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Genocidaires

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As far as we know, human beings have always engaged in mass murder. With the emergence of the nation-state, however, sustained violence, including wars between more or less symmetric parties and the mass extermination of unarmed civilians, has occurred less frequently, but on a much larger scale.

In The Killing Compartments, Abram De Swaan, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam, provides an insightful analysis of the phenomenon of mass annihilation that is not directly a part of "regular warfare." De Swaan identifies four modes of mass violence and applies them to dozens of case histories. Reading into the record, revising and, at times, refuting the claims of Hannah Arendt, Stanley Milgram, Robert Jay Lifton, Norbert Elias, and others about the "banality of evil," obedience to authority, "the divided self," and the "collapse of civilization," he speculates that millions of people have been (and are) willing and even eager to kill because their actions occur in a supportive social context that separates people into opposing categories and encourages "disidentification" with members of the target group. Individuals are more likely to participate in mass murder, he maintains, if their moral consciences are constricted, they have a low sense of agency, and lack (or compartmentalize) empathy.

According to De Swaan, mass annihilation is always propagated and legitimized by the nation-state. The regime encourages members of the dominant group to identify more closely with one another and dis-identify more sharply with others; this dialectic characterized the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda and the massacre of Muslims in Bosnia. Wherever possible, the regime isolates members of the target group mentally, socially and spatially, allowing "ordinary citizens" to function as if nothing is happening.

De Swaan's four modes of mass extermination are characterized "by the degree and manner of compartmentalization of the killing sites and killers." The "conquerors' frenzy" is perpetrated on an alien (and often hostile) population by soldiers who are far from home. Officials invariably
argue that the enemy committed atrocities first. To "rule by terror," regimes like Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China, and North Korea rounded up anyone they mistrusted and sent them to detention and extermination sites in isolated areas. Facing imminent defeat, nation-states intensify efforts to eliminate hated groups, even if it means diverting resources from the war against the armed opponent. Nazi Germany, of course, is the paradigmatic example of the "losers' triumph." Finally, civil strife or defeat in war is often accompanied by "megapogroms," local riots by armed gangs and mobs that appear to morph, spontaneously, into large campaigns of ethnic cleansing, but are, in fact, condoned, covertly, or organized and encouraged, by the government in power. The largest "megapogroms" in the twentieth century, according to De Swaan, occurred against individuals of German nationality or extraction after World War II and against Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Although he insists that perpetrators of mass murder, the great majority of whom are young and healthy men, are anything but banal, De Swaan agrees that they are, in a sense, "ordinary." And he makes a nuanced and persuasive case for the pivotal role played by their lack of empathy for their victims. De Swaan acknowledges that the personal predispositions of perpetrators are important, but he emphasizes the impact of the regime in shaping their attitudes and actions. After all, the killers do exhibit a moral consciousness: they are loyal to their comrades and intensely committed to their wives and children. Compassion, however, is a fragile commodity: "in strongly compartmentalized societies with intense antagonism between groups," De Swaan suggests, individuals can and often do exclude outsiders from their "circle of empathy." Heinrich Himmler, De Swaan reminds us, held the men under his command to a tightly restricted morality. "One ground rule applies to every SS man absolutely," Himmler proclaimed. "We must be honest, decent, faithful, and loyal to those who are of our blood, and to no one else."

Like everyone else, De Swaan repeats, perpetrators of mass murder "have emotions, they construct meanings and justifications, no matter how hard they may deny it." After their war ends, they somehow "relegate their murderous self to a separate and closed compartment." Their memories do not disappear, De Swaan indicates; they no longer think of them and "become their old civilian selves again." Testifying to judges or biographers, they deny that they made any choices at all, do not accept responsibility for their actions, and show no remorse or shame (unless they hope it will result in a more lenient sentence).

Providing a chilling conclusion to his compelling analysis of what appears to be an entrenched pathology, De Swaan leaves us wishing that he had elaborated on his claim that "what is modern is not mass murder but rather the embarrassment about it."