

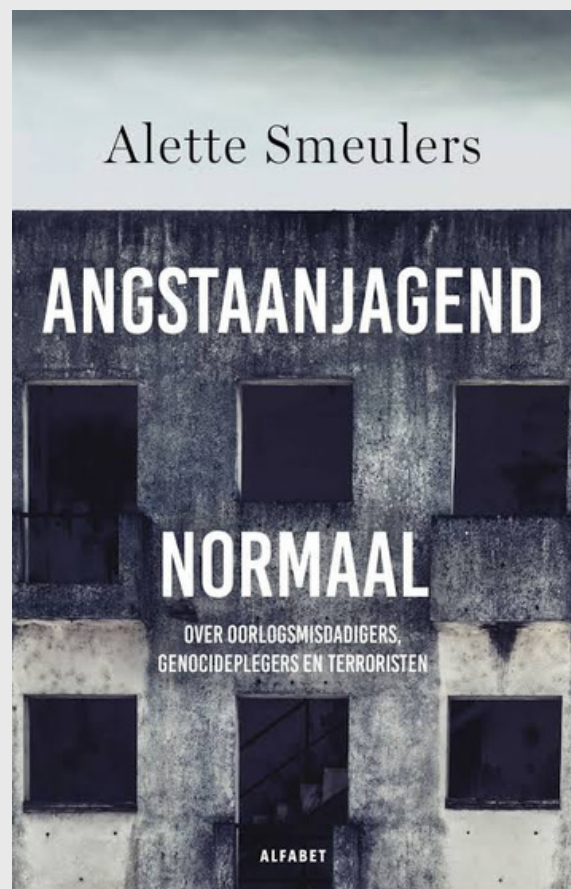
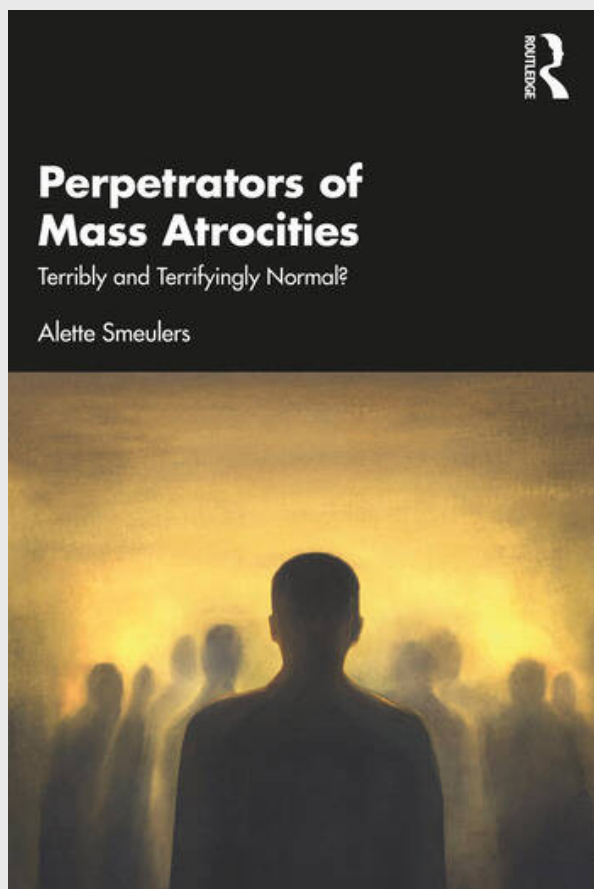


WHAT DRIVES PERPETRATORS OF MASS VIOLENCE?

**Context, motivations, and the possibility of
change**

ABSTRACT

Humanitarian professionals face the consequences of extreme violence every day. From Gaza and Sudan to Rwanda and Syria, the same questions keep resurfacing: What drives people to commit such acts? On 18 June, KUNO invited Alette Smeulers, author of *Perpetrators of Mass Atrocities: Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal?*, to present insights from her extensive research on perpetrators of international crimes, such as genocide crimes against humanity, war crimes and terrorism, and help humanitarians make sense of what they encounter in their work. This article presents key takeaways from the discussion.



The book of Alette Smeulers: *Perpetrators of Mass Atrocities – Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal?* (Routledge 2024) is also available in Dutch translation: *Angstaanjagend Normaal – over oorlogsmisdadigers, genocideplegers en terroristen* (Alfabet 2025).

REPORT

Violence starts with context

When we, as human beings, witness atrocities, we tend to distance ourselves from both the crime and the perpetrator thereof. The perpetrators must be evil; they are nothing like us. That reaction is understandable. But Alette Smeulers argues people who commit violence rarely see themselves as villains. They often believe they are the only real victims or protecting their community against a bigger evil, just following orders, or doing what is necessary to make the world a better place. Her research shows that mass violence grows from political pressure, ideology, institutions, and group dynamics that gradually make what was once unthinkable seem normal.

Becoming a perpetrator is a process

We tend to think of perpetrators as sadists or psychopaths, but they are the exception. Based on 30 years of research, Smeulers reaches an uncomfortable conclusion: under certain conditions, ordinary people are capable of doing extraordinary harm.

People do not become complicit in mass violence overnight. The process usually starts with fear, insecurity and political leaders encouraging an "us versus them" narrative, where the "other" is framed as dangerous. Evil. Lacking humanity. Once people are dehumanised, violence becomes much easier to justify.

As divisions deepen, small acts of exclusion can escalate into larger violence. Institutions matter too: armies, militias, police forces, and political movements rely on loyalty, hierarchy, and obedience, making it almost impossible for individuals to question or refuse orders. The Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda both evolved gradually. In retrospect, warning signs were visible years before mass violence erupted.

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Most people do not become a perpetrator through a single decision. Instead, they face many small choices: Do I obey? Do I stay silent? Do I go along just this once? The first harmful act makes the second easier, pulling people deeper into objectionable behaviour.

After crossing a line the very first time, people often feel guilt or shock. Instead of stopping, however, many justify their actions: the victim is dangerous, the situation exceptional, the cause just. In Rwanda, Smeulers noted, Tutsis were referred to as “cockroaches”, making violence easier to justify. Perpetrators convince themselves that their moral standards remain intact: you cannot kill a human being, but you can crush a cockroach. In such contexts, people reshape reality to protect their conscience. Smeulers cited the example of a WWII perpetrator who reframed shooting Jewish children as mercy killings, arguing that once the mother had been shot, the child could not survive anyway. In this way, he could justify his participation in genocide as an act of compassion.

Not all perpetrators are the same

Smeulers' research shows there is no single type of perpetrator. Some are leaders who organise violence. Some are true believers driven by ideology. Others seek power, money, or status. Many simply follow the crowd because they want to belong and fear standing out. Followers are –next to the profiteers– probably the largest group.

People struggle to resist in contexts that breed extreme violence. Group pressure plays a key role. People conform out of fear for their lives, their loved ones, social exclusion, or being seen as weak or disloyal. Smeulers cited a German reserve battalion of middle-aged men, not fanatical Nazis, who took part in the mass execution of Jews because of peer pressure and loyalty to their country – even when their commander gave them the option to refuse the order. Because people later need to justify what they did, participation can strengthen ideological convictions over time. Those not fully embedded in the group may find it somewhat easier to resist. But the example of a soldier at My Lai in the Vietnam War who shot themselves in the foot to avoid taking part in the killing of civilians shows how strong the pressure to conform can become.

The same applies to bystanders. People like to imagine a clear line between perpetrators and everyone else, ourselves included, but the reality is more complex. When people are aware of wrongdoing and stay silent, it signals acceptance and not only reassures perpetrators that nobody will intervene but perpetrators also qualify the silence of the bystander as approval. Over time, this helps to normalise repression and violence.

Mass atrocities depend not just on those who commit the crimes, but also on wider societies that are indifferent, accepting, or quietly complicit. Any set of beliefs can turn extreme. Nationalism, religion, communism, fascism, and even capitalism, shaped by colonial legacies and deep inequalities, can all become dangerous when they stop tolerating criticism.

How bubbles shape beliefs and behaviour

This sparked a broader debate about the dangers and opportunities of social media. Algorithms create bubbles that amplify people's fears and prejudices. This erodes the sense of a shared reality and makes it easier to see other groups as threats and to justify hostility or even violence. Similar dynamics are at work in conflicts and authoritarian systems. Perpetrators often operate within what Alette Smeulders describes as a separate moral world, where their actions go unchallenged, because everyone around them shares, or at least does not question, the same view. Sometimes, however, that bubble bursts. One torturer described how everything changed when he recognised a prisoner as the doctor who had treated him as a child. Suddenly, he no longer saw an enemy: he saw a person. Others only began to question their actions after leaving the group or when something happened in their personal lives that disrupted the justifications they had fed themselves.

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Yet the same group dynamics that can fuel violence can also encourage solidarity and courage.

Social media can also connect people, help them organise, and share their voices.

Positive behaviour spreads the same way as harmful behaviour: through visibility, support and social reinforcement.

The recent Red Line demonstrations were mentioned as an example. When people posted about attending, they discovered that many friends and acquaintances quietly shared their views. Once they realised they were not alone, others felt encouraged to speak out or join in. The hopeful takeaway: small acts can make a real difference and change what a community sees as normal.

Lessons for humanitarian workers

Smeulders emphasised that behaviour is deeply influenced by context, pressure, and social reinforcement, and can change when those conditions change. This nuance calls for restraint in categorising people as “good” or “evil”; black-and-white thinking must be avoided.

For humanitarian workers, this is not about excusing violence; it is about making sense of the perpetrators they encounter. Whether someone is part of an armed group, or acts out of fear, ideology, self-interest, or simple survival influences how you engage: there is no single “right” approach. This complexity does not disappear when conflicts end. In asylum centres, refugee settings or local communities, whether in Europe or in conflict-affected countries, practitioners may meet people who were once involved in violence but are now trying to rebuild their lives or come to terms with what they experienced and did. Outside the conflict setting, the social pressure and group dynamics that shaped their behaviour often fade, changing how they act and reflect on their past.

Meeting people who have committed terrible acts, yet still appear completely ordinary, can be very unsettling. And aid workers are only human. Many stay focused during interviews or fieldwork, only to feel the impact afterwards: anger, sadness, exhaustion, or even a sense of feeling dirty or contaminated, as if some of the immorality they encountered has rubbed off on them.

It is easy to see victims as traumatised and perpetrators as evil. Yet reality is more complicated. Victims undoubtedly carry deep wounds, but perpetrators can too. Guilt, flashbacks, depression and breakdowns may surface years later, once the group, ideology, or moral narrative that justified their actions falls away.

The examples shared by practitioners are especially hopeful here: former child soldiers and others once involved in violence who have gone on to become peacebuilders, community leaders, and human rights advocates. These stories matter because they show that people are not trapped in one identity forever. When circumstances change and the beliefs that sustained violence lose their grip, people can change, and sometimes even help repair the harm in which they were complicit. That was perhaps the most positive message of the session: the same ordinary people who can be drawn into violence are also capable, in the right circumstances, of helping societies heal and rebuild.

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