrase, “You or I, under the same circumstance, might have done the same thing.” The idea is that individual psychological “dispositions” do not matter at all; it is the immediate situation that causes “ordinary

people” to “commit extreme evil.”

The situationist view owes much to the experiments on obedience to authority conducted by Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the early 1960s and to Hannah Arendt’s perhaps even more famous coinage “the banality of evil” in her reporting on the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann. Arendt portrayed Eichmann, the Nazi SS officer who oversaw the machinery of the Holocaust, as a bland, robotic bureaucrat who dispassionately went about his job of assembly-line mass slaughter.

The situationist view is deeply troubling from a moral standpoint since it appears to absolve the perpetrators of personal responsibility. But it also suffers from profound shortcomings on factual and conceptual grounds. As Bettina Stangneth demonstrates in her recent re-examination of Eichmann’s early life, “Eichmann Before Jerusalem,” there was nothing “banal” in the least about Eichmann’s fanaticism. He was a devoted Nazi and zealous Jew hunter whose only stated regret was that he failed to exterminate all 10.3 million Jews. These statements were well known even at the time of his trial, having appeared in an interview Eichmann gave to a fellow ex-Nazi that was reprinted in Time magazine. Mr. de Swaan heaps well-deserved scorn on the shoddy legacy that Arendt left to the study of genocide. Arendt’s “catchy phrase . . . ,” he writes, “now probably express[es] the greatest *bêtise* in the small but widely quoted repertoire of clichés about the Holocaust and about genocide in general.” He suggests that her naive and skewed portrait was accepted because it fit a then-common impression of the Nazi state as an efficient, cool, totalitarian machine that commanded mindless obedience from its populace. The reality of the Holocaust, like that of all of the mass murders that Mr. de Swaan recounts, was hardly so impersonal. “The actual destruction of the Jews on the killing sites most often was unrestrained, wild, barbaric,” he writes. “Murder was not enough; Jews had to be made to suffer before being killed.”

The author likewise points out serious factual misrepresentations in the lessons conventionally drawn from Milgram’s famous

experiments, in which many of the participants showed themselves disturbingly willing to obey the orders of a lab-coated “authority figure” to continue administering what they were told were increasingly powerful electric shocks to a test subject (who was actually an actor feigning painful reactions). Rarely mentioned in accounts of Milgram’s study is that many of the subjects did not obey—one-third of the participants flatly refused to “follow orders.” Far from confirming that “you or I, under the same circumstance, might have done the same thing,” the experiments suggest that in fact a good many people will do nothing of the kind.

But there is a much more fundamental problem with the situationist explanation for mass murder: Simply, most people are not going to find themselves in “the same circumstance.” The circumstance in which mass murder becomes possible is inseparable from the society in which it develops, Mr. de Swaan argues; so too the disposition of the perpetrators to engage in mass killing is the end result of a complex interplay of social and psychological factors over an extended period of time. Just because mass murderers are not born does not mean that they do not have to be made. Most people in fact require a great deal of preparation to lose their inhibition against this kind of extreme violence.

To explain mass murder as nothing but the result of obeying orders is thus begging the question in the extreme; it leaves unaddressed how it came to be that those orders were given and how hundreds of thousands were indeed prepared to execute them. It is no more an explanation of why mass murders arise at specific times and in specific places—and not in countless others—than are other “explanations” that Mr. de Swaan makes short work of. These include attempts to chalk up such barbarism to an inherent human genetic propensity to violence, or the modern state, or perhaps “modernity” in general—all these claims surely contain an element of truth but are utterly trivial as useful explanations for why the killing happens and how it can be prevented.

Mr. de Swaan’s great contribution is to forthrightly tackle the

deeper and larger questions of what causes genocidal social attitudes to arise and become acceptable in the first place. He builds a convincing case that mass murders are the result of a very specific set of social and psychological steps that sharply distinguish this kind of violence from all others and that help to explain how and why “ordinary people” become capable of committing such acts.

Unlike common violent criminals, mass murderers “almost always worked in large teams.” They “without exception” operated “within a supportive social context” and with the assurance of impunity. And, what I found his most striking observation of all, they almost never felt remorse for their actions afterward. As Mr. de Swaan observes: “Many survivors of mass annihilation campaigns suffer the psychic consequences for the rest of their lives. Some of the bystanders remain traumatized for scores of years. A significant proportion of combat veterans develop ‘shell shock,’ as it was once called, or ‘post-traumatic stress syndrome.’ Not the genocidaires. Most of them did just fine.” In the 1980s two Israeli psychologists sent out questionnaires and approached hundreds of psychiatrists, therapists, clergymen and physicians in Germany and other European countries asking if any Holocaust perpetrators had ever expressed feelings of guilt or sought help for lingering aftereffects of their crimes. They came up with but a single instance: a German soldier who said he felt haunted by the eyes of a 6-year-old Jewish girl who had run toward him in the Warsaw Ghetto with her arms outstretched—and whom he had then stabbed to death on his commander’s orders.

A lack of remorse on the part of the murderers is striking evidence that there is indeed nothing “ordinary” about the phenomenon of mass murder—precisely because an ordinary person would feel guilt, regret or at least some emotional trauma if thrown into such a situation absent special preparation. Mr. de Swaan sees genocidal murder as fundamentally an act of extreme social and psychological compartmentalization. In nearly every case he reviews, he finds a prior period of social indoctrination in which

the state that instigated the murders—and it is almost always a state—presents itself as the aggrieved victim of historical injustice. That is followed by a growing demarcation of the target population socially, legally and physically. Then, in the immediate run-up to the massacres, propaganda campaigns relentlessly paint the victims as the real aggressors, threats to the very existence of the state and its people, an alien “other.”

In most cases, the actual killing takes place in a physically separated location that allows the perpetrators to view their acts as somehow distinct from their “normal” lives and the social and psychological norms of civilized society. Although the invariable brutality of the killings is in one sense a complete collapse of civilization and a retreat into barbarism, it is barbarism confined to well-defined locations and episodes: The rest of civilization has not collapsed, order elsewhere is maintained, and the perpetrators can even come to see their work of killing as a “job” that they can go to and return from each day, moving between two separate worlds. The barbarism toward the victims, in turn, reinforces their “disidentification” as cringing, sickly, subhuman, cowardly: This is why, as Mr. de Swaan puts it, “Jews had to be made to suffer before being killed.”

“The Killing Compartments” is exceptionally clearly written, and the author eschews almost completely the jargon and pseudoscientific labeling of the obvious that is the bane of academic sociology. The only disappointment I felt upon closing the book was that his final chapter was but a recapitulation of his previous arguments rather than an attempt to draw from his analysis any conclusions as to how episodes of mass murder could be averted. Mr. de Swaan has dispelled many pernicious myths and offered much clarity and wisdom on a subject whose very enormity would overwhelm most who dared to venture into it.

—Mr. Budiansky is the author, most recently, of “Mad Music: Charles Ives, the Nostalgic Rebel.”