Chapter Nine

Ordinary People in Extra-Ordinary Circumstances

1. Introduction

As seen in the previous chapters, international crimes are crimes of obedience rather than crimes of deviance. They are usually committed within a social, political, ideological, organisational and legal context which supports or at least condones the crimes. We have seen that many people get involved in international crimes simply because they think that it is their duty to torture and kill and that, under the circumstances, it is the right thing to do. Many perpetrators are ordinary people within extra-ordinary circumstances. In this chapter we try to understand how ordinary people are gradually transformed into perpetrators. We will focus on the social-psychological mechanisms and neutralization techniques which play a role in this transformation process and we will put special emphasis on the reduction of restraints which usually inhibit us from committing horrendous crimes. Not all perpetrators are the same, however; some are more reluctant than others, some torture or kill in an almost gentlemanly fashion while others display sadism. Some perpetrators play important initiating roles, while others merely follow the flow. Some physically torture while others draft policies and do paperwork. After we have given an overview of research on the perpetrators within mainly Nazi-Germany (section 2) we will focus on the transformation process of ordinary people into perpetrators (section 3). In the fourth section we will emphasize the differences between perpetrators by presenting a typology of perpetrators. In the fifth section we will say a few words about gender and pose the question whether males are more prone to commit international crimes than females.

2. Who are the Perpetrators?

Immediately after the Second World War many people thought and believed that ‘Nazis’ were disturbed sadists and criminals. Observers seemed to have a strong urge to distance themselves from these perpetrators. Many scholars tried to prove the so-called Mad-Nazi theory and prove that ‘Nazis’ were different from ‘us, ordinary people’ (Cf. Waller 2007, 59) even learned
psychologists and psychiatrists wanted to believe that the perpetrators were
different from ordinary people. Borosky and Brand (1980) pointed to the
remarkable fact that ten experts who were asked to draw conclusions from
the results of the Rorschach tests taken from the sixteen high-ranking defen-
dants at the Nuremberg trial refused to publish (and accept) the outcome
of these tests which showed that even the Nazi leaders were ordinary peo-
ple. Years later one of the experts, Harrower (1976, 76), acknowledged: ‘I
have come to believe that our reason for not commenting on the test results
was that they did not show what we expected to see, and what the pressure
of public opinion demanded that we see – that these men were demented
creatures, as different from normal people as a scorpion is different from a
puppy.’ Twenty years later Hannah Arendt’s thesis on the banality of evil
(Arendt 1964) was heavily criticized as it characterized Eichmann, the head
of transportation in Nazi Germany and as such one of the main organizers
of the Holocaust, as a rather pathetic ordinary man – a dull bureaucrat who
was ‘terribly and terrifyingly normal’ (Arendt 1964, 276). The psychologist
who examined Eichmann however could do nothing else than conclude that
Eichmann was just an ordinary man: ‘more normal, at any rate, than I am
after having examined him’ (Arendt 1964, 25).

In the following section we will give a brief overview of the most impor-
tant research done on the people who committed crimes in Nazi Germany.
In the second subsection we will refer to research done on perpetrators in
other countries and conflicts.

2.1 Perpetrators in Nazi Germany

The central focus of the research on perpetrators within Nazi Germany was
initially directed towards the defendants at Nuremberg. Douglas Kelley and
Gustav Gilbert both worked for the American army as respectively psychia-
trist and psychologist and were stationed at the prison in Nuremberg and
thus had direct access to the defendants. They could observe the defendants,
conduct psychological tests and talk to the defendants in their cells. Kelley
and Gilbert who apparently did not get along very well together were both
intrigued by the questions as to what kind of people these defendants were
and how they came to lead a whole population to commit such atrocities.
Kelley studied the personality traits among the defendants and concluded:
‘[the defendants, AS] were essentially sane and although in some instances
somewhat deviated from normal, they nevertheless knew precisely what they
were doing during their years of ruthless domination. From our findings
we must conclude not only that such personalities are not unique or insane
but also that they could be duplicated in any country of the world today’
(Kelley 1946, 47). Kelley concluded: ‘They simply had three quite unremark-