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Perpetration as a Process A Historical-Sociological Model

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1. Introduction: Building a Dynamic Model

In the past two decades, research on civil wars, massacres, and genocides has shifted its perspective from the study of merely *perpetrators* to *perpetration*. Whereas the former term refers to the agency of the individuals who have perpetrated forms of mass violence against civilians, the latter concept refers to the process of collective commission of mass violence. The advantage of taking a processual view is that it enables us to cater for the complexity of the process of perpetration: different layers of authority, different motives of involvement, different rules of engagement, and most importantly, the changes in these factors over time. This chapter approaches perpetration as a socio-ecological model containing three distinct analytical levels: top-level (architects), mid-level (organizers), and bottom-level (killers), and develops a temporal processual model focusing on the power relationships between groups of people, especially between perpetrators and victims, but also within the perpetrator group—between high-ranking architects and low-ranking killers.

The chapter also sees these levels as not simply piled on top of each other, but as transforming and interacting over time, thereby explicitly developing a historicizing approach. It approaches genocides, fundamentally, as *processes* with a beginning, development, and end. The chapter fleshes out and discusses each level of analysis and applies existing theoretical insights from the field of comparative genocide studies. This overview incorporates recently published studies on genocide perpetration (de Swaan 2015; Lewy 2017; Bergholz 2016; Vatlin 2016; Anderson 2018). The chapter also highlights several thematic sections in its discussion, especially on regional differentiation, and on mid-level perpetrators. This outline attempts to survey what is known, what remains unknown, and what is desirable in these areas of research.

Genocide can be defined as a complex process of systematic persecution and annihilation of a group of people by a government.¹ In the twentieth century,

¹ Genocide by non-state actors is an upcoming field of inquiry, including focus on terrorists or insurgents. In those cases where these types of groups control a given territory, they can be considered to hold

approximately forty to sixty million defenceless people have become victims of genocidal policies.² The twenty-first century has not begun much better, with genocidal episodes flaring up in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, and Syria. Genocide is the persecution and destruction of human beings on the basis of their presumed or imputed membership in a group, rather than on their individual properties or participation in certain acts. Although it makes little sense to quantify genocide, it is clear that a genocidal process always concerns a society at large, and that genocide often destroys a significant and often critical part of the affected communities. It also does not make much sense to discriminate between the types of groups that are being targeted: ethnic, religious, regional, political, sexual, for example.³ It can be argued that genocidal processes are particularly malicious and destructive because they are directed against all members of a group, mostly innocent and defenceless people who are persecuted and killed regardless of their behaviour. Genocide always denotes a colossal and brutal collective criminality. For this reason, genocide is a phenomenon that is distinct from other forms of mass violence such as war, civil war, less violent persecution, or an isolated massacre.

Genocide perpetration is a complex process through and through. First of all, it can be approached from at least three analytical perspectives: macro (top-level architects), meso (mid-level organizers), and micro (low-level killers). The macro level refers to the context of highest, domestic, political office: the structures and the context of the political helm that wields supreme authority inside a state and is responsible for the decision-making processes that launch genocide. The meso level consists of those institutions, individuals, and developments right below the highest level: mid-level political and administrative elites, the internal agencies that assume the tasks to divide labour and organize the machinery of killing, the (para-)military bosses who press buttons, and the mechanisms of mass mobilization for the destruction of the victim group. The micro level, then, is about the lowest socio-ecological level: the individuals who become involved in the genocidal process, either as direct or indirect perpetrators.⁴ Together these three contextual layers are not simply piled on top of each other, but the largest contexts are often preconditions for the smallest ones: without the macro context of the radicalization of the political elites, the violent measures against the victims would not have been conceived by mid-management,

the monopoly of violence, which is the key to the Weberian definition of modern states. For example, the Islamic State (the name suggests it) was not an internationally acknowledged state, but controlled large swaths of territory where it held the monopoly of violence, levied taxes, offered governance and public services—in other words, behaved like a state. According to the legal definition in the 1948 Genocide Convention both governments and non-state actors can commit genocide.

² For the updated demographic study, see Rummel (2011).

³ Another important point is that some of these cases will be considered genocide by historians, sociologists, and political scientists, but not by legal scholars as it strictly speaking does not fall under the definition of genocide in the Genocide Convention of 1948. The tension between legal approaches and social-scientific approaches remains a significant obstacle in the academic study of genocide and mass violence.

⁴ I use the terms 'indirect' and 'direct' on a historical and sociological spectrum denoting distance and intimacy, respectively, in which the former applies to those actors who are not directly pulling triggers and ending lives, and the latter applies to those actors who are active in the moments of ending the victims' lives.

and ultimately countless individual perpetrators would not have murdered innumerable individual victims in micro situations of killing. In other words, let alone the complexity of each level in itself, we must bear in mind the relevant connections between the three levels, and their development over time.

Second, the temporal complexity of genocide rightly is a main concern in genocide perpetration. How do perpetration processes begin, develop, and end? Mass violence of the scale that unfolds in genocide generally develops through three fairly distinct phases: the pre-violence phase, the phase of mass political violence, and the post-violence phase. The pre-violence phase is often rooted in a broader economic, political, and cultural crisis that vexes the country internally and/or aggravates its external relations with neighbouring states. Such a crisis between political groups and social movements can polarize into non-violent confrontations such as mass protests, boycotts, or strikes. At the local level, it can be characterized by fragile, even hostile, but still non-violent coexistence between political or ethnic groups. Occasionally, however, a local pogrom or a political assassination can occur, and often the state can gradually become engaged in a low-intensity conflict. The main precondition for extreme violence such as massacres or genocide is (civil) war. During wars, violence is exercised on a large scale, first exclusively between armies in legally sanctioned military hostilities, but later potentially also in illegal paramilitary operations against civilians.

These transitions from crisis to mass violence are often turning points, where serious moral and political transgressions occur in a rapid process of violent polarization. Comparative research on mass political violence demonstrates that once unleashed, it can develop its own dynamic and become nearly unstoppable by internal forces—reaching ‘relative autonomy’.⁵ This dynamic consists of a routinization of the killing, and a collective moral shift in society due to mass impunity. Two other key variables are the political elite’s decision-making and the organization of violence. The first is often conducted in secret sessions, develops in periodic eruptions, and becomes visible only retroactively, when the victims are killed. Indeed, violent conflict exposes the criminal operations and actions of violent political elites, who often begin operating as an organized crime group with growing mutual complicity developing among them. Secondly, the organization of the violence is another major analytical category to be examined. The violence is often carried out according to clear and logical divisions of labour: between the civil and military wing of the state, but also crucially between the military and paramilitary groups. The killing process has the dual function of at once annihilating the victim group and constructing the perpetrator group. The destruction of the other is the validation of the self.

Finally, the transition to a post-genocidal phase often overlaps with the collapse of the violent regime itself. The main perpetrator groups within the regime will attempt to deny their crimes, while traumatized survivor communities will mourn and demand justice or revenge. In this phase, these groups often struggle to propagate

⁵ The classic text on the relative autonomy of violent persecution developing into genocide is Bauman (1989) in particular the discussion on p. 101 ff.

their own memory of the conflict by attempting to straitjacket the complexity of the conflict into a single, self-serving view. The term 'transitional justice' often proves to be an elusive concept: sometimes a fragile democracy develops, and sometimes a different authoritarian regime takes over. In either case, impunity has proven to be the rule and punishment the exception in post-violence societies. This is a genuine dilemma because often an enormous number of people are involved in the crimes, and there are often no clear, premeditated, written, and circulated orders of particular massacres. The direct victims and often even their offspring can continue to suffer for years, even decades. Historians and other scholars often struggle with sketching a detailed picture of the course of the genocide, and forms of denial by successor governments who inherit the perpetrator state, are often the rule.

Together, the above approach generates a dynamic model that has three analytical dimensions and three temporal dimensions. It is primarily a political-sociological model: its focus is centred on the power relationships between offices, agencies, and individuals. To research and try to understand how that process has functioned in different genocides should be one of our top priorities. I will now turn to brief discussions of perpetration, starting from the top-level and working down.

2. The Macro Context: Orchestrating

At the macro level the perpetration of mass violence concerns mainly the political elites that hold offices at the zenith of state power. Before the onset of mass violence, two issues are key to understanding the beginnings of perpetration: power and ideology. To understand a period in which mass violence is perpetrated, it is important to understand how the political elite has been able to wield the state's apparatus(es) of coercion like the police, army, or militias. The increasing concentration of power among political elites can be the result of a creeping, long-term process, or more often a swift revolution. Once such a bureaucratic overtake is successful, political elites can be seduced, by the very prospect of extreme power, to carry out political objectives with or without consent of the political and social groups in society. A broad research landscape deals with this level of analysis, and a plethora of publications has explored the motives of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, and others.⁶ Since perpetration of mass violence against civilians is the near-exclusive monopoly of authoritarian, dictatorial, and totalitarian regimes, the motives and moves of authoritarian leaderships are extremely important to understand. One theme that has sparked debates in this literature is extreme ideology: communism, fascism, Nazism, ethnic nationalism, and their syncretic forms. Scholars have argued that extreme ideologies have a penchant for mass violence due to their anti-liberal nature, flirtations with utopia, development of sharp in/out group dynamics, and permissiveness to the use of violence (Weitz 2005). Comparative volumes on Nazism and Stalinism, but also studies of ethnic

⁶ For a good recent survey, see Ezrow and Frantz (2011).

nationalism, *Juche*, or Ba'athism, have advanced this sub-field (Geyer & Fitzpatrick 2009; Sö & Suh 2013; Sassoon 2011). In any case, no understanding of the motives of top-level perpetrators would be complete without deep analyses of their ideological world-views. I now discuss two sub-topics at the macro level that relate to extreme power and extreme ideology: polarization and out-grouping. These themes have not received appropriate attention and critical analysis so far in the specific literature on perpetration and perpetrators.

First, the polarization of political elites is a good indicator of lower-level political violence. Whether we are dealing with an authoritarian state or a democratic one, the polarization of political elites, under specific conditions, often boils over into violence (Rapoport & Weinberg 2013). The polarization between Turkish and Armenian political elites before 1914, that between Serbian and Croatian elites before 1991, or the polarization of the Rwandan political landscape in the period 1990–1994, are instructive examples of this process. This process is as much about ideologically opposed visions of the future of the society, as they are power struggles for influence in political decision-making. As crisis struck these societies, it sparked the deterioration of relations between antagonistic political parties, which carried especially deadly potential if politics was ethnically tinged.⁷ These three cases demonstrate that radicals on either side, but especially those in positions of public office came to perceive the leaders of the other political parties and movements as security liabilities for their own positions. As violent incidents grew, at some point there seems to have been a set of fateful decisions to arrest, detain, and ultimately murder the entire membership of these opposition parties, from top to bottom. These types of violent initiations are critical junctures that define the course of the macro level, and thereby, the entire genocide.

Furthermore, events at the macro level trickle down fast: as a result of political polarization at the macro level, citizens locally can come to imagine themselves as part and parcel of an overarching, bigger conflict, and in-groups/out-groups rapidly form. Jacques Sémelin has underlined the importance in genocidal processes of the construction of an imagined 'internal enemy' (Sémelin 2007, 22–33). How is 'out-grouping' constructed in the various cases we study? One line of thought places it in the context of long-term identity formation process, in which the definition and demarcation of the in-group occurs under serious inter-state and intrastate pressures, frequently causing crises of identity. During such crises, external enemies can be equated with internal groups accused of disloyalty by virtue of their supposed ethnic, religious, or political proximity to the outside force (Mylonas 2013). A second body of knowledge focuses on identity politics, especially on how collective identity entrepreneurs can purposefully construct an out-group as a dangerous, treacherous, deeply alien, and ultimately dehumanized enemy. Once in power, the Nazis rapidly and very effectively out-grouped German Jews; Ottoman Armenians went from the 'loyal nation' to backstabbers within one turbulent year; Soviet citizens in the 1930s

⁷ For studies of these three cases see Der Matossian (2014), Bieber and Galijaš (2014), and Guichaoua (2015).

would wake up every morning to a different category out-grouped by Stalin; and the rise and normalization of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 era is a good contemporary example (Wilmsen & McAllister 1996).⁸

Once these conditions of political polarization and the image of an internal enemy are in place, a (civil) war generally facilitates the transition into perpetration. The macro-level actors now move from the pre-genocidal phase into the genocidal phase. Two key issues here are the decision-making process, and the criminal subculture of the elites. Decision-making processes are deeply complex phenomena and much more detailed research is needed, since particular critical junctures in these processes might well constitute the critical turning points in the entire process. What are top elites thinking, dreaming of, and planning for when they cross that threshold into massacre? There are a few generalizations we may infer from the research. First, decision-making on mass murder is without exception deeply secret, e.g. all relevant Nazi, Soviet, and Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) documentation is shrouded in profound secrecy. There are reasons for this secrecy⁹ but it has at least two consequences: secrecy obstructs our research even decades after the killings, and secrecy becomes ‘visible’ or understandable to the outside world only once the killing processes are firmly entrenched. In other words, only once a genocide is well on its way may we infer that a secret decision-making process has preceded the on-going mass killings. A second allowable generalization would be that we have by now prudently stopped looking for smoking guns: explicit orders authorizing mass slaughter will not be found. Genocidal elites are overall intelligent enough not to compromise themselves in such written decrees, with very rare exceptions (Stalin, Saddam Hussein). Macro-level analyses of perpetration demonstrate that political elites can get quite ‘comfortable’ with their orchestration of mass murder.¹⁰ After the initial transgressions, organizing the killings becomes a routine that requires some special attention, some adaptations and innovations—but the killings nevertheless continue unabated.

There can be little debate that most genocidal regimes are those based on deeply authoritarian structures—all backed by the fist of enormously expansive violent apparatuses.¹¹ In the genocidal phase, regime type is important to analyse in so far as it relates to the criminal subculture of elites. How do genocidal elites manufacture compliance? How does complicity perpetuate the process of perpetration? (In other words: how does committing crimes *in unison* propel the killing process further and further?) What is the role of the prisoner’s dilemma among the elites? The CUP dictatorship from 1913 to 1918 is a case in point. Although the scholarship on it is developing rapidly, we know relatively little about it compared to other genocidal regimes. A series of studies by Şükrü Hanioglu has sketched a compelling portrait of a ruthless, clandestine revolutionary cabal, an uncompromising party that visualized

⁸ See also Staub (2013, 133 ff). ⁹ For a discussion, see Kühne (2010).

¹⁰ See, for example, the many incisive studies on the Soviet elite in the late 1930s: Harris (2013, 13–28, 49–65), McLoughlin and McDermott (2002, 1–18), Khlevniuk (2009, 127–65).

¹¹ However, massacres in Indonesia, Turkey, Russia, Kenya, India, and Mexico do point out that we cannot dismiss these events so easily and must take seriously the occurrence of violence in fledgling democracies, or societies in transition.

politics mostly as a dichotomy of friends versus enemies, applying terror, threats, and assassination to its 'enemies'. As time passed, all of this violence bore heavily on the party and radicalized it further (Hanioglu 1995; Hanioglu 2001). Much of these analyses hold true for the Bolsheviks, the Khmer Rouge, or the Ba'athists in Iraq. The enormous concentration of executive power in the hands of these parties, from the moment of a coup d'état onwards, made the exercise of violence on a mass scale possible. But these studies also offer a window into the *internal* dynamics of these elites. Milovan Djilas' classic *Conversations with Stalin*, or Saddam Hussein's audio-taped meetings offer a glimpse into the world of the genocide-perpetrating elite (Djilas 1969).¹² It is a grim, suffocating universe of existential uncertainty, dark suspicion, mutual complicity, and utter misanthropy. We require greater depth (comprehensive empirical recreations) and breadth (implicit and explicit comparisons) of this particular phenomenon regarding macro-level perpetrators during genocides.

What happens to a genocidal elite after the killings end? Often there is a transition, peaceful or violent, and sometimes there is 'normalization'. More often there is impunity and no punishment. Stalin, Hafez al-Assad, and Suharto presided over unprecedented mass murders in their respective countries but lived on unperturbedly and died natural deaths. It is unlikely that they did not get rid of incriminating evidence—documentary or forensic. In some cases, dirty deals are made, and genocidal elites receive golden parachutes.¹³ There is convincing circumstantial evidence that US diplomat Richard Holbrooke offered Radovan Karadžić a US-authorized immunity from prosecution. Idi Amin lived comfortably for decades in Saudi Arabia, and so did Mengistu in Zimbabwe. The chances that contemporary criminal elites such as Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Bashar al-Assad, Kim Jong-Un, let alone American war criminals such as George W. Bush or Henry Kissinger, will ever be held accountable are very slim. Those against whom there are attempts of accountability, such as Slobodan Milošević or Charles Taylor, ultimately go through trials that do not seem to deter future genocidal elites (Bloxham & Pendas 2010, 617–37). The entire process of macro-level perpetration, from incipience to orchestration to post-violence life, requires particularly close attention to the transitions between each phase, and their relations with the lower levels. It is to the first lower level that we turn now.

3. The Meso Context: Organizing

The second tier of our model concerns the intrasocietal context of the actual organization of mass violence. These processes are decisive for the deadly outcomes. Accordingly, not only does this level link the macro with the micro, but it is also here that the macro-level dynamics are reproduced within a society by various political

¹² For a selection of transcripts from Saddam Hussein's meetings see <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/168/saddam-hussein-s-iraq/2> or <http://crrc.dodlive.mil/collections/sh/> (Accessed 31 January 2018).

¹³ For a set of arguments see <http://howgenocidesend.ssrc.org> (Accessed 7 May 2017).

actors and groups. The meso level refers to the perpetrating agencies, including the culture and practice of organizing mass murder. How do previously non-genocidal and technocratic institutions, organizations, and agencies in a given state and society collaborate in genocide? How do otherwise apolitical families make decisions, conduct business, and comport themselves in a genocidal process? How are city administrations taken over and steered towards genocidal destruction of some of their fellow citizens? And of course: how can we better understand the changing sociological relationships among different perpetrator groups?

The scholarship on this level is scant but developing. Most monographs on perpetrators focus on the micro-level contexts of the actual killers. For example, Scott Straus defined perpetrators as ‘those who directly killed or assaulted civilians and those who participated in groups that killed or assaulted civilians’ (Straus 2006, 102). The studies by James Waller (2007), Roy Baumeister (2015), Steven Baum (2008), Dick Mildt (1996), Donald Dutton (2007), and Dinah Shelton’s *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity* (2005), to name a few, largely concur with this view. With a few excellent exceptions, the scholarship has largely neglected to examine the mid-management contexts, the intermediary agencies and institutions that translate macro-level orders to the micro-level destruction. Books that deal with this level are gradually appearing. There is of course a rich literature on the meso-level Nazis, from economically minded arguments in Heim and Aly’s *Vordenker der Vernichtung* to Mallmann and Paul’s panoptic *Karrieren der Gewalt* and Fulbrook’s detailed *A Small Town Near Auschwitz* (Aly & Heim 1991; Mallmann & Paul 2004; Fulbrook 2013; see also Wildt 2002). Other genocides, too, are beginning to deal with mid-level perpetrators, such as Cruvellier’s and Hinton’s books on the Cambodian prison boss Duch (Cruvellier 2014a; Hinton 2016).¹⁴

A close look at most works on mass violence clearly identifies patterns of interaction between the macro and meso levels, e.g. in the recruitment of perpetrators, the coordination of murderous efforts, civil society initiatives toward assisting the genocidal apparatus, and the manufacturing of broad-based indifference towards the plight of the victims. On the other hand, an over-focus on the macro level may also blind us to the autonomy and agency of these mid-level bureaucracies. Perpetration of mass violence is co-produced by a vast network of collaborating ministry officials, military officers, government functionaries, gatekeepers and caretakers, committees, civil servants, police commissars, career diplomats, party bosses, provincial judges, urban regulators, militia bosses, and many others. In principle, these are not yet the men who get their hands dirty.¹⁵ The macro-level overseers are well aware they need these people to manage the many necessary tasks. Before the killings, the civil-bureaucratic and military takeover deeply polarizes and purifies this level of officials. Some stay in their positions if they reconcile the vague (but unmistakably murderous) designs of the new regime; others are either purged or leave on their own volition.¹⁶ This partly self-regulating and self-reinforcing process paves the way for

¹⁴ See also Chapter 5 by Bouwknecht and Nistor in this volume.

¹⁵ But there are examples of relatively high-ranking Nazis performing executions, like Theodor Eicke, who executed Ernst Röhm.

¹⁶ The Armenian genocide offering ample examples of both. See, for example, Üngör (2015).

the macro-level organizers to push through their plans, and also bolsters the political polarization at the elite-level mentioned in Section 2.

Genocides develop in shocks and fits that the macro-level elites visit upon the meso-level agencies. They are generally not smooth processes that develop in a linear way, with a measured, steady escalation of violence; on the contrary, there are sudden shocks and unexpected turns to the process of mass killing. The transition from the pre-genocidal to genocidal phase ushers in two distinct processes for the meso-level perpetrators: practical organization and regional variation. The organization of perpetration requires a clear, functional, and effective division of labour between the state's civil service system and its military industry—but also between the military and paramilitary actors in the state (Feldman & Seibel 2005). Throughout the perpetration process, tensions remain pertinent, and have a profound impact on the outcome of the genocide. Examples abound: whereas the various German agencies did not co-operate well during the invasion of France, they did much better during the invasion of the Soviet Union. The frequent conflicts between the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) and the various Serb paramilitary groups in Bosnia are well documented in Ratko Mladić's diaries (Mladić 1991–1996). Whether these tensions are resolved or not, the meso-level officials are the ones who have to deal with real constraints during the perpetration of the violence, such as shortages of resources and manpower, interagency competition, and conflicting priorities.

The meso level is then also confronted with a very common problem: regional variations in the perpetration of the violence. After all, genocides are not undifferentiated campaigns in which simultaneous mass killing evolves the same everywhere in the country. Scholars have examined the relationship between central decision-making processes and the implementation of mass murder at the local level. In-depth research on how genocidal processes evolve at the meso level (province, district, city) has proven most fruitful. These studies can teach us a great deal about how local power shifts influence the course and intensity of genocidal processes, since we know that some genocides (such as the Indonesian and Armenian ones) are more regionally varied than others. Local political or social elites can anticipate, expedite, intensify, or delay and resist processes of genocidal destruction directed from above.¹⁷ A micro focus can also follow the deterioration and ultimate disintegration of intercommunal relations in the face of external pressures, amidst drastically worsening security and life conditions for the victims. Possible explanations for this variation may include, for example, the personal whims of the local power holders, the geographic conditions, the conduct of local elites, and structural factors such as proximity to the front, social stratification, settlement patterns, poverty and unemployment, population density of victim group, and opportunity structures. But which combination of factors accounts for what kind of variation in genocidal processes? For example, why did the eastern Drina valley (roughly along the line Bijeljina-Zvornik-Višegrad-Foča) saw much higher levels of violence than the central-northern Tuzla region during the genocide in Bosnia? Why did the genocide

¹⁷ For a broader analysis of this problem, see Robinson (2018, 3–27).

in Rwanda's southern and northern provinces develop at quite different speeds? Why did violence develop so quickly in Bali compared to Sumatra during the 1965–1966 Indonesian genocide? Only by addressing these meso-level issues comparatively we can aggregate our theoretical debates.

Discussions of regional heterogeneity have serious implications because they prompt us to reconceptualise 'diversity' in genocide perpetration. In an examination of diversity in the Holocaust, Henri Zukier identifies four important polarities in the scholarship: personal versus situational factors, centre versus periphery, ideology versus pragmatism, and long-term planning versus short-term reactions. He argues that diversity is often seen as an outcome, but diversity can also be part and parcel of the process of genocide, especially in the complex interactions between centre and periphery. Zukier concludes rightly that the 'diversity of triggers still led to a uniformity of outcomes' (Zukier 2013, 387–410). Most genocides do not have an equivalent of the Wannsee Conference to resolve the pervasive divergence in the local implementation of state policies. It is often up to an interior ministry to co-ordinate the operations and synchronize the violent measures against the victims. These ministries or specialized agencies delegate the daily implementation of the destruction to its officials and officers, as well as civil administrators. Time and again, *provincial governors* seem to be highly relevant in steering policies, as many fine-grained provincial case studies demonstrate.¹⁸ A similar argument can be made for generals in military districts, as Jess Melvin (2014) convincingly demonstrates for Aceh during the 1965 Indonesian genocide. There is much to be gained from comparative examination of provincial and local factors that interfered in the process of perpetration. But it also confirms Zukier's point that even if genocides unfold on a twisted course, the result is nevertheless generalized destruction.

How does a regionalized conceptualization of genocide relate to its temporal understanding? This question requires a closer analysis than these pages allow, but it suffices to state here that there seems to be a certain conception of 'communicating vessels' at play. Provincial studies on the Armenian and Rwandan genocides suggest that when a genocide is more intensive and extensive in one province, other provinces emulate their violence bottom-up, or are ordered to do so top-down. A breakdown of perpetration per province demonstrates 'above-norm performers' and 'under-norm performers'. The underachieving provinces are often stimulated to emulate the best practices or benchmarks of the overachievers, leading perpetrators to move from their own provinces to other provinces, and the victims to flee from the deadliest areas to those that are slightly safer. Regionalization is not simply a matter of territorial differentiation. It is closely related to the morphology of the organization, coordination, and implementation of the crime. Recent studies challenge the convention that genocides have uni-polar pyramidal structures. The more research is published, the more genocides are conceived of as multi-polar processes: radicalization comes from within and without, and emanates from different perpetrating

¹⁸ See, for example, the provincially structured studies from Kévorkian (2006), Zukier (2013), and Jisheng (2012).

clusters, such as civil and military organizations, the ruling cabals themselves, and local elites.¹⁹ Competition and conflict among these sectors shape genocides.

One common, almost universal tension in genocide perpetration is that between military authorities and paramilitary structures. Perpetration is almost exclusively carried out by well-equipped, specialized, often paramilitary forces. Paramilitarism refers to clandestine, irregular, armed organizations that carry out acts of violence against clearly defined civilian individuals or groups. It has immense importance for understanding the processes of violence that are played out during ethnic conflicts, which often see the formation of paramilitary units that conduct counter-insurgency operations, scorched earth campaigns, and violence against civilians, including genocide. Many studies of genocide have convincingly demonstrated the central role of paramilitaries in the perpetration of genocide.²⁰ Whether in democratic or authoritarian states, throughout the twentieth century paramilitaries have been responsible for widespread violations of human rights against civilians. States orchestrating mass violence spawn paramilitary units as a covert augmentation of state power for special purposes such as mass murder. The set of questions to ask here is: How and why were paramilitary forces organized and deployed? Why did they emerge, and which relationships can we detect between paramilitaries and other meso-level perpetrator clusters? The perpetration of paramilitary groups has been studied extensively for some of the major cases of mass violence (Campbell & Brenner 2000). The SA and SS, for example, have extensive, stand-alone historiographies. There are good studies of the Rwandan *Interahamwe*, Serb paramilitary groups, the *Janjaweed* in Sudan, or the Hindu-extremist militias in Gujarat.²¹ A comparative reading of these studies offers unique insights into the 'nuts and bolts' of perpetration, and studies of new conflicts should focus on these types of paramilitary groups.

After the violence ends, examining the meso level is relevant for understanding the 'perpetrator society'. How did Germany after 1945, Indonesia after 1966, Turkey after 1915, and Serbia after 1995 fare? What happened to the perpetrating agencies? How did the state transform them, and how did they transform the state? Joshua Oppenheimer's documentaries *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* show, in astonishing scenes, how these mid-level perpetrators generally fared well and ended up being promoted to governors, bureaucrats, and influential politicians with comfortable socio-economic positions. A recent investigative journalism piece by *Der Spiegel* illustrated how, at the time of writing, this process is ongoing in Syria: those paramilitary groups who were most loyal to Assad since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, are now the ones who enjoy immense privileges of political, economic, and military power.²² The prospects for vetting, punishment, or reconciliation are slim,

¹⁹ For an introduction to the plunder of Armenian property, see Üngör and Polatel (2011).

²⁰ For one overview, see Alvarez (2006).

²¹ See Munene (2005), Ferguson (2018), Flint (2009), and Berenschot (2011).

²² *Spiegel International*, Assad's Control Erodes as Warlords Gain Upper Hand (8 March 2017) www.spiegel.de/international/world/assad-power-slips-in-syria-as-warlords-grow-more-powerful-a-1137475.html (Accessed 5 May 2017).

in case the perpetrating regime gains the upper hand in the conflict and manages to remain an acceptable partner in the international community.

4. The Micro Context: Killing

Let us now turn to the micro level, which concerns the extraordinary things that occur to rank-and-file executioners on the ground. Alexander Hinton's book title nicely captures the overarching research question in this field: *Why did they kill?* (Hinton 2004). At this level, the study of perpetration thrives. The study of low-level perpetrators has moved way beyond differing clichés of faceless, banal, or sadistic killers, undifferentiated and unexplained, who murder people for no apparent reason, or out of pure hatred and malignance. Biographical investigation and sociological contextualization have challenged and debunked these essentialist ideas for years now. Comparative research on the killers is gradually reflecting common ground, increasing sophistication, and a nuanced and complex picture of dispositional and situational factors (Jensen & Szejnmann 2008). One of the cornerstones in the field was undoubtedly Christopher Browning's bestseller *Ordinary Men*, famous for adopting a social-psychological model of obedience to authority and conformity to explain the behaviour of German perpetrators (Browning 1992, xvi). Journalistic research on perpetrators has also often been insightful. For example, in one chapter of her book *They Would Not Hurt a Fly*, Slavenka Drakulić uses ICTY court transcriptions and contextual interviews to paint a moving picture of Dražen Erdemović, a Bosnian Serb who passed through various trials and tribulations, and ended up shooting Bosniak men in the Srebrenica massacre of 13–22 July 1995 (Drakulić 2004, 106 ff). But the study of perpetration suffers from a certain imbalance, or lopsided growth: whereas many studies have contributed to the micro level, the macro and meso levels have not enjoyed the same attention.

Studies of micro-level perpetration hardly focus on the period before the commission of mass violence. Little is known of the personal backgrounds, life courses, personal conflicts, individual ambitions, and grievances of the perpetrators to be. Interviews with them (long) after the killings clarify some of these issues, but they are affected by retrospective adaptations and lapses of memory. Sometimes, it is possible to 'catch' young men before they become perpetrators, but this requires foresight, social access, and luck. From the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, I deliberately began interviewing pro-Assad young Syrian men, before I suspected they could be mobilized to join (para)military organizations. Once they were inducted in these groups, it proved much more difficult to interview them due to the censorship, discipline, suspicion, and secrecy surrounding the groups. These interviews have yielded some insights I believe can be useful to understand the mobilization of perpetrators. For example, some of my preliminary findings suggest that the Assad regime has convincingly offered a range of incentives to address the variety of motives of these young men. Another tentative conclusion I draw is that sibling rivalry and favouritism has played an undeniable role in mobilizing militia members.

Once the violence begins, the micro-level perpetrators conduct countless killings of unarmed civilians or defenceless prisoners. When we speak of ‘perpetration’ this is generally what we mean: the violent phase at the micro level. This reductionist perspective can be expanded by imagining perpetration as an explicitly multi-level process with distinct phases, as discussed here. One more problem in the scholarship is the confusion between mass violence and organized violence, i.e. the over-focus on (mass) individual motives, instead of small-scale sociological organizational dynamics.²³ Micro-level perpetrator studies invariably include models and explanatory diagrams, but these are often too static, and do not reflect sufficiently the dynamic interactions over time as a *process*. Juxtaposition of motives, regardless how convincing, does not capture the changing ‘life moments’ of the perpetrators’ inner world: motives change over time, they are unanticipated beforehand, and produce unwanted consequences. The *micro-sociology* of studies like those of Lee-Ann Fujii (on Rwanda), Ton Robben (on Argentina), Aziz Nakkash (on Syria), Kjell Anderson (comparative), and Abram de Swaan’s (comparative) are a new step in the right direction (Fujii 2009a; Robben 2010; Nakkash 2013; Anderson 2018; de Swaan 2015).

There also seems to be a widespread confusion about *motives* versus *motivations*. Both terms basically mean incentive or drive, but *motive* is used to mean the specific reasons for performing a specific action, an incentive, a particular goal or objective. It also often implies ulterior motives, and therefore the term is often used in judicial proceedings to explain the actions of criminals—a suspect’s possible ‘motives’ for committing a crime. Motivation is generally what drives a person, at a deeper level, to pursue certain broader goals of self-actualization in life. For example, someone can decide to become a doctor to help relieve human suffering; the motivation is to relieve human suffering. Therefore, ‘motive’ has a more negative and short-term connotation than ‘motivation’ (Ryan 2013). We need to apply fine-grained distinctions here: a perpetrator may hold general motivations in life, which during a genocide may give him/her specific motives to kill. This approach is related to explanations founded on collective emotions. Studies of ethnic violence have identified three major emotional responses triggering ethnic violence in the twentieth century: fear, hatred, and resentment.²⁴ For the micro level of perpetrator research, this is a useful point of departure. According to emotion-based theories, political elites construct identity narratives based on group experiences of structural changes. Shifting socio-economic conditions and patterns of social mobility alter power and status relations among groups, as they overturn time-honoured hierarchies in ranked ethnic systems. These changes can tap into motivations and affective dispositions of potential perpetrators and manufacture acute collective emotions such as hatred, fear, and resentment.

The transition to killing has been elaborately studied in perpetrator studies and I will not recap the entire scholarship here. Suffice it to state that this phase of micro-level perpetration, too, is a process with at least three distinct stages of development.

²³ See, for example, Lewy (2017) and Grossman (1996).

²⁴ For two theoretical syntheses see Horowitz (2000) and Petersen (2002).

First, the killers are subjected to a moment of initiation or induction: they are confronted with the tasks of mass killing, pressured by vertical and horizontal forms of coercion painstakingly described by Christopher Browning in *Ordinary Men*. The group then bonds through these collective transgressions and gradually develops into a routinization process in which killings become more and more standardized and the perpetrator gets used to the perpetration. Finally, the adaptation process produces a unique moral shift, in which the killings are so normalized that it becomes increasingly difficult for the perpetrator to realize the full extent of his crimes and imagine the destruction from the meso or micro levels.²⁵ Once the murderous tasks are completed, micro-level perpetrators enter the post-perpetration phase and their identities change again. How do they process, discuss, and explain their perpetration in hindsight? How do they view the (absence of the) victim community? To what extent can we speak of guilt, or a ‘perpetrator trauma’? (Mohamed 2015).

5. Discussion

This chapter has focused on constructing a model of perpetration that unites (political-) sociological and historical perspectives, using an ecological approach with interconnected levels that shift and change over time. Rather than a myopic focus on *perpetrators*, this dynamic model revolves around the concept of *perpetration* as a process. Perpetration is a complex political process interlocking macro-level perpetrators (architects) with meso-level perpetrators (organizers) and countless micro-level perpetrators (killers). The precise configurations are different per genocide and need to be studied in detail on a case-by-case basis, but the net results are always mass murder and obliteration of the victim group. Two important challenges need to be considered. First and foremost, none of these levels of analysis stand alone, and need to be continuously connected and seen as complex inter-relations and vectors of influence. For example, macro-level justifications using ideology are used by micro-level killers, meso-level organizers depend on the grand plans and fiat of macro-level genocidal thinkers, and macro-level architects utilize micro-level perpetrators as alibis. As scholars of perpetration, we need to identify which levels are well-studied in which cases, and which levels are not. We must also bear in mind that, and explain why, the ‘shape’ of the perpetration looks different for each case. Some cases of mass violence are ‘bottom-heavy’ (lots of micro-level perpetrators) and resemble an irregular pyramid, again others are anchored at the meso level (involving many state agencies) and approximates a rhombus or ellipse shape.

Secondly and finally, there are clear limits to the model. Whereas it may seem as if victims and third parties (‘bystanders’) are left relatively under-represented in the model, they should be central to any analysis of perpetration. Mass violence invariably consists of distinct phases of unilateral killing, but perpetrator–victim interactions are relevant to fully grasping the ideas and acts of perpetrators of all levels.

²⁵ For a comprehensive overview, see Smeulers and Grünfeld (2011, 203–330).

A similar argument can be made for ‘bystanders’, a complex and vague term that requires a critical approach and more thorough empirical foundation. Bystanders’ behaviour, across these three levels, has influenced perpetration in ways that have been explored well for some, and less for other genocides.²⁶ Bearing in mind these constraints, the model constructed in this chapter offers pathways to a deeper understanding of perpetration.

²⁶ This topic was explored in-depth at the conference *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The ‘Bystander’ in Holocaust History*, Amsterdam, 24–26 September 2015.