Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust

Leonard S. Newman
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Editors

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Edited by
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To our families
Preface

The idea for this book evolved over the course of two meetings (1997 and 1998) of the Social Psychologists of Chicago (SPOC). At those meetings, we individually presented papers that were later expanded into our chapters in this book. Besides discovering a common interest in the central themes of this volume, we also found that we shared a concern that social psychologists were not making their voices heard in public debates about genocide and the Holocaust. At the time, there was much public and academic discussion of two monographs that are cited quite a bit in this book: Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* and Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. The discussion centered around what caused Holocaust perpetrators to act as they did, with special attention devoted to how perpetrators construed their own behavior and the extent to which they had been affected by powerful situational forces. What was being discussed, in other words, was the social psychology of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, when any social-psychological research was cited, it tended to be quite dated. And much to our distress, few actual social psychologists seemed to be entering into the public discourse.

We resolved to do something about that state of affairs and set out to see whether contemporary work being done by social psychologists could speak to the issues that were being (and continue to be) so passionately debated by students of the Holocaust. We were not disappointed. The first concrete result of our efforts was a symposium at the annual meeting of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, in Lexington, Kentucky, in October 1998 (“Social-Psychological Perspectives on Genocide: Understanding Perpetrator Behavior”). Two other contributors to this volume (Irv Staub and Bob Zajonc) also participated in that symposium, along with John Darley. The next result of our efforts is the book you are holding in your hands. Needless to say, it will not answer all your questions about why one group of people would resolve to exterminate their neighbors. But we do believe that when you finish reading the chapters in this volume, you will have gained a deeper understanding of the personal, social, and cultural factors that can interact in such a way as to trigger the horrors of genocide.
Preface

This book went into production less than a month after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Before the dust of the former World Trade Center settled, many instant analysts offered “explanations” for the attacks. Jerry Falwell blamed homosexuals and the American Civil Liberties Union; Noam Chomsky attributed them to revenge for the U.S. 1998 missile strike on Khartoum; and Norman Finkelstein cited American support for Israel as the cause. These explanations do little to help us understand the complex nature of what motivated the actual perpetrators to go through with their mission, but preventing future atrocities of this kind will in part depend on developing an understanding of the psychological factors involved in the planning and execution of such massacres. Of course, it is not clear that the September 11 attacks can be categorized as “genocide”; nonetheless, many of the processes described by the contributors to this volume could apply to mass killers of any sort.

We would like to thank the people at Oxford University Press for their interest in this project, especially our editors, Phillip Laughlin (who helped us get started) and Catharine Carlin (who saw it to completion). During our work on this book, Len Newman’s research program was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9809188) and the National Institutes of Mental Health (R01 MH58876). Finally, we would also like to thank our many colleagues who over the last few years have inspired and motivated us with their interest in and enthusiasm for our plans for this book. Those colleagues include Peg Birmingham, John Darley, Bella DePaulo, Maureen Wang Erber, Susan Fiske, Paul Jaskot, Nancy Lipsitt, John Pryor, Glenn Reeder, Steve Scher, Clive Seligman, Linda Skitka, Chuck Suchar, Midge Wilson, and Phil Zimbardo.
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Understanding Genocide
Introduction

Christopher R. Browning

In the first decade after the Holocaust, attempts at understanding the perpetrators focused for the most part on the questions of individual psychological makeup, on the one hand, and a specifically German iniquity, on the other. The Nuremberg trials provided a closer look at both the prominent Nazi leaders and the top-echelon functionaries, such as the Einsatzgruppen leaders, “euthanasia” doctors, incriminated generals, and ministerial state secretaries, who had survived the war and been captured.1 The work of Adorno and others focused on the cluster of individual traits—conceived of as the “authoritarian personality”—that would have predisposed others in German society to embrace the Nazi cause and commit mass murder on its behalf.2 Others traced the fatal effect of Prussian/German traditions of militarism, authoritarianism, and anti-Semitism.3

In the early 1960s the search for understanding the Holocaust perpetrators turned from explanations focused on the psychological analysis of individual perpetrators and the exceptionalism of German history to the social-psychological analysis of group behavior. The impetus for this change derived, in my opinion, from three major events. First, in 1961, Raul Hilberg published his monumental study, The Destruction of the European Jews, which portrayed the Nazi Final Solution as essentially an administrative and bureaucratic process. Hilberg argued that the perpetrators “were not different in their moral makeup from the rest of the population. The German perpetrator was not a special kind of German.” Rather, the perpetrators represented “a remarkable cross-section of the German population,” and the machinery of destruction “was structurally no different from organized German society as a whole.”4 Above all, Hilberg argued for an inherent structure of bureaucratic persecution that moved through the stages of identification, confiscation, concentration, and extermination, and that by implication had little to do with the
individual psychological traits, anti-Semitic convictions, or national character of the perpetrators.\textsuperscript{5}

Second, in 1963, Hannah Arendt published \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil}. Influenced by Hilberg’s book and the defense strategy of Eichmann, Arendt portrayed him as a nonideological, petty bureaucrat dutifully carrying out the policies of the regime he served and too mindless even to understand fully the criminality of those policies. Most historians would now agree, I think, that Arendt had uncritically accepted Eichmann’s misrepresentation of himself, and that he was in fact a Nazi activist, motivated by both his ideological identification with the regime and his unquenchable ambition.\textsuperscript{6} But the fact that Eichmann was not the “banal bureaucrat” that he pretended to be does not discredit the notion that so many of the Holocaust perpetrators—the proverbial “desk murderers”—were exactly that. Arendt had arrived at a powerful insight that the ability of a state to organize mass murder owes much to the accommodation and compliance of petty and dutiful civil servants, even if she misunderstood her star example. The “banality of evil” is a concept that survives her historical shortcomings.

Third, virtually simultaneous with the publications of Hilberg and Arendt, Stanley Milgram conducted his famous “obedience to authority” experiments and disseminated his initial conclusions. Milgram’s experiments have been both praised and criticized by many, and they are discussed again, of course, in many of the contributions to this book. Concerning their impact on the search for understanding the Holocaust perpetrators in the 1960s, however, two factors must be mentioned here. In the face of the constant claims made by perpetrators on trial that they had been forced to obey orders, Milgram’s experiments reconceptualized a crucial issue by shifting the focus away from coerced obedience to noncoerced, situationally induced deference to authority. (In this regard it should be noted that Milgram included the state’s power to legitimize and disseminate ideology as a factor that helped to define the “situation.”) And the fact that his subjects were both randomly selected and non-German lent his conclusions undeniably universalistic implications.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the lonely, pioneering work of Raul Hilberg and a few others was followed by a growing wave of historical scholarship. The bulk of these works that were devoted to studying the perpetrators (as opposed to those studying the victims and bystanders) focused on the decision and policy-making processes, the structures and functioning of the Nazi regime, and the plethora of institutions and professions beyond the notorious SS that had played a crucial role in one way or another. While the centrality of anti-Semitism to Hitler’s psyche and ideology was not seriously questioned, increasingly this was seen as inadequate to explain the capacity of the dictator to harness so many others to the enterprise of mass murder. The focus shifted away from Hitler at the top and the actual killers at the bottom to the institutions, political processes, and bureaucratic personnel in between. Discussions
of motivation shifted from anti-Semitism to other contributing factors: power-struggle calculations, ambition and careerism, the segmenting and routinizing of participation that obviated a sense of individual responsibility, and a broader ideological framework of racism and eugenics that targeted a multitude of victims beyond the Jews.  

By the 1990s, the study of what had once been a shamefully neglected but central event in the twentieth century had reached such proportions that it was being disparaged by some with epithets such as “Shoa business” and “Holocaust industry.” Despite such criticisms, scholarly research has continued unabated. Several historiographical developments occurred that are highly relevant to the issue of understanding the perpetrators. First, there has been renewed attention to the crucial role of Nazi ideologues as transmitters and legitimizers of anti-Semitic policies, and of fanatically anti-Semitic SS men in key positions as vital personnel in the implementation of the mass murder. Awareness of this corrective trend in scholarship has not been fully appreciated for several reasons. The cutting-edge scholarship in this regard has been published so far only in German but not yet in English. Furthermore, this trend has been virtually eclipsed by the publicity and controversy surrounding the second historiographical trend in the study of perpetrators in the 1990s.

These more recent works focused on the men who actually committed the face-to-face killings. Two books, one by myself and another by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, involved case studies of the same hitherto obscure but now notorious Nazi killing unit, namely, Reserve Police Battalion 101. Some conclusions in our two accounts were a matter of consensus. The conscripted, middle-aged reserve police of this unit were randomly selected and neither well trained nor especially indoctrinated for their task; they could be characterized as both “ordinary” and representative. Those who found themselves in such units and nonetheless declined to kill were not forced to do so and did not suffer any significant repercussions, much less punishment, for their refusal. Conspicuous and all too numerous among those who did kill were those who did so with frightening eagerness. (In Goldhagen’s account there is also a major emphasis on the gratuitous cruelty of the killers.)

On the other hand, a number of issues were contested. Did the eager and gratuitously cruel killers constitute a crucial minority or an overwhelming minority? Were those who sought to evade participation in the killing a minute and insignificant minority, or did they constitute between 10% and 20% of the unit? Were the killers solely motivated by a unique German “eliminationist” anti-Semitism culturally imprinted over centuries? Or were institutional, organizational, and situational factors indispensable to explaining rank-and-file behavior? Did the bulk of the killers come to their task already culturally programmed to kill Jews with “gusto,” or did the environment of fighting a race war and imposing racial imperialism, on the one
hand, and the task of killing itself, on the other, significantly transform most of these men over time?

Also at issue in the debate was the degree to which the insights and findings of social psychology better equip the scholar to resolve these questions. To help make sense of the materials I had gathered and the narrative I had constructed, I turned to the studies of Stanley Milgram on deference to authority and Philip Zimbardo on adaptation to role expectation and the intoxicating and corruptive effect on some of unfettered power over others. I also emphasized what struck me as the equally important factor of pressure for conformity to the group, especially in the circumstances of an isolated paramilitary unit in occupied enemy territory for which there were in effect no countervailing influences or support for nonconforming behavior outside the unit itself. Goldhagen deemed my use of social psychological concepts as both an academically dubious explanation of the perpetrators’ behavior and a morally suspect exoneration of their “individual responsibility” and “choice.”

I was resorting to the literature of social psychology now several decades old.12 The book in hand has the merit of making readily accessible to both scholars and the reading public those recent developments in the discipline of social psychology that the various authors deem relevant to understanding not only the perpetrators but also other aspects of human behavior during the Holocaust. It is not my task to summarize the various contributions that follow, but I would at least briefly note some of the issues discussed that strike me as particularly relevant to recent debates. Some of the authors explore the continuing and dynamic interaction between cognition and attitude, on the one hand, and situation, on the other, and reject the notion that either can be seen as an “unmoved mover” of human behavior. Gratuitous cruelty is understood not only as a reflection of initial attitude (of hatred and contempt for the victim) but also as the product of an escalating process of harm-doing and devaluation of the victim, in which people are changed by what they do. Through the concept of “pluralistic ignorance,” it is argued that the attitudes of individuals within a group cannot necessarily be inferred from collective behavior and conformity to a perceived group norm.

Finally, the strong tendency of many to see social psychological explanations as deterministic and individually exonerating is explored. However, no definitive answer is found for the dilemma of the scholar who finds the insights of social psychology crucial in attempting to explain human behavior in the Holocaust while rejecting the exonerating “spin” many readers will inevitably attribute to the resulting interpretations. But the Holocaust was a man-made event—the result of human beliefs and behavior. The contributions of social psychology that help us understand how human beliefs are formed and behavior shaped must not be ignored.
Introduction

NOTES

3. This is reflected not only in popular works, such as the best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), but also in A. J. P. Taylor’s *The Course of German History* (New York: Coward McCann, 1946).
5. However, when asked on occasion if only Germans could have perpetrated the Holocaust, Hilberg seemed to resist the logic of his own argument and wishfully answered, “I hope so.”
6. For the most recent and important scholarly study of Eichmann and his entourage, see Hans Safrian, *Die Eichmann Männer* (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1993). For a study of the staff of Eichmann’s “Jewish desk” in the Gestapo in Berlin, see Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitlers Burokraten* (Zurich: Pendo, 2000).
8. The two most recent critical works in this vein are Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), and Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (London: Verso, 2000). The former is a substantive though controversial study of the rise of “Holocaust consciousness” in American culture; the latter dismisses virtually all Holocaust scholarship as politically motivated and worthless.
9. A prime example of the former is Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft 1903–1989* (Bonn: Dietz Verlag, 1996). A prime example of the latter is Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996). Pohl emphasizes both the broad consensus among all the German occupiers behind the mass murder of the Galician Jews and the key role played by a relatively small group of notorious police officials. Pohl is one among a number of young German scholars studying regional aspects of the Holocaust and emphasizing the importance of the initiatives of local German officials.
10. Two works will change this: Yehuda Bauer, *Reexamining the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); and Michael Thad Allen’s forthcoming study of the engineers and businessmen of the Economic and Administrative Main Office of the SS.
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Part I

BECOMING A PERPETRATOR
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The Psychology of Bystanders, Perpetrators, and Heroic Helpers

Ervin Staub

What leads groups of people or governments to perpetrate genocide or mass killing? What are the characteristics and psychological processes of individuals and societies that contribute to such group violence? What is the nature of the evolution that leads to it: What are the motives, how do they arise and intensify, how do inhibitions decline?

A primary example in this article will be the Holocaust, the killing of between 5 and 6 million European Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II. Other examples will be the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey in 1915–1916, the “autogenocide” in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and the disappearances and mass killing in Argentina, mainly between 1976 and 1979. Many of the same influences are also present both in the widespread uses of torture and in terrorist violence.

In the United Nations charter on genocide the term denotes the extermination of a racial, religious, or ethnic group. Although not included in the charter, and although some scholars call it politicide (Harff & Gurr, 1990), the destruction of a whole political group is also widely regarded as genocide (Kuper, 1981). In mass killing, the boundaries of the victim group are less well defined, and the elimination of a whole racial, religious, or ethnic group is not intended. For example, in Argentina the victims included Communists, people seen as left leaning, and liberals who wanted to help the poor or supported social change. Usually, although not always, mass killings have fewer victims. The Holocaust, the killings of the Armenians, and the killings in Rwanda were genocides; the killings in Cambodia were genocidal but with less well defined group boundaries, in that Khmer as well as members of minority groups were killed; the disappearances in Argentina were a mass killing. Genocides and mass killings have similar psychological and cultural origins.
Becoming a Perpetrator

This chapter will focus on the psychology and role of both perpetrators and bystanders. Bystanders to the ongoing, usually progressively increasing mistreatment of a group of people have great potential power to influence events. However, whether individuals, groups, or nations, they frequently remain passive. This allows perpetrators to see their destructive actions as acceptable and even right. As a result of their passivity in the face of others’ suffering, bystanders change: They come to accept the persecution and suffering of victims, and some even join the perpetrators (Staub, 1989a, 1989b, 1999a, 2000).

All of us are bystanders to many events—neither actors nor victims but witnesses. We witness discrimination and the fate of the homeless. We have known about torture in many countries, the death squads in Guatemala and El Salvador, the use of chemical weapons by Iraq to kill its own Kurdish citizens while our government and many others supported Iraq, the imprisonment of dissidents in mental hospitals in the Soviet Union (Bloch & Reddaway, 1977, 1984), and the nuclear policies of the United States and the USSR. Examination of the role of bystanders in genocides and mass killings may enlighten us about our own role as bystanders to others’ suffering, and to policies and practices that potentially lead to the destruction of human beings.

Another focus of this chapter is the psychology of those who attempt to save intended victims, endangering their own lives to do so. Bystanders, perpetrators, and heroic helpers face similar conditions and may be part of the same culture: What are the differences in their characteristics, psychological processes, and evolution?

BRIEF REVIEW

A conception is presented in this chapter of the origins of genocide and mass killing, with a focus on how a group of people turns against another group, how the motivation for killing evolves and inhibitions against it decline. The conception identifies characteristics of a group’s culture that create an enhanced potential for a group turning against others. It focuses on difficult life conditions as the primary activator of basic needs, which demand fulfillment. Conflict between groups is another activator. The pattern of predisposing cultural characteristics intensifies the basic needs and inclines the group toward fulfilling them in ways that turn the group against others. As they begin to harm the victim group, the perpetrators learn by and change as a result of their own actions, in ways that make the increasing mistreatment of the victims possible and probable. The perpetrators come to see their actions as necessary and even right. Bystanders have potential influence to inhibit the evolution of increasing destructiveness. However, they usually remain passive and themselves change as a result of their passivity, becoming less concerned about the fate of the victims, some of them joining the perpetrators.
The Psychology of Bystanders, Perpetrators, and Heroic Helpers

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERPETRATORS

Violence against a subgroup of society is the outcome of a societal process. It requires analysis at the level of both individuals and society. Analysis of the group processes of perpetrators, an intermediate level, is also important.

Instigators of Group Violence

Difficult Life Conditions and Basic Human Needs

Why does a government or a dominant group turn against a subgroup of society? Usually difficult life conditions, persistent life problems in a society, are an important starting point. They include economic problems such as extreme inflation, or depression and unemployment, political conflict and violence, war, a decline in the power, prestige, and importance of a nation, usually with attendant economic and political problems, and the chaos and social disorganization these often entail.

Severe, persistent difficulties of life frustrate powerful needs, basic human needs that demand fulfillment. Certain “predisposing” characteristics of the culture and social organization tend to further intensify these needs (Staub, 1989a, 1996, 1999b). These include needs for security, for a positive identity, for effectiveness and control over important events in one’s life, for positive connections to other people, and for a meaningful understanding of the world or comprehension of reality. Psychological processes in individuals and social processes in groups can arise that turn the group against others as they offer destructive fulfillment of these needs.

Germany was faced with serious life problems after World War I. The war and defeat were followed by a revolution, a change in the political system, hyperinflation, the occupation of the Ruhr by the French, who were dissatisfied with the rate of reparation payments, severe economic depression, conflict between political extremes, political violence, social chaos, and disorganization. The intense conflict between political extremes and the collapse of traditional social mores were both manifestations and further causes of life problems (Craig, 1982; A. DeJong, 1978). Intense life problems also existed in Turkey, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Argentina (Staub, 1989a, 1999a). For example, in Argentina, severe inflation, political instability, and repression, followed by wide-scale political violence, preceded the policy of disappearances: the kidnapping and torture of tens of thousands of people and the killing of at least 9,000 but perhaps as many as 30,000 people (Nunca Mas, 1986).

The inability to protect oneself and one’s family and the inability to control the circumstances of one’s life greatly threaten security. They also deeply threaten identity or the psychological self—self-concept, values, beliefs, and ways of life—as well as the need for effectiveness and control. The need for
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comprehension of reality (Epstein, 1980; Janoff-Bulman, 1985, 1992; Staub, 1989a), and a conception of the world, one’s place in it, and how to live is frustrated as the social chaos and disorganization render the existing views of reality inadequate. The need for connection to other people and the group is frustrated at a time when people need it most, by the competition for resources and self-focus that difficult life conditions foster. Finally, people need hope in a better future. These psychological needs join material ones, such as the need for food and physical safety, and rival them in intensity and importance. Since the capacity to control or address life problems and to satisfy material needs is limited, the psychological needs become predominant in guiding action (Staub, 1989a, 1996, 1999b, in press).

The motivations just described can be satisfied by joining others in a shared effort to solve life problems. But constructive solutions to a breakdown in the functioning of society are difficult to find and take time to implement. Certain cultural-societal characteristics, present in most societies but to greatly varying extents, add to the likelihood that these needs will be fulfilled in ways that turn the group against another group—that create a predisposition for group violence.

In Germany a two-step process led to the genocide. The difficult life conditions gave rise to psychological and social processes, such as scapegoating and destructive ideologies, which are described later. Such processes do not directly lead to genocide. However, they turn one group against another. In Germany, they brought an ideological movement to power and led to the beginning of an evolution, or steps along the continuum of destruction, also described later. Life conditions improved, but guided by ideology, the social processes and acts of harm-doing they gave rise to continued to intensify. In the midst of another great social upheaval, created by Germany, namely, World War II, they led to genocide.

Group Conflict

Another instigator that frustrates basic needs and gives rise to psychological conditions in individuals and social processes in groups that may lead to genocide is conflict between groups. The conflict may revolve around essential interests, such as territory needed for living space. Even in this case, however, psychological elements tend to make the conflict intractable, such as attachment by groups to a particular territory, unhealed wounds in the group, or prior devaluation and mistrust of the other.

Or the conflict may be between superordinate or dominant groups and subordinate groups with limited rights and limited access to resources. Such conflicts deeply affect the needs for security and positive identity, as well as other basic needs. They have often been the originators of mass killing or genocide since World War II (Fein, 1993). When group conflict turns into war and the other predisposing conditions are present, mass killing or genocide
becomes especially likely (Harff, Gurr, & Unger, 1999). In Rwanda, preceding the genocide by Hutus of Tutsis in 1994, there were both difficult life conditions and conflict between groups, a combination that is an especially intense instigator. Starting in 1990, there was also the beginning of a civil war (des Forges, 1999; Staub, 1999a).

Cultural-Societal Characteristics

Cultural Devaluation

The differentiation between in-group and out-group, us and them, tends by itself to give rise to a favoring of the in-group and relative devaluation of the out-group and discrimination against its members (Brewer, 1978; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971). Devaluation of individuals and groups, whatever its source, makes it easier to harm them (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Duster, 1971).

A history of devaluation of a group, negative stereotypes, and negative images perpetuated in the products of the culture, its literature, art, and media “preselects” this group as a potential scapegoat and enemy (Staub, 1989a). In Germany, there had been a long history of anti-Semitism, with periods of intense mistreatment of Jews (Dimont, 1962; Girard, 1980). In addition to early Christian theological anti-Semitism (Girard, 1980), the intense anti-Semitism of Luther (Hilberg, 1961; Luther, 1955–1975), who described Jews in language similar to that later used by Hitler, was an important influence. Centuries of discrimination and persecution further enhanced anti-Semitism and made it an aspect of German culture. Even though at the end of World War I German Jews were relatively assimilated, anti-Semitism in the deep structure of German culture provided a cultural blueprint, a constant potential, for renewed antagonism against them. In Turkey, deep-seated cultural devaluation of and discrimination against Armenians had existed for centuries. In Rwanda, there was intense hostility by Hutus toward Tutsis, as a result of prior dominance by Tutsis.

At times devaluation of the potential victims is the result of a newly emerging ideology that designates a group as the enemy. The ideology usually draws on existing differentiations and divisions in society. For example, in Cambodia, there had been a long-standing rift between the city, inhabited by those who ruled, the officialdom, the aristocracy, and the educated, and the country, with its peasant population (Chandler, 1983; Etcheson, 1984). The Khmer Rouge ideology drew on this division, defining all city dwellers as actual or potential enemies (Staub, 1989a).

This is a probabilistic conception, with different elements enhancing or diminishing the likelihood of one group turning against another. Not all probabilities become actualities. For example, intense anti-Semitism had existed at least in parts of Russia before the revolution of 1917. While it was per-
Becoming a Perpetrator

haps not as embedded in the deep structure of the culture as in Germany, it did create the potential for Jews to become scapegoats or ideological enemies. Deep divisions had also existed between rulers and privileged members of society, on the one hand, and the peasants and workers, on the other. The ideology that guided the leaders of the revolution led them to focus on this latter division.

**Respect for Authority**

Overly strong respect for authority, with a predominant tendency to obey authority, is another important cultural characteristic. It leads people to turn to authorities, old or new, for guidance in difficult times (Fromm, 1965). It leads them to accept the authorities’ definition of reality, their views of problems and solutions, and stops them from resisting authorities when they lead them to harm others. There is substantial evidence that Germans had strong respect for authority that was deeply rooted in their culture, as well as a tendency to obey those with even limited authority (Craig, 1982; Girard, 1980). German families and schools were authoritarian, with restrictive and punitive child-rearing practices (Miller, 1983; Devereux, 1972). Strong respect for authority has also characterized the other societies that engaged in genocide or mass killing, such as Turkey, Cambodia, and Rwanda, although in some cases it was especially strong in the subgroup of the society that became the perpetrator, as in Argentina, where the military was both the architect and the executor of the disappearances (Nunca Mas, 1986).

**A Monolithic Culture**

A monolithic society, in contrast to a pluralistic society, with a small range of predominant values and/or limitations on the free flow of ideas, adds to the predisposition for group violence. The negative representation of a victim group and the definition of reality by authorities that justifies or even necessitates the victims’ mistreatment will be more broadly accepted. Democratic societies, which tend to be more pluralistic, are unlikely to engage in genocide (Rummel, 1994), especially if they are “mature” democracies, with well-developed civic institutions (Staub, 1999a).

German culture was monolithic: It stressed obedience, order, efficiency, and loyalty to the group (Craig, 1982; Staub, 1989a). As I noted earlier, the evolution of the Holocaust can be divided into two phases. The first one brought Hitler to power. During the second phase, Nazi rule, the totalitarian system further reduced the range of acceptable ideas and the freedom of their expression. In the other cases, the societies, and at times particularly the perpetrator groups in them, such as the military and paramilitary groups in Argentina, were also monolithic. In the frequent cases of genocide or mass killing when the political-ideological system was highly authoritarian and even totalitarian, monolithic tendencies were further intensified.
Cultural Self-Concepts

A belief in cultural superiority (that goes beyond the usual ethnocentrism), as well as a shaky group self-concept that requires self-defense, can also contribute to the tendency to turn against others. Frequently the two combine, a belief in the superiority of one’s group with an underlying sense of vulnerability and weakness. Thus the cultural self-concept that predisposes to group violence can be complex but demonstrable through the products of the culture, its literature, its intellectual and artistic products, its media.

The Germans saw themselves as superior in character, competence, honor, loyalty, devotion to family, civic organization, and cultural achievements. Superiority has expressed itself in many ways, including proclamations by German intellectuals of German superiority and of their belief in Germany’s right to rule other nations (Craig, 1982; Nathan & Norden, 1960; Staub, 1989a). Partly as a result of tremendous devastation in past wars (Craig, 1982; Mayer, 1955) and lack of unity and statehood until 1871, there was also a deep feeling of vulnerability and shaky self-esteem. Following unification and a brief period of strength, the loss of World War I and the intense life problems afterward were a great blow to cultural and societal self-concept.

The combination of a sense of superiority with weakness and vulnerability seems to have been present in Turkey, Cambodia, and Argentina as well. In Argentina, progressively deteriorating economic conditions and political violence deeply threatened a belief in the specialness and superiority of the nation, especially strongly held by the military, and an elevated view by the military of itself as protector of the nation (Crawley, 1984). In both Cambodia and Turkey, a past history of empire and national glory were deeply embedded in group consciousness (Staub, 1989a). The existing conditions sharply contrasted with the glory of the past. Difficult life conditions threaten the belief in superiority and activate the underlying feelings of weakness and vulnerability. They intensify the need to defend and/or elevate the self-concept, both individual and cultural.1

To a large extent, people define themselves by belonging to groups (Mack, 1983), which makes their social identity important (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987). Group self-concepts become especially important in difficult times as the inability to deal with life problems threatens personal identity. Over time, the group’s inability to help fulfill basic needs and societal disorganization also threaten group self-concept, people’s vision, and the evaluation of their group.

Unhealed Wounds Due to Past Victimization

Another important cultural characteristic that contributes to a sense of vulnerability is a past history of victimization. Just like victimized individuals (Herman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990), groups of people who have been victimized in the past are intensely affected. Their sense of self is diminished.