
First published: Südosteuropa, 64 (2016), 4

Eastern Europe has seen major instances of mass annihilation, including the Soviet terror under Stalin, the Holocaust, and the Srebrenica massacre. This book throws light on these episodes of large-scale, asymmetric violence against unarmed populations by providing a comprehensive sociological model of analysis that includes various aspects and scales. It helps us to understand why, and under what conditions, mass annihilation occurs and what the perpetrators are like, referring to numerous cases of mass murder, extermination, and genocide across continents. Although, predictably, prominence is given to the Holocaust, the author chooses Rwanda for a detailed case-study analysis (Chapter 5). He leaves aside mechanized killings from a distance, such as shelling and bombing of unarmed civilians, or murder by omission caused by large-scale famine, and focuses instead on mass extermination at close range whereby murderers confront their victims in a situation of physical intimacy, in the context of colonial campaigns, (civil) wars, revolutions, and coups d’état.

His analysis starts with an ardent critique of the dominant ‘situationist’ consensus, which portrays perpetrators as ordinary people who had ‘the bad luck to end up in circumstances that transformed them into mass murderers’ (x), an argument that can be traced back to Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963), and continues to resonate in Browning’s Ordinary Men (1992) and Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners (1996), and is supported (quite erroneously, as de Swaan shows) by Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiments (Chapter 2). Although the perpetrators (almost always males) seem to be normal men and good fathers, rather than psycho- or sociopaths, de Swaan argues that they are still not quite like ‘you’ and ‘me’. They have passed through stages of social and political upheaval and ideological and military preparation (usually generated by war, political violence, economic crisis, unemployment, and authoritarian and militaristic traditions) and incremental processes of selection and self-selection, which brings their capacity for unscrupulous killing to the surface. As de Swaan writes, ‘[a]n almost invisible selection mechanism operates in the manner of a vibrating sieve, gradually sorting out persons who are only slightly more disposed to violent abuse than others, until they end up in a genocidal setting’ (268). Young men with reduced moral consciousness, a low sense of agency, and limited empathy are therefore more likely to end up as ‘genocidaires’.

De Swaan, a Dutch sociologist renowned for his clear-headed and elegant essays written for a broad audience, provides a compelling and lucid account and analysis revolving around Norbert Elias’ idea of the (de)civilizing process and psychoanalytic concepts such as projective identification, empathy, and mentalization. His main concern is to understand evolving pro-
cesses of identification (‘widening circles of identification’) and, as part of this, the occasional collapse of civilization (‘widening circles of disidentification’). The latter leads to regression, in terms of perpetrators losing their inhibitions toward the use of violence against target populations in the so-called ‘killing compartments’. His book provides an important step forward in offering a broad sociological understanding of such episodes of mass violence, although the author remains modest in the face of the enormity of the events described, claiming that he has come up ‘with some answers […] incomplete, tentative, but enlightening’ (x).

De Swaan argues that the situationist paradigm can be questioned, since we know very little about the perpetrators: they tend to hide and remain silent because of the social opprobrium they would receive and the risk of arrest they may face. Most of what we know about them is from trials, which produce testimonies of victims and statements by defendants. The latter play down their roles and try their best to appear as average, uncommitted, ordinary men, who had no choice, a trap that Hannah Arendt fell into. We know little about how they coped with their experiences and memories of killing other people, although the available evidence suggests that they suffered little personal damage: while survivors and bystanders are traumatized, the perpetrators seem to have no problem (214). They acted with the regime’s full support, ignoring the humanity of their victims and reducing them to disposable objects of contempt and hatred. De Swaan talks about ‘stunted mentalization’, which prevents perpetrators from empathizing with their victims. There are variations, however: some men are willing executioners, whereas others may be indifferent, reluctant, or may even try to stay away from the killing sites.

The key concept in de Swaan’s analysis is ‘compartmentalization’, which includes a number of parallel mental, social, political, legal, and spatial and temporal processes (Chapters 6 and 7): the creation of hostile categories of despised ‘others’ that usually crystalizes over a longer period of time, the construction of an enemy group that needs to be eliminated, the spatial separation and rounding up of the target population, the creation of ‘killing compartments’, that is, the formation of separate (often isolated or secluded) spaces where mass killings are permitted in demarcated spaces and temporal slots, and last but not least the compartmentalization or ‘doubling’ taking place in the minds of the perpetrators who separate the mass-murderer-in-them from their ‘real self’.

The author distinguishes four types of mass violence (Chapter 7): conquerors’ frenzy: triumphant armies carrying out massacres in conquered and unfamiliar territories or colonies; rule by terror: authoritarian regimes organizing detention and extermination sites for adversaries; losers’ triumph: genocidal regimes facing imminent defeat intensifying their ‘now or never’ annihilation of the target group; and megapogroms: mob violence carried out by gangs and vast, deadly riots, often condoned by the regime in power. In explaining these different instances of mass violence, he also distinguishes four scales of analysis (Chapter 8): the macrosociological: broad social and economic processes producing a shared habitus and mentality among a population, which includes formative experiences such as war, economic crisis, and unemployment; the mesosociological: institutional and legal measures supporting compartmentalization and creating an opportunity structure for violence; the microsociological: the concrete small-group situation in which violence is carried out;
and finally the *psychosociological*: the perpetrators’ biographies and personality traits, which account for their disposition toward violence (lacking in others).

I do have certain reservations with the term ‘genocidaires’, which the author uses for the rank-and-file perpetrators on whom the author particularly focuses. It suggests that all perpetrators share a ‘genocidal’ intent, which is difficult to prove and sustain for the rank-and-file executioners. In the case of the Srebrenica massacre, genocidal intent was only established (at The Hague Tribunal) for the highest echelons of the Bosnian Serb political and military leadership, the rank-and-file being not subject to this charge. De Swaan himself writes that perpetrators are often kept ignorant of their bloody task beforehand (211). One can also question whether mass killings actually require large groups of perpetrators, which the author sometimes seems to suggest. Indeed, massacres can be carried out by relatively small groups (such as in the case of Srebrenica). The author’s non-inclusion of perpetrators-at-a-distance, who for example issue the commands to start killings (such as in the case of Srebrenica) or operate radio stations inciting mob violence killing many thousands (as in Rwanda), is an important omission in his analysis of ‘genocidaires’, particularly as the concept seems to fit them much better than it does the rank-and-file. In his description of the former Yugoslavia (the only one that I can judge in terms of its factual accuracy), de Swaan makes some silly and avoidable mistakes, mentioning for example ‘the fall of Marshall Tito’ (which should be ‘the death’) (45) or ‘the mainly Croat army of Mihailović’ (which should be ‘the Serb army’) (185); the current estimate of war deaths in the former Yugoslavia is 130,000, rather than the exaggerated figure of 300,000 that de Swaan mentions (187); finally, the Serb ethnic cleansing campaigns at the start of the war, however ruthless, cannot be described as ‘genocidal excesses’, as de Swaan does, at least not legally (as only the Srebrenica massacre has been categorized as such) (184). However, these mistakes do not diminish the importance of the book, which forcefully reminds us that the phenomenon of mass annihilation, also in contemporary societies, should be a central problem for the human sciences.

Ger Duijzings (Regensburg)


The book under review inaugurates a new series, ‘Phantom Borders in Eastern Europe’ (*Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa*), edited by the five authors of this opening volume. They constitute the group of principal investigators in the research project of (almost) the same title in which their studies originate (www.phantomgrenzen.eu), financed by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research between 2011 and 2017. The project has been coordinated at the Berlin-based Centre Marc Bloch, a German–French research center for the humanities and social sciences. The project’s results are fed by both pluridisciplinarity—mainly geographers and historians—and debates at the intersection of at least two academic traditions, the French and the German.

This volume sets the programmatic stage, and promotes further exploration of what the authors call the ‘time-space-complex’ (12). The core question is: How