

Understanding Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence

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REVIEW OF: Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel eds., *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations and Dynamics* (New York: Routledge, 2018). 214 pp. £120.00 (hb). ISBN: 9780815386179.

Scholarly efforts to investigate, analyse and ultimately understand perpetrators of mass violence are not new, yet in the last few years we have witnessed the expansion of these studies across disciplines and historical instances of mass violence. It seems as though more books and articles are being published on the various aspects of perpetration of genocide and mass violence than ever before, and perpetrator-centered research is truly having a moment. This dynamism and innovation in the field of perpetrator studies makes it much harder to make a significant scholarly contribution to the expansion of knowledge and understanding, yet that is exactly what this edited volume does.

Scholars have used different approaches to study political and civilian leaders and their role in perpetrating genocide and mass violence, and researchers in ethnography and anthropology in particular have looked at rank and file and their participation. Political scientists, sociologists, historians, criminologists, legal scholars and media experts have all contributed to our understanding of the complex social and political context in which violence is perpetrated, and how men and women, as well as children, come to kill, beat, torture, rape or rob others.

There are a number of scholarly works that have become must-reads, approaching the subject from different angles. For example, works by James Waller,¹ and Abram de Swaan.² Other, more recent volumes complement these near-classical texts. For example, writings by Sin-

1 James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

2 Abram de Swaan, *The Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).



iša Malešević³ and Kjell Anderson⁴ examine organized violence and perpetration, as do studies by Lee Ann Fujii,⁵ Saira Mohamed⁶ and Wendy Lower.⁷ The latter three analyze community dynamics, perpetrator behavior and female perpetrators during the Second World War.

Another relevant contribution, *Perpetrators of International Crimes*, edited by Alette Smeulers, Barbora Holá and Maartje Weerdesteijn, analyzes perpetration informed by legal and criminological perspectives, through case studies on Nazi Germany, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, the so-called Islamic State and the former Yugoslavia.⁸ Journalists have also made great strides forward in our understanding of perpetration, for example Sam Dagher's recent work on the Assad family and its networks in Syria.⁹ Most recently, a handbook edited by Susanne Knittel and Zachary Goldberg was published, tracing the development of this growing interdisciplinary field of perpetrator studies, setting out its foundations, key debates and main questions.¹⁰ The book which is the subject of this review is in conversation with all these works and complements them in important ways.

Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence's distinguishing feature is the emphasis on perpetration as action, and on the dynamics of violence, rather than on the perpetrator as a person or concept. The book is divided into two sections, where the former theorizes perpetration while the latter analyzes motivations and dynamics of perpetration. It contains eleven chapters written by some of the leading scholars in the field, whose diverse disciplinary background reflects the diversity within perpetrator studies, with contributions by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, criminologists, and political scientists. The guiding questions of the book are: why do people perpetrate violence? What does perpetration as action signify and what motivates these

3 Siniša Malešević, *The Rise of Organised Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

4 Kjell Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A Criminological Account* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

5 Lee Ann Fujii, 'Talk of the Town: Explaining Pathways to Participation in Violent Display', *Journal of Peace Research*, 54.5 (2017), 661-73.

6 Saira Mohamed, 'Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity', *Columbia Law Review*, 115.5 (2015), 1157-216.

7 Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

8 *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn and Barbora Holá (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

9 Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

10 *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (New York: Routledge, 2019).

actions? How do political, social and economic dynamics influence perpetration?

These and other important questions are discussed in chapters focusing on civil servants in the Third Reich (Chapter 4), on aspects of symbolic violence in participation and perpetration in civil war (Chapter 5), on narratives of perpetration in the Wehrmacht between 1941 and 1944 (Chapter 6), on perpetrators of sexual violence (Chapter 8), gender and genocide in Rwanda (Chapter 7), the cross-border recruitment during the Ivorian civil war (Chapter 9), and in one chapter which focuses on the *Judenjagd*, assessing the role of ordinary Poles as perpetrators in the Holocaust (Chapter 10). Among these, Jesper Bjarnesen's chapter on the *Forces Nouvelles* rebel movement is particularly notable given the relative absence of in-depth discussion of the perpetrators in the Ivory Coast in contemporary scholarly publications which often focus on the Holocaust or the genocide in Rwanda. The introductory chapter stresses the importance of perpetrators being analyzed and understood as 'ordinary human beings', while, as often seen in similar works, the authors are quick to emphasize that this is not in order to exculpate but to understand them.¹¹ This caveat is a common feature of scholarly works on perpetrators, and while understandable in the earlier years of perpetrator research, when efforts at understanding perpetrators were observed with suspicion, one would hope that today's readership, academic and lay, will not require it any longer.

For the purposes of this review, we will focus on three chapters, those written by Timothy Williams, Christian Gudehus and Scott Straus, as they represent the more conceptual parts of this book and are likely to influence approaches and analysis in future scholarship. Williams opens the book by asking the reader to think about perpetrators beyond the well-known classifications including perpetrators, bystanders and heroes, and by suggesting that researchers look beyond perpetrator typologies. He emphasizes that perpetrators do not often fit these rigid categories, as there is 'diversity of genocidal actions' and asks for a more flexible approach which will reflect this fact.¹² Williams proposes a focus on action in genocide (as opposed to focusing on the person—the perpetrator) and to analyze precisely what perpetrators actually *do*, that is, taking a 'behavioral perspective'. In the following

11 *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Action, Motivations and Dynamics*, ed. by Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 9.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

pages, Williams develops a typology of action in genocide, which he visualizes in the form of a schema where behavior is presented along two axes, one of 'proximity' to the act (distant versus close), and one of individual impact (from subversive behavior to commanding or agitating for violence).¹³ For example, Williams categorizes a wide range of actions along the proximity axis, from no connection to the killings to the bodily involvement in the assault. In between, ten different ways an individual can participate in the killing (or not) are noted, covering everything from tangential involvement such as 'hearing reports of killing in a distant location' to 'face to face encounter with killing'.¹⁴

Williams thus challenges previous conceptualizations and typologies and provides us with the tools to understand perpetration as a much more complex, dynamic phenomenon, where there are numerous ways of perpetrating and participating in mass violence and genocide, as well as observing it from the sidelines. This approach is a productive way of thinking about human action and atrocity crimes because it is more likely to capture the complexities of human behavior. It allows us think perpetration from a multitude of perspectives, and with significant nuance, where perpetrator behavior is not easily categorized as being simply the work of a sadist or a power-thirsty leader. It also captures the fact that a perpetrator may kill one day, beat the next, and observe from the sidelines the day after. Perpetrator typologies are less likely to capture that complexity.

Gudehus takes this approach of violence as action further in the following chapter, discussing social theoretical approaches to collective violence, and suggesting understanding this violence as 'human activity'.¹⁵ The chapter posits that 'perpetrators differ considerably at least in relation to (1) their real contribution to the deed, i.e. their actions, and, closely related, (2) in the factors leading them to these actions'.¹⁶ By emphasizing this, Gudehus invites researchers to investigate beyond the individual, while considering the perpetrator as a person with all their individual complexities. This chapter further outlines different social theoretical approaches, how these approaches have developed historically, and suggests ways in which they are useful in shaping the thinking and writing about perpetration. For example, by discussing how much violence aims to achieve, or avoid, a certain

¹³ *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence*, p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

social change, as well as by noting that extreme violence in the context of genocide changes both society and the individuals involved.¹⁷ Importantly, Gudehus reminds us that it is the people who act, that their actions are not predetermined, and 'they do this rooted in experiences that are sedimented to various degrees and that not only create their modes of perception but also their sensibility'.¹⁸ Scholarly work inspired by this approach will certainly be available within the project Gudehus is running with his colleagues, where a network of researchers cooperates to document, analyze and discuss sources and practices relevant for understanding perpetration of mass violence.¹⁹

Finally, Straus brings together some of the questions and arguments in the book in the last chapter when he asks if a comparative theory of perpetration is possible.²⁰ Straus correctly identifies a lack of comparative studies on perpetrators and moreover a lack of studies that bring together the approaches in earlier works focusing on the perpetrator as a person, and the approaches focusing on action, as advocated by Williams and Gudehus. The questions which remain unanswered, according to Straus, are 'What is a perpetrator?' and 'What does the perpetrator perpetrate?'.²¹ Pushing the discussion forward and demanding a more precise understanding of the central figure of our scholarship, 'the perpetrator', this chapter differentiates between the perpetrator and the soldier (while understanding that they can indeed be the same person), because the former engages in 'non-sanctioned' violence, in a 'normative, legal sense'.²² Another important emphasis Straus makes is the requirement to look at the circumstances and institutions 'that lead individuals to commit violence'.²³ This chapter in particular, while short, is useful for the reader as it enables them to collect their thoughts at the very end of the book, and think precisely about *whom*, and *what*, they study.

Rich as it is with theoretical contributions and case studies, the volume leaves two distinct elements largely unaddressed: the ethics of researching perpetrators of mass violence, and methodological

17 *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence*, pp. 39–40.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

19 More broadly on the project see: *Practices of Violence*, <practices-of-violence.net> [accessed 5 January 2020].

20 *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence*, p. 204.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

issues concerning the collection and treatment of sources. The issue of methodology is recognized as crucial in the very last section of the book, but not expanded upon.²⁴ This last chapter by Straus inspires us to think about whether, for example, a survivor should be given more credence when testifying because of their victim experience? Secondly, and this is a question that has sadly been often ignored: what does the freedom to choose and act freely mean in the context of armed conflict? What is the role of duress and peer pressure – and how many perpetrators in a given situation are enthusiastic about, as opposed to pressured into, committing attacks on civilians and other atrocities? What kinds of pressures do prospective perpetrators face? While it is true that armed conflicts are different and circumstances vary vastly from context to context and one violent situation to another, it appears as though many conversations about perpetrators depart from an assumption that each individual is free to choose how they act. Much of the research seems to pay too little attention to the pressures, internal and external, perpetrators are subjected to. Going beyond perpetration of mass violence alone, it seems that the assumption that all individuals have an equal ability to truly and freely choose should not be made so lightly.²⁵

Questions which research on perpetrators and perpetration should address in the future are numerous, developing further as the nature of contemporary warfare changes. These include different paramilitary engagements with states and private corporations as well as private security companies, cyber warfare, and artificial intelligence, which is increasingly being used in militaries around the world. One conventional but fascinating line of research, separate but very much related to perpetration of mass violence concerns research conducted on the recruitment, engagement and experiences of combatants in armed conflicts. One valuable book is *Insurgent Women*, which looks at female participation in three conflicts: in Ukraine, the Kurdish regions of the Middle East, and Colombia.²⁶ After all, before people become actual perpetrators, they often take up arms as part of regular or irregular units. Therefore, understanding what drives people towards violence in the first place is crucial.

24 *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence*, p. 208.

25 David Eagleman, The Brain on Trial, *The Atlantic*, July/August 2011, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/the-brain-on-trial/308520/>> [accessed 5 January 2020].

26 Jessica Trisko Darden, Alexis Henshaw, and Ora Szekely, *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

It is important that we comprehend what influences internal dynamics of armed groups and the likelihood of attacks on civilians. Furthermore, what fuels or contains particular types of assaults such as rape and sexual violence, torture and gruesome acts such as mutilation? More attention should be directed towards the structures which enable perpetration as well as to patterns of violence, asking what is being done to whom, and why. The action-centered approach presented in this volume is especially well-suited for the latter because of the close attention paid to the ways in which violence is practiced. Some of these questions may be answered with studies focusing on micro locations: small towns and villages outside of the focus of existing research, as well as in-depth scholarship on paramilitaries which attack civilians in conflicts around the globe.²⁷

Perpetrators and Perpetration provides an accessible, thorough yet concise treatment of the topic of perpetrators and perpetration of mass violence and showcases the current state of the research and its key questions while pointing to directions where and how to expand this important scholarship. As such, it is one of the key volumes to read in the field of perpetrator studies.

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²⁷ See, for example, one such project focusing on paramilitaries in Syria, Turkey and the former Yugoslavia: *Paramilitarism*, <paramilitarism.org> [accessed 5 January 2020]. See also Ugur Ümit Ungor, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence and the Shadow of the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).