

WHAT TRANSFORMS ORDINARY PEOPLE INTO GROSS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATORS?

Alette Smeulers

Department of Criminal Law and Criminology
Maastricht University, the Netherlands

ECPR in Torino, 22-27 March 2002

Workshop 9: The Systematic study of human rights violations

WHAT TRANSFORMS ORDINARY PEOPLE INTO GROSS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATORS?

After hearing about the Shoa during the Second World War I was struck with disbelief and wondered what kind of people could be so cruel and figured out that they must be beasts and sadists. During my university studies I wrote a doctoral thesis in which the main research question was: what kind of people are people who torture, kill and maim fellow human beings on behalf of the state? The outcome of the research was disquieting: these perpetrators were very ordinary people. Another outcome, a bit more comforting was that in ordinary circumstances ordinary people would never commit such crimes as genocide and torture and would even be revolted by such atrocious crimes. Ordinary people are not sadistic by nature. Ordinary people would therefore not commit such crimes in ordinary circumstances, but merely do so in very specific extra-ordinary circumstances. The main aim of this research is partly to define these extra-ordinary circumstances but basically to understand how ordinary people react to these circumstances. More specific: how ordinary people are transformed by these circumstances into perpetrators, that is to say gross human right violators.

1. Research proposal

1.1 Presumptions and main research questions

The starting point (presumption) of this research project is the outcome of the prior research project, namely, that (a) most perpetrators are ordinary people and (b) within specific circumstances all ordinary people can become gross human rights violators. The aim of this research is not to prove these presumptions. Many studies have already sufficiently proven the first thesis, namely that these perpetrators are ordinary people. Reports by psychologists and psychiatrist who studied perpetrators for example showed that most of them have ordinary personalities. The outcome of many intensive and in-depth interviews with perpetrators¹ and social - psychological research on individual perpetrators² as well as events leading up to for example massacres³ is that these perpetrators are ordinary people. The second presumption is an outcome of two laboratory experiments which gave a good insight in how easily ordinary people are transformed into perpetrators. The laboratory experiment of Milgram (the obedience experiment) has sufficiently proven that the majority of people (65%) will give their fellow human being electric shocks if they are demanded to do so by a perceived authority and are given the assurance that the electric shocks are necessary and that they themselves are not responsible for the possible consequences of the shocks.⁴ Zimbardo's prison experiment showed that the environment is extremely important too. In this so-called prison experiment ordinary students who were given the role of prison-guards quickly transformed into cruel personalities brutalizing their victims, the powerless prisoners.⁵ Many studies on causes of gross human rights violations show that perpetrators often find themselves in extremely compelling circumstances in which they are believed to have no choice. Haritos-Fatouras, a Greek professor after an intensive research on a Greek torture school (1967-1974) and the compelling circumstances surrounding the recruits concluded, that almost anyone can become a torturer given the appropriate training.⁶

The main aim of this research project therefore is not to prove these two presumptions but to concentrate on the transformation process that is undergone by ordinary people who commit gross human rights violations.⁷ As said before, in ordinary circumstances ordinary people are not and will not be prepared to for example torture a fellow human being. Under ordinary circumstances ordinary people would be revolted by the idea to torture or commit another atrocious crime. Under what circumstances, why and how does this change? The aim of this research is to find answers to these questions; to -in other words- find an answer to the question: What transforms ordinary people into perpetrators?

1.2 Delineation

This research focuses on the perpetrator in the sense of gross human rights violator. That is to say, perpetrators who commit gross human right violations such as torture, maiming and killing other human beings on behalf of

¹ Sereny 1994 on Stangl camp commander of Treblinka.

² Arendt 1964 on Eichmann and for e.g. Hilberg 1992 on perpetrators in general.

³ Browning 1992 on Reserve Police Battalion 101 and Bilton and Sim 1992 on My Lai.

⁴ Milgram 1969.

⁵ Zimbardo 1974.

⁶ Haritos-Fatouras 1986.

⁷ See also an earlier publication: Smeulers 1996.

the state and/or state authorities. This can either be on the basis of a strict order or on the basis of an implied order or policy. Almost all perpetrators are members of a certain kind of militaristic unit, squad or service such as the police, the army, prison guards, special units or squads or the secret services. The research will focus on these "state-sponsored" perpetrators. Ordinary criminals and terrorists are excluded from the research, although a comparative research on especially the last group might show interesting results.

Within this group of perpetrators (read GHRV-ors) there are many different kinds of perpetrators. In my research I have distinguished the leaders, the superiors, the executioners, the associates and the accessories. The leaders, like for example Hitler and Idi Amin are excluded from the research, because their personalities and motivations are different and they therefor would not fit in this research. The main focus will be on the executioners, that is to say those people who actually commit the gross human rights violations, mainly the torturers, executioners, camp and prison guards and members of special squads or units who carry out special orders which include either of these crimes. The focus will be less on the superiors, associates and accessories but they are definitely not excluded from the research. Bystanders generally play an important and sometimes decisive role if it comes to gross human right violations; they too will, however, be excluded from this research.⁸

1.3 Research method

The main research methods will be studying the existing theories and testing these theories by analyzing so-called ego-documents of perpetrators. Ego-documents are trial statements, interviews, diaries, auto-biographies, letters and all other oral or written statements made by the perpetrators themselves. The method will be to collect as many useful ego-documents as can be found and to read and analyze all statements which can be helpful in finding an answer to the main research question. The idea is to create two databases. One in which all information on a specific perpetrator will be collected. This database is important because it will make it possible to check specific statements in light of the complete picture of a certain perpetrator. Thanks to this database it is for example possible to find out whether and when the perpetrator contradicts himself. The second database is a database in which all interesting quotes will be collected. In this database many different categories will be distinguished. The three main categories are:

- How do perpetrators come to their acts?
- How do perpetrators live with their acts?
- How do perpetrators feel about their acts later?

Each of these main categories is divided into many subcategories. For example in the category: How do perpetrators live with their acts, there is a subcategory on psychological mechanisms and a further specification on defense mechanisms. In this subcategory I collect statements in which the perpetrator shows typical signs of for example evasion, such as blocking out emotions, dissociation from own acts, minimization of own role and straight forward denial. Another example: in the category how do perpetrators feel about their acts later, there is a subcategory on psychological consequences in which all quotes are collected which show clear signs of discomfort (sub a) and in which the perpetrators talk about their syndromes (sub b) such as for example recurrent memories, nightmares and a post traumatic stress disorder. Whenever I find an interesting statement which doesn't fit into a category I will add a new category to the list.

1.4 Underlying theory

Several scientists, like for e.g. Kelman, Staub, Lifton and Arendt have tried to define important underlying psychological and social-psychological mechanisms which explain why and how ordinary people are transformed into perpetrators. Kelman distinguished three social-psychological mechanisms: authorization, routinization and dehumanization.⁹ Staub's theory is on the continuum of destructiveness.¹⁰ Lifton sees doubling as a facilitating mechanism¹¹ and Hannah Arendt called the whole process the banality of evil.¹² All these theories give us an insight in the transformation process. Not all has been said yet, however. The scientific aim of this research is threefold. In the first place applying and testing the existing theories. The second aim is to go a

⁸ See for studies on bystanders Hilberg 1992 and Grünfeld 2000.

⁹ Kelman 1989.

¹⁰ Staub 1989.

¹¹ Lifton 1987.

¹² Arendt 1964.

step further and to search for missing links in the scientific explanations of this behavior. What other mechanisms, theories and processes play a role? Special attention will be given to the functioning of individual and collective defense mechanisms and the techniques used by individuals, groups and societies alike in order to create their own disturbed pictures of the truth. The third aim is to combine the various theories in the sense that they will be tested in order to see whether or not they form one coherent picture or not, whether or not we can formulate a more general overall theory that clearly explains all steps and phases which are part of this transformation process. In order to do so I have distinguished three different phases and one decisive moment within this transformation process. The three phases are in chronological order: the preparation phase, the initiation phase and the habituation phase. On the border line between the initiation phase and the habituation phase there is the all decisive moment, when the perpetrator commits his first crime. For some perpetrators there comes another decisive moment which can be defined as a turning point. In the next few paragraphs I will go deeper into these phases and the decisive moments. A sixth paragraph will focus on how perpetrators look back.

2. The transformation process

2.1 The preparation phase

Most perpetrators are members of some kind of militaristic unit. This can be police, army, prison guards, special or elite force, special units, secret services and others alike. These units are practically all characterized by some typical organizational features such as a very clear and strict order and hierarchy in which the position of each individual is clearly marked by a specific rank. The tasks and duties of each rank are clearly specified and all play their own role in the continuous chain of command, which is typical for these kinds of organizations.¹³ All ranks are obliged to obey the orders of their superiors, that is to say to either pass them on or to carry them out as expected. Within this chain of command obedience, discipline and loyalty are demanded. The idea is that the leaders (this can be for e.g. a president, but also a general, a chief police inspector or a chief prison guard) determine the policy and that all others carry out this policy without questioning it. Within this system the responsibility of the choices made on a policy level are purely for the leaders, all others merely follow orders and have as their only task to follow orders.

'Whether the reasons behind the extermination of the Jews was necessary or not was something on which I could not allow myself to form an opinion. (Hoess, camp commander Auschwitz)'¹⁴

Another typical feature is that within these organizations individuals are de-individualized. Recruits are often not known by names but by rank and number. They all wear uniforms indicating their rank and often even have to wear the same haircut. There is little room for the recruits to show their individual personalities. These organizations furthermore often stand apart from the outside world and form a closed secret world of their own. They have a special basis, which is closed to the public and ordinary people. Within this world a different set of rules and morals apply. Outsiders are kept away and in some organizations many things are secret. From within the premises of the organization it is sometimes very difficult for the recruits to get in touch with the outside world.

Recruits of these organizations generally go through a militaristic training period in which they often get a physically enduring training, in which they learn the special skills they need and in which they get to learn the rules, morals and values of the organization and in which they are taught what their respective roles are and how they should behave. In other words: the recruits are disciplined and learn to obey without questioning the order and learn to be loyal and to think and act in line with the outlined policy.

'You must understand ... I was a soldier. Like you. I had orders to follow. ... The order came from the Führer himself. ... There was nothing to be done.' (Eichmann)¹⁵

On the one hand this phase is nothing out of the ordinary and many people, especially those who have gone through military service will recognize the features. On the other hand we should be aware that even an ordinary military training changes people and makes them more prone to obey orders and have learned to refrain from questioning these orders. Recruits who have gone through such an ordinary training period are probably not aware of it but the changes often are that within this world, let's say the army they have accepted a different kind

¹³ Finer 1962.

¹⁴ Hoess 1959, p. 162

¹⁵ Malkin 1960, p. 231-232

of moral attitude. Within the organization they feel absolved from the responsible for their own actions and behavior and the consequences thereof. Their only duty is to carry out the orders and they are held accountable for their success or failure in doing so towards their superiors. An important moral restraint to commit torture, maim or kill a fellow human being has thus already been reduced by now although most recruits will probably not be aware of this.

Many perpetrators however, have not only undergone an ordinary military training but have subsequently undergone a special training.¹⁶ This training differs from an ordinary military training in the sense that everything is more extreme. The training method is harsher and continuous threats, insults, humiliation, emotional and physical violence such as beatings and whipping surround the recruits. Recruits are disciplined up to an extreme point and absolute and unquestioning obedience is demanded of them. The difference with ordinary military training is that the orders that are given to them are often extreme, senseless, absurd or cruel. A good (and horrifying) example of such a senseless and cruel order comes from a South-American torture school in which the recruits were obliged to take a pet at the beginning of their training period and stimulated to look well after their pet. Because of the harsh training and the inability to contact family or friend, many recruits naturally bonded with their pets and this was stimulated too by the superiors. At the end of the training period the recruits were told that they would only pass their exams if they fulfilled one last order. The order was to kill their own pet.

A continuous atmosphere of violence and fear often characterizes these special training programs. The recruits are isolated from the outside world and completely dependent on their superiors. Recruits within such a training program or school completely lose control of their own fate and life becomes absolutely unpredictable. The only way to survive during such a course is to do as you are told in order to avoid punishments, further insults and humiliation, physical violence and sometimes even torture. The designers of the course aim at the survival instincts of their recruits and thus turn them into obedient soldiers by making it clear to them that the only way out is the way up. Soldiers who do not think for themselves, do not question orders but merely follow orders, all orders.

'They changed us into instruments. People without a will of their own. Who obey.' 'You were trained not to think.' (Petrou, a Greek torturer)¹⁷

In these extreme circumstances ordinary people can fairly easily be turned into obedient followers. The extreme circumstances and terror used changes people: they get used to violence, get brutalized, get used to a different set of norms and values and have learned not to question any order anymore. They have learned to do as they are told. These recruits will not like an order to torture, maim or kill a fellow human being but they will definitely feel obliged and compelled to carry it out, despite all moral and emotional restraints they might still feel. During the training period they have learned to disregard these feelings and the fear that if they disobey they themselves might be tortured, maimed or killed plays an important role. Although most recruits will carry out their orders to torture, maim or kill by now, many training schools, especially torture schools do not leave it here but even go one step further and make their recruits go through an initiation phase.

2.2 The initiation phase

Recruits who are going through a training program or school, which is designed to turn them into perpetrators, will go through an initiation phase. During such a phase recruits are slowly accustomed to for example torture. They will already be surrounded by an atmosphere of violence and possibly torture and might have already been shown movies on torture sessions. During this phase their involvement in for example torture sessions will be enlarged on a step by step basis. In for example the Greek torture school (Greece 1967-1974) recruits were not suddenly asked to torture a so-called subversive but were asked to guard the prisoners and bring them food first. The second step would be to bring prisoners to the torture chamber and to take them back to their cells after the torture sessions. Thus they got used to seeing the prisoners after they had been beaten up and tortured. They got used to seeing them bleeding, wounded and in pain. A third step would be to bring something into the room where the prisoners would be tortured. Like this they would witness but not yet participate in torture. A fourth step would be to make notes during torture sessions. A fifth step would be to very slightly increase their role, for e.g. holding the victim for a second in between the application of various torture techniques. During these steps their roles would still be extremely small but in the meantime they would get used to torture and seeing people

¹⁶ See haritos-Fatouras 1986.

¹⁷ Amnesty International video

being tortured. At the same time it will become clear to them that if they themselves would not do as told, that their fate would not be much different from the fate of the alleged subversives. The result of this initiation would thus be twofold: the threat to be tortured themselves is enforced on them in this implied manner and at the same time the recruits will get the idea that the prisoners will be tortured anyway -whether they later will take part or not- and that torture is nothing out of the ordinary.

This phase ends when for the first time the recruit will be asked to actively assist during a torture session. After a long preparation and initiation period this is the most decisive moment. The recruit who follows the order to torture, kill or maim will cross an important line and will if he follows the order become a perpetrator. The dynamics of this moment will be described in the next paragraph. One remark should be made before hand though. As said not all recruits will go through this phase, not even all future perpetrators will go through an imposed initiation. Some will go through a kind of spontaneous initiation for example when fighting in a war. The mere fact by being there and for e.g. fighting in a frontline will probably make such an impression on the recruit that he is prepared to carry out every order or even turns (temporarily) berserk.¹⁸ Like some of the American soldiers who took part in the My Lai massacre:

'That day in My Lai, I was personally responsible for killing about 25 people. Personally. Men, women. From shooting them, to cutting their throats, scalping them, to ... cutting off their hands and cutting out their tongue. I did it. I just went. My mind just went. And I was not the only one that did it. A lot of other people did it. I just killed. Once I started the ... training, the whole programming part of killing, it just came out. ... It just came. I did not know I had it in me ... I had no feelings or no emotions or no nothing. No directions. I just killed.' (American soldier)¹⁹

2.3 The first time: crossing a line

After these prior phases many recruits will feel compelled to follow orders. The (implied) pressure from the environment and the fear from within will be too strong and most recruits will not be able and do not dare to resist and disobey the order. They have been taught to obey and that is what they will do: the whole training will come out. The fear of being punished severely, tortured or even killed themselves is no longer visible now because these threats are no longer explicit but during the training period the impregnation of this threat was so strong that it still functions now. When the order comes, they will thus follow it and for the first time will commit a GHRV and for the first time will cross an important line.

It struck me, however that despite the whole training program which is designed to brutalize the recruits, to make them get used to violence and to see and experience torture, maiming and killing as something ordinary, all of them experience revulsion the first time they actually commit one of these crimes. They still -as ordinary people would- feel empathy for their victims and are horrified by the things they feel compelled to do to them. They do not disobey however, simply because they -unlike ordinary people who haven't gone through the training program- do no longer have the means to resist.

'When you see a selection for the first time -I'm not talking only about myself. I'm talking about the most hardened SS people ... you ... how children and women are selected. Then you are so shocked ... that it just cannot be described. (A nazi doctor)²⁰

'I can only say that when you first start doing the job, it is hard ... you hide yourself and cry, so nobody can see you.' (South-American torturer)²¹

Once a recruit has crossed the line he has become a perpetrator but whether he will commit many more crimes will depend on how he deals with the whole situation. On the one hand the perpetrator had felt compelled to commit his crime on the other hand he is revolted by his own actions and knows that he has crossed a line: instinctively the perpetrator will feel and experience that what he has done is wrong. There are two possible reactions to this: either the perpetrator consciously acknowledges that he was wrong and decides for himself that despite all the pressure and the consequences he will refuse to carry out any comparable order in the future. This

¹⁸ For e.g. in My Lai where American soldiers executed and killed hundreds of innocent civilians.

¹⁹ Bilton 1992, p. 7

²⁰ Lifton 1987, p. 197

²¹ Harpers 1985, p. 15.

is an option, but it is not such an easy one. By disobeying the next order most perpetrators will put their own lives in peril. Given the climate of fear that has surrounded him earlier it will be very unlikely that many recruits have the guts to stand up at this point. Despite the fact that it is very unlikely some still do so however, and manage to get out, like this executioner from Reserve Police battalion 101 (RPB 101):

'After I had shot the elderly woman, I went to [his Sergeant] and told him that I was not able to carry out further executions. I did not have to participate in the shooting anymore ... my nerves were totally finished from this one shooting.' (Executioner RPB 101)²²

Another executioner from RPB 101 had been given a very old man, who could not or would not keep up with his fellow country man, because he simply lay there. The executioner remembers:

'I regularly had to lift up and drag him forward. [...] I only reached the execution site when my comrades had already shot their Jews. At the sight of his countrymen who had been shot, my Jew threw himself on the ground and remained lying there. I then cocked my carbine and shot him through the back of the head. Because I was already very upset from the cruel treatment of the Jews during the clearing of the town and was completely in turmoil, I shot too high. The entire back of my Jew was torn off and the brain exposed. Parts of the skull flew into sergeants Steinmetz's face. This was grounds for me, after returning to the truck, to go to the first Sergeant and ask for my release. I had become so sick that I simply could not continue anymore. I was then relieved by the first sergeant.' (Executioner RPB 101)²³

The other much more likely reaction is to rationalize and justify the crime. This reaction is more likely because the environment will support this reaction: the recruits as shown above have been trained to not take the consequences of their actions into account and to leave that to the superiors and they are told by their superiors that they have done the right thing. Besides the ideology upheld by their organization will definitively support their efforts to rationalize and justify. According to the prevailing ideology (whether this is nationalism, patriotism, communism or fascism) the crime should not be seen as a crime but as a necessary means to achieve certain goals.

However, an even more important and compelling reason why this reaction is more likely is because it is a natural reaction. By finding excuses for his crime and by rationalizing and justifying his crime the perpetrator can absolve himself of guilt and absolving himself of any blame and that is exactly what ordinary people instinctively tend to do when they did something wrong. By doing so the perpetrator does not have to acknowledge the fact that he has committed an atrocious crime and has by committing this crime crossed a line which is not supposed to be crossed by ordinary and good people. Naturally and instinctively many defense mechanisms will try to protect the perpetrator from feeling guilty.

'You have to realize that you yourself have not killed anyone and that you are just an instrument of the state' (American executioner)²⁴

Once the perpetrator starts to rationalize or justify his crime he has, however, passed a point of no return. Because the rationalization and justification will make him push aside his revulsion, he will not have enough means to disobey the next order. The most important barriers and restraints to torture, maim or kill have thus successfully been overcome by his natural reaction to absolve himself of any blame. During the next phase the rationalizations, justifications and other defense mechanisms will continue their immense but natural task to chase all feelings of guilt away. It is almost impossible to stop this process. It is hardly possible for an ordinary human being to accept and acknowledge full responsibility for such an atrocious crime as for e.g. torture without finding excuses, which justify the crime. If a perpetrator has not acknowledged his guilt after his first offence, it will be even harder to accept this after he has committed more or sometimes many more crimes. The pressure to find excuses becomes stronger after each and every crime and finally will overcome all feelings of empathy, remorse and guilt.

²² Browning 1992, p. 66

²³ Browning 1992, p. 66.

²⁴ Trombley 1993, p. 217

2.4 Habituation and Routinization

During this phase many natural defense-mechanisms besides rationalization and justification are active in order to keep the feelings of remorse, guilt and empathy away. Many perpetrators for e.g. convince themselves that they do not really have any control and that it wouldn't have made a difference if they had stood up and refused to carry out the order:

'If I had sacrificed myself, if I had made public what I felt and had died ... it would have made no difference. Not an iota. It would all have gone on just the same, as if it and I had never happened.'
(Stangl)²⁵

Many perpetrators use evasion in order to avoid having to acknowledging what truly happens. They block out their emotions, they dissociate themselves from their acts, they minimize their own roles, they avoid thinking or talking about it or they simply deny to themselves what they are really doing. For themselves they argue that they were trapped, not guilty, could not have done otherwise. Some start to blame the victim: it's his fault, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perpetrators often start to create their own world in which they define the things around them in order to sooth their conscience. They create their own distorted reality. One executioner of RPB 101 for example made the murdering of innocent children sound like mercy killings:

'I made an effort, and it was possible for me to shoot only children by the hand. My neighbor then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer.' (Executioner from RPB 101)²⁶

Massive gross human rights violations are sometimes extremely well organized like for e.g. the highly bureaucratized organization of the genocide of the Jews, gypsies and others deemed 'unworthy of life' in Nazi Germany.²⁷ This means that there was a clear hierarchical and functional division of labor, which creates a distance between the perpetrators and final consequences and outcome of their collective activity. Those higher up in the chain of command have no direct personal experience and sometimes not even the knowledge of the final aims. Those lower in rank play a minor role and experience that they are merely a small cog in a machine. By fragmentizing the killing process like this, the natural tendencies of the perpetrators to deny their own responsibility and accountability are reinforced. Within this system moral responsibility is substituted by a clear hierarchical and technical responsibility.

'I must admit that this gassing set my mind at rest, for the mass extermination of the Jews was to start soon and now we had a procedure. I always shuddered at the prospect of carrying out extermination by shooting, when I thought of the vast numbers concerned, and of the women and children. I was relieved to think that the victims too would be spared all these bloodbaths and that the victims too would be spared suffering until their last moment came.' (Hoess, camp commander Auschwitz)²⁸

Morality and responsibility are reduced to doing one's own job well.

*'I had no feelings. I was concentrated on the job.'*²⁹

'No ... thoughts came. But I forced them away. I made myself concentrate on work, work and again work.' (Stangl, camp commander Treblinka)³⁰

'I was good at my job. When I was present they talked.' [Did this please you?] 'Yes, at that time it did.'
(Petrou, Greek torturer)³¹

²⁵ Sereny 1994, p. 231

²⁶ Browning 1992, p. 73. This perpetrator was by the way very aware of what he was doing: 'It was supposed to be, so to speak, soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers.'

²⁷ See for e.g. Kogon 1974 and Bauman 1989.

²⁸ Hoess 1959, p. 165.

²⁹ Lifton and Markusen 1990, p. 117

³⁰ Sereny 1994, p. 200

³¹ Amnesty International video

Perpetrators furthermore dehumanize their victims.³² They call them names and look upon them as evil or inferior up to a point that ordinary moral norms no longer apply to them. This makes it easier to torture, maim or kill them. The treatment of the victims is often such that for the victims too it is difficult to uphold their dignity. If practically starved to death and not having opportunities to relieve oneself, they will start fighting over a scrap of bread and will dirty themselves. This will reinforce the contempt perpetrators have for their victims.

'I think it started the day I first saw the Totenlager in Treblinka. I remember Wirth standing there, next to the pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity - it could not have: it was a mass - a mass of rotting flesh. Wirth said 'What shall we do with this garbage?' I think unconsciously that started me thinking of them as cargo. ... I rarely saw them as individuals. It was a huge mass. I sometimes stood on the wall and saw them in the tube. But -how can I explain it- they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips like ...'.³³ 'It has nothing to do with hate. They were weak: they allowed everything to happen - to be done to them. They were people with whom there was no common ground, no possibility of communication - that is how contempt is born. I could never understand how they could give in as they did.' (Stangl, camp commander Treblinka)³⁴

Lifton focused his research on the Nazi doctors and tried to understand how doctors who are meant to heal people, came to not only be involved but even playing a crucial role in the killing process. According to Lifton, the psychological process of doubling took place in many doctors. Thanks to this process they more or less lived in two worlds, the ordinary world in which they were caring doctors, loving husbands and fathers and sociable types and in which ordinary human morality applied. They however also lived in another world, the world of Auschwitz in which completely different morals applied and in which they were prepared to participate in the killing process and in which they conducted cruel medical experiments. A Nazi doctor talking about Mengele said for e.g.:

'And the experiments that he performed -I have to repeat again and again - they were nothing out of the ordinary in terms of the usual Auschwitz daily routine. His experiments with twins were performed on human beings who had in any case, been condemned to death.' (Nazi doctor)³⁵

All these forces which work upon the perpetrator from outside and much more important from within, finally makes that the perpetrator gets used to his job, that he no longer views it as something out of the ordinary and gives it very little thought. To maim, torture and kill becomes a job, not much different from any other job, despite the revulsion they felt at the beginning. A Nazi doctor and a South-American torturer:

'When you see a selection for the first time -I'm not talking only about myself. I'm talking about the most hardened SS people ... you ... how children and women are selected. Then you are so shocked ... that it just cannot be described. And after a few weeks one can be accustomed to it. And that cannot be explained to anybody.' (A Nazi doctor)³⁶

'I can only say that when you first start doing the job, it is hard ... You hide yourself and cry, nobody can see you. Later on, you do not cry, you only feel sad. You feel a knot in your throat but you can hold back the tears. And after ... not wanting to ... but wanting to, you start getting used to it. Yes, definitely there comes a moment when you feel nothing about what you are doing.' (South-American torturer)³⁷

Once the perpetrator has come to this point, he is prepared to commit the most gruesome crimes onto his victims. His natural reaction of revulsion after he committed his first crime and his empathetic feelings for the victims are successfully overcome. The perpetrator uses all the excuses he can find for what he has done and out of pure self preservation finally starts to believe in them. Due to the compelling circumstances he felt he couldn't evade and due to the natural defense mechanisms which started to work within him, ordinary men are thus successfully transformed into perpetrators prepared to do whatever is asked of him. A Colombian killer, whose girlfriend left him after she learned about his work, recalls:

³² Kelman 1989.

³³ Sereny 1994, p. 201.

³⁴ Sereny 1994, p. 233.

³⁵ Bar-on 1989, p. 21

³⁶ Lifton 1987, p. 197

³⁷ Harpers 1985, p. 15.

'Now looking back I think she was the one who opened my eyes, because if I had continued like this I would have been able to kill my own brother in law, who was a communist.'

For some perpetrators the brutalization brought forth unknown vices, like sadism, sexual satisfaction derived from violence and a lust for power. Vices which under different, namely ordinary circumstances might never have come out.

*'Usually I kept hitting until I ejaculated. I have a wife and three children in Breslau. I used to be perfectly normal. That's what they've made of me. Now when they give me a pass out of here. I do not go home. I do not dare look my wife in the face.'*³⁸

'They taught us to show power - we were the leaders. I was not just anybody, anymore. It changed my life. I felt craving for power.' (Greek torturer)³⁹

Staub called the process, which transforms ordinary people into perpetrators 'a continuum of destructiveness': 'Once perpetrators begin to harm people, the resulting psychological changes make greater harm-doing possible.'⁴⁰ Once a perpetrator has progressed so far on this continuum of destructiveness it is almost impossible to get out. There are some perpetrators, however, who along the way suddenly start realizing what is going on. This phase, which will be called turning point, will be discussed in the next paragraph.

2.5 Turning point and exit

Some simply can take no more and quit. They have had enough. This however is not very likely to happen if the perpetrators have already progressed on the continuum of destructiveness. In certain extra-ordinary circumstances though it might happen early in this process. Browning for example describes how several perpetrators from Reserve Police Battalion 101 quit after a while. The killings made them feel too uncomfortable after a certain period of time and they opted out. What was extra-ordinary in this situation was that the commander of RPB 101 had, prior to the killing given the recruits a chance to quit. This was very unusual and the opportunity to quit was taken by some men who after a while could take no more.⁴¹

A more likely turning point is when a perpetrator gets the order to torture, maim or kill a victim whom he knows, who comes from the same region as he does or who for example strongly resembles a family member or friend. An Indonesian torturer for example suddenly recognized the man brought in the room about to be tortured. It was the doctor who had looked after him and his family when he was a child. He was immediately filled with many good memories of this man who had so often cured him from an illness. He wasn't able to torture this man and suddenly realized what had been going on all the time. He decided to quit the job and flee.⁴²

Another possible turning point is when for example a torturer's girl-friend, wife, family or friends become aware of what his job really is. Torturers often do not and may not reveal their real jobs to anyone outside the organization. Their wives and family member will obviously know that they are working within the police or army but it is often easy to conceal what their exact job is. Sometimes the wives become aware of what the fact that their husbands torture people and sometimes they start asking questions about this work. What happens at that moment is that the two worlds in which the perpetrator lives suddenly clash? Confronted by the questions asked by a person he likes or even loves may make him suddenly realize that what he is doing is wrong.

'Now looking back I think she was the one who opened my eyes, because if I had continued like this I would have been able to kill my own brother in law, who was a communist.'

Many perpetrators who come across such a turning point will not all be able to simply quit the job. They often know too much and might well be distrusted. If they are in the army they are not allowed to leave. The fear of what might happen to them if they quit will be enormous. They more than anyone else know what happens to

³⁸ Arendt 1964, p. 454

³⁹ Amnesty International video

⁴⁰ Staub 1989, p. 79.

⁴¹ Browning 1992

⁴² Horison 1969.

people who have different views. Fleeing the country is often the only possibility and it will depend very much on the situation whether a flight might and can be successful.

In the next paragraph I will give some attention to how perpetrators look back on their crimes. This is not a phase in the transformation from ordinary man to perpetrator but it does give a good insight in how perpetrators feel about their crimes and in what made them commit them.

2.6 Looking back

The way perpetrators look back differs from individual to individual. Many still believe that what they have done was completely justified. They strongly believe that they did the right thing, that it was necessary to maim, torture and kill in order to achieve a higher cause or to protect their home country. The strong need to still soothe their conscience will probably prevent many former perpetrators from ever acknowledging that they were wrong and they have committed atrocious crimes. Many perpetrators hold on to their ideology out of pure self-preservation because they wouldn't be able to handle the feelings of guilt and shame if they would see the truth as it is.

'One should do nothing to interfere with the great goal being sought ... the triumph of the Germanic race.' (Nazi doctor)⁴³

'I was able to perfect an absolutely new method of sterilization ... [which] would be of great use today in certain cases.' (Nazi doctor)⁴⁴

Others acknowledge that the torture, maiming and killing was wrong but refuse to accept their own accountability for the crimes. They keep telling others and themselves that they had no choice, that they were given orders and that they couldn't have done otherwise. They keep saying that they were forced to act the way they did and they blame everyone else (superiors, victims, bystanders). They too out of pure self-preservation keep convincing themselves that they are not to blame, that they were mere instruments that they were and still are innocent.

A third group tries to avoid all memories; they do everything in order to escape a confrontation with the past. Some go so far as to deny what has happened and what they have done and strongly try to believe in their own denial. Not all who try to chase the past away are successful in doing so, however. Hurting memories, bad dreams and even nightmares haunts many perpetrators.

'I often have night-mares. I dream of the captain and the people I have killed. Look, I dress in black now, because of all that has happened. I feel guilty, but I can not get the people I have killed back to life.' (Member of a death squad)

Some feel depressed and ashamed. They feel rancor and repentance. For some these feelings, memories and depressions gets so strong that they become ill or suffer from a post traumatic stress disorder. The shield these perpetrators had built suddenly breaks down and the defense mechanisms no longer work effectively. They now have to accept and acknowledge the truth and that hurts. Not all manage to cope with the truth and some turn insane or kill themselves. Night-mares and recurrent memories haunted an American soldier who took part in the My Lai massacre when his ten-year old son was accidentally killed by a bullet:

*'I was in the house. And I came out and picked him up. But he was already dead ... he was dying. He died in my arms. And when I looked at him, his face was like the same face of the child that I had killed. And I said: this is the punishment for me killing the people that I killed.'*⁴⁵

Some perpetrators do however have the guts and strength to face the truth and feel terrible about it. All perpetrators I know of who reached this stage want to take action. This can either be in the form of revealing the truth, accusing their superiors and asking for a conviction and prison sentence which they genuinely feel that they deserve or it can be by asking for forgiveness and try to make up for it.

⁴³ Lifton 1987, p. 310

⁴⁴ Lifton 1987, p. 277

⁴⁵ Bilton 1992, p. 6

LITERATURE

- Arendt, H., *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Penguin Books, London, 1964.
- Bar-On, D., *Legacy of silence: encounters with children of the Third Reich*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989.
- Bilton, M. and Sim K., *Four hours in My Lai*, Viking, London 1992.
- Browning, C.R., *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. Aaron Asher Books, New York, 1992.
- Finer, S.E., *Men on horseback - the role of the military in politics*, London 1962.
- Grünfeld, F., The role of bystanders in human rights violations, in: Coomans et al. (Eds.), *Rendering justice to the vulnerable*, Kluwer Law International, The Hague 2000.
- Haritos-Fatouras, M., The Education of a torturers, *Psychology Today* 1986, p. 50-58.
- Harper's, *Confession of a state terrorist*, 1985, p. 15-17.
- Hilberg, R., *Perpetrators, victims, bystanders*, Harper Perennial, 1992
- Hoess, R., *Commandant of Auschwitz*, World, New York 1959.
- Horison, Notes of personal experience from Ustamah, 1969.
- Kelman, H.C., *Crimes of Obedience*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1989.
- Lifton, R.J., *Nazi doctors: medical killing and the psychology of genocide*, Basic Books, New York 1986.
- Lifton R.J., Markussen E., *The genocidal mentality - Nazi holocaust and the nuclear threat*, Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, New York, 1990.
- Malkin, P.Z., Stein, H. *Eichmann in my hands*, Warner Books, New York, 1960.
- Milgram, S., *Obedience to authority*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1969.
- Sereny, G., *Into that darkness: from mercy killing to mass murder*, Andre Deutsch 1994.
- Smeulers, A., Auswitz and the Holocaust through the eyes of the perpetrators, *Driemaandelijks tijdschrift van de stichting Auschwitz* 1986, p. 23-55.
- Staub, E. *The roots of evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.
- Trombley, S., *The execution Protocol*, Crown Publishers, New York 1992.

Video:

Amnesty International, Your neighbour's son.