

A Typology of Perpetrators of Mass Atrocities

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REVIEW OF: Alette Smeulers, *Perpetrators of Mass Atrocities: Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal?* (London: Routledge, 2023), xx + 580 pp. (paperback) GBP 36.99 ISBN: 978-1-032-56802-7

This book represents a pivotal advancement in understanding the complex psychology of mass violence. By developing an innovative typological system, Smeulers moves beyond existing scholarly frameworks, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of how individuals become perpetrators of extreme violence. Where Ferguson focused on paramilitary command structures,¹ Hilberg categorized Holocaust participants into victims, perpetrators and bystanders,² and Waller explored individual motivations for genocide,³ Smeulers introduces a more dynamic and multifaceted approach. By integrating insights from psychology, historical analysis, and international legal scholarship, she creates a robust interdisciplinary methodology that reveals the intricate mechanisms driving human participation in mass atrocities. Through this lens, she analyses the circumstances that shape perpetrators' trajectories from ascent to downfall. Her 'ideal types' systematically analyse perpetrators from top-level command structures to victims-turned-perpetrators (p. 9). Unlike previous studies that often relied on static categorizations, Smeulers's acknowledges the complex, fluid nature of human motivation. Her approach challenges simplistic narratives of inherent evil, instead exploring how ordinary individuals can be transformed by specific social, psychological, and systemic conditions. This perspective offers a more profound understanding of mass violence, moving beyond moral absolutes to examine the intricate psychological and social dynamics that enable large-scale mass violence. Crucially, she acknowledges that perpetrators can have mixed or changing motives, and thus also potentially shift roles.

- 1 Kate Ferguson, *Architectures of Violence: The Command Structures of Modern Mass Atrocities* (London: Hurst, 2020).
- 2 Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933-1945* (New York: Harper Perennial 1993).
- 3 James E. Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Journal of Perpetrator Research 7.1(2024), 207–214
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.7.1.170 © 2024 by the Author



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The book's comprehensive analysis spans thirty years of research, investigating transnational case studies including the Holocaust, South African Apartheid, Cambodian and Rwandan Genocides, the Vietnam War, ISIS atrocities, and Argentina's Dirty War. By meticulously examining individual and group roles, Smeulers reveals the intricate mechanisms through which ordinary individuals can become perpetrators of extraordinary violence. Central to her work is a profound insight: humans are not inherently evil but possess the potential for destructive actions. Through her typology, Smeulers illuminates the delicate interplay between individual choice, societal context, and the moral transformations that enable mass atrocities.

Opening with 'The Criminal Mastermind,' a category representing individuals who wield absolute power at the apex of atrocity-perpetrating regimes, Smeulers identifies distinct psychological patterns, including narcissistic personality traits, megalomaniacal tendencies, and Machiavellian characteristics (p. 40). Drawing from historical examples like Hitler, Mao, and Stalin, she establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding these highest-ranking perpetrators. Her analysis extends to contemporary politics through an examination of Donald Trump's presidency, making her work particularly relevant to current discussions of democratic erosion. This contemporary focus distinguishes her scholarship, as few scholars besides Alexander Hinton have systematically analysed Trump's leadership and campaign through the lens of mass atrocity studies.⁴

In her examination of 'The Fanatic' in Chapter 2, Smeulers delves into a potent category of perpetrators characterized by their unwavering devotion to an ideology and their active role in spreading extremist beliefs. These individuals serve as devoted followers of the so-called 'Mastermind,' functioning as crucial propagators of violence by eliciting others to commit violence. A pivotal insight in Smeulers's analysis is the psychological transformation of moral boundaries. She observes that when perpetrators initially commit acts that transgress their previously held moral values, they experience profound shock. However, this initial psychological dissonance gradually gives way to a process of rationalization, where extreme ideologies are used to justify increasingly violent actions. This category resonates with contexts of radical religious beliefs and terrorist movements, where ideological commitment supersedes individual moral constraints. 'The Fanatic's' role

⁴ Alexander Laban Hinton, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide* (New York: NYU Press, 2022).

extends beyond personal or individual violent action; their primary function is to spread and normalize these extreme beliefs, thereby creating a broader ecosystem that facilitates mass violence. To illustrate this typology, Smeulers employs case studies of terrorist figures like Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden. By tracing the psychological mechanisms of ideological radicalization, Smeulers provides a nuanced understanding of how extreme beliefs can systematically erode individual moral resistance.

In Chapter 3, Smeulers analyses 'The Careerist,' a perpetrator motivated by personal advancement rather than ideology or violence itself. These opportunists pursue various forms of profit—financial gain, notoriety, or political influence—and typically operate close to 'Criminal Masterminds' while avoiding direct participation in physical violence. Through examining both the Nazi regime and the Serbian Radical Party, Smeulers reveals how 'Careerists' navigate power structures within atrocity-perpetrating systems. She points to figures like Milošević and Karadžić who, notably, transcended their initial 'Careerist' roles to become 'Criminal Masterminds' themselves. This evolution exemplifies a crucial aspect of Smeulers's framework: the dynamic nature of perpetrator categories. Her typology accommodates both simultaneous membership in multiple categories and transitions between types, reflecting the complex reality of how individuals participate in mass atrocities (p. 9).

Smeulers's analysis of 'The Devoted Warrior' in Chapter 4 marks a crucial transition from policymaking to operational roles in mass atrocities. These perpetrators, acting as subordinates to authority figures outlined in the previous chapters, often defend their actions through claims of obedience, that is, of having only followed orders. Through case studies of Adolf Eichmann, Kaing Guek Eav, Alfredo Astiz, and Eugene de Kock, Smeulers examines how these figures embody what Hannah Arendt termed the 'banality of evil'.⁵

The category of 'The Professional,' discussed in Chapter 5, builds upon this operational focus, examining military-trained perpetrators. Smeulers centres her analysis on the training methods at Greece's KESA military facility. While her detailed examination of the Greek unit provides valuable insights, this section would have benefited from additional comparative examples. The inclusion of cases from Guantanamo Bay, for instance, could have strengthened her typology by providing contemporary context and deeper analytical richness.

5 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin Group, 2006).

Nevertheless, Smeulers arrives at a compelling conclusion: that extreme circumstances can transform ordinary individuals into perpetrators (p. 148). This observation reinforces her central thesis that while humans are not inherently evil, all possess the capacity for perpetrating atrocities under certain conditions.

In Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, Smeulers explores ‘The True Believer’ and ‘The Holy Warrior’ as distinct yet interconnected perpetrator types. While her earlier discussion of ‘The Fanatic’ encompasses both ideological and religious motivations, she carefully differentiates these two categories. ‘The True Believer’ is defined as an individual who commits to an ideology, religion, belief, movement, or leader, deriving a sense of hope for transformative change (p. 149). In contrast, ‘The Holy Warrior’ perceives the world as fundamentally unjust and seeks radical religious solutions that promise personal meaning and societal transformation. By examining case studies such as Timothy McVeigh and Abu Yusaf, exemplifying the ‘True Believer’ and the ‘Holy Warrior’ respectively, Smeulers illustrates the psychological mechanisms that drive these individuals to commit atrocities. These profiles demonstrate how deeply held beliefs can motivate individuals to pursue radical actions they perceive as necessary for achieving broader goals.

In Chapter 8, dedicated to ‘The Avenger,’ Smeulers explores perpetrators motivated by revenge — those who commit violence to avenge themselves, their loved ones, or their broader social group. Through case studies including the Ustashe, participants in the My Lai Massacre, and the Beltway Sniper John Allen Muhammad, Smeulers unpacks the psychological mechanisms of retaliatory violence. She offers a theoretical framework distinguishing between individual and collective revenge motivations. She reveals a critical distinction: group-based avengers often rationalize their actions through a dual narrative of external orders and personal desire, while individual avengers act primarily on personal grievances. Importantly, she theorizes that group dynamics can create a collective psychological space where revenge becomes legitimized and normalized. While acknowledging the conceptual overlap with ‘Holy Warriors’ — both types are driven by perceived injustices — Smeulers argues that for ‘Avengers,’ revenge itself is the primary motivational force, rather than ideological or religious transformation (p. 227). This subtle differentiation highlights the typology she develops, demonstrating how seemingly similar perpetrator types can be distinguished through careful psychological and sociological analysis.

Chapter 9 centres on ‘The Profiteer,’ an initially law-abiding individual transformed by atrocity into an actor motivated by material gain. Smeulers examines this through case studies of private military companies, individuals like Viktor Bout, Anton van der Waals, and Josef Mengele, exploring the mechanisms that drive opportunistic participation in violent systems. She concludes that while ideological motivations may intersect with profiteering (as seen in ‘The Fanatic’ or ‘The Devoted Warrior’), self-interest ultimately propels their actions (p. 262). The subsequent category developed in Chapter 10, ‘The Criminal,’ represents individuals often radicalized through prior criminal experiences, who may engage with ideological motivations but do not necessarily require them to commit atrocities. Smeulers investigates this type through diverse cases including Cherif Kouachi, Amedy Coulibaly, Boko Haram, and Arkan’s Tigers. Critically, Smeulers’s typology reveals a fundamental insight: across all categories, perpetrators are fundamentally motivated by gains — whether power, prestige, territorial expansion, ideological propagation, or financial reward. This observation transforms her classification from a mere descriptive exercise to an analytical framework that exposes the underlying human motivations driving mass violence.

The archetype of ‘The Predator’ in Chapter 11 represents a perpetrator who actively seeks out and derives gratification from committing violence, typically characterized by extreme and disproportionate force. Smeulers investigates the potential psychological and biographical factors that might contribute to such behaviour, exploring domains such as sadistic personality traits, potential genetic predispositions, and personal histories of traumatic experiences. Crucially, Smeulers maintains a nuanced perspective, emphasizing that while these factors may offer insights into violent behaviour, they do not constitute a deterministic pathway to criminality. Simply experiencing abuse, for instance, does not predestine an individual to become a violent offender. To illustrate this complex profile, Smeulers examines historical examples who epitomize ‘The Predator’ archetype: members of the *Einsatzgruppen* (Nazi death squads), Amon Göth (Commandant of the Plaszów Concentration Camp), and Japanese soldiers who committed atrocities during the Rape of Nanking. According to Smeulers, these individuals share a distinctive characteristic: they executed violence not merely as a means to an end, but with personal satisfaction and enthusiasm. Unlike perpetrators motivated by instrumental goals such as financial gain, ideological conviction, or religious zealotry, ‘The Predator’ is driven by violence itself — finding pleasure in the act of causing harm.

In exploring the intersection of mental health and violent behaviour, Smeulers challenges the pervasive societal tendency to reflexively attribute criminal actions to mental illness. Her research reveals that only a small fraction of perpetrators received clinical diagnoses. In Chapter 12, Smeulers introduces the conceptual category of 'The Deranged' whereby she systematically examines psychological profiles associated with violent tendencies. Her analysis centres on diagnostic classifications such as antisocial personality disorder, sociopathy, and psychopathy — each representing distinct manifestations of psychological dysfunction potentially linked to violent behaviour. The research draws from contexts of mass violence, including school shootings, terrorist incidents, and individual acts of extreme aggression. Notable examples include Dylan Klebold from the Columbine Massacre, Ted Kaczynski the Unabomber, as well as suicide bombers, each driven by psychological motivations. By analysing these cases, Smeulers seeks to move beyond simplistic narratives that utilize mental illness as an explanatory structure.

Smeulers explores the concept of 'The Follower' in Chapter 13, a perpetrator characterized by their susceptibility to group pressure and an overwhelming desire to conform. She contextualizes group dynamics by examining the broader social and institutional structures that enable and normalize violence, and then delves into the role each individual plays within these groups. To illustrate this phenomenon, Smeulers draws on several case studies that powerfully demonstrate the 'Follower' archetype. These include the Nazi Reserve Police Battalion 101, the My Lai Massacre, and the contemporary example of foreign women joining ISIS, showcasing how individuals can be drawn into extremist groups and participate in their violent ideology. A critical insight emerges from Smeulers's analysis: these individuals are systematically convinced that their actions are not only justifiable but fundamentally normal within their social and ideological context. The mechanisms of normalization are so potent that participants often internalize the group's narrative, suspending their individual moral judgments.

In her exploration of 'The Compromised' in Chapter 14, Smeulers challenges traditional definitions of perpetratorship by examining individuals who were victims and were coerced into committing crimes. This complex category probes what Primo Levi termed the 'grey zone',⁶ a morally ambiguous space wherein victimhood and perpetration

6 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

intersect. Drawing on historical contexts including Nazi Germany, Apartheid South Africa, and child soldiers, Smeulers investigates the experiences of those forced into positions of violence. A critical example is the *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils), which have sparked scholarly debate about their categorization within perpetrator typologies. Highlighting the divergent perspectives of scholars like Arendt, who critically examined the councils' role, and Hilberg, who viewed them primarily as victims, Smeulers illuminates the complexity of these liminal positions. The crucial distinction Smeulers emphasizes is that these individuals did not voluntarily choose their roles but were compelled by circumstances of extreme duress. While Smeulers briefly explores survival as a motivating factor, the chapter suggests a spectrum of responses within this category. Some individuals, like Chaim Rumkowski, seemingly embraced their new positions of limited power, while others remained fundamentally reluctant participants. This approach reveals the psychological complexity of individuals forced into perpetrator roles, challenging simplistic moral categorizations and highlighting the profound ways systemic violence can transform human behaviour. The chapter contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of how extreme circumstances can blur the lines between victimhood and perpetration, offering a critical lens for examining the moral landscape of mass violence.

Smeulers's pragmatic methodology, employing a comprehensive case study approach, extends her typology's accessibility to a broader audience, including policymakers and practitioners. These meticulously selected case studies are instrumental in defining her categories and enable her to navigate complex cross-cultural, transnational, and transtemporal dimensions, marking this work as a groundbreaking contribution to understanding perpetrator dynamics. Her typology represents a significant analytical advancement in perpetrator studies by transcending moral categorizations. Rather than portraying mass atrocity participation as an expression of inherent evil, Smeulers demonstrates that such actions stem from intricate human motivations that can be systematically mapped and comprehended. Her approach deconstructs the notion of perpetrators as inherently "other" or pathological, instead highlighting the critical role of systemic conditions in enabling individual moral transformations. This understanding reveals how ordinary motivations can contribute to violence. Her work suggests that prevention requires a comprehension of these motivational mechanisms rather than simply condemning individual moral

failures. This approach not only provides insights into the psychology of violence but also offers a sophisticated tool for scholars, legal professionals, and policymakers seeking to understand and potentially mitigate the conditions that enable mass violence.

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