

Three Characters and a Tragedy

We used to think that if we knew one, we knew two, because one and one are two. We are learning that we must learn a great deal about "and."

--Arthur Eddington, Mathematician

The three characters in the tragedy of genocide are the bully, the bullied, and the bystander. There could be no genocide without a Talaat, a Hitler, a Hutu Power—the bullies, the *genocidaires*. But equally they could not have pulled off what they did without the complicity of bystanders. Author William Burroughs makes the provocative statement "There are no innocent bystanders," and then asks the equally provocative question, "What were they doing there in the first place?" These not-so-innocent bystanders circle around the bullied—the one who is targeted. Starting with the bully/bullies on the left side of the circle, counterclockwise in order of complicity, the various characters surrounding the target are:

A. **Bully/Bullies**—planners, instigators, and perpetrators, i.e., *genocidaires* who plan, instigate, and/or take an active part in the genocide.

B. **Henchmen**—who do the Bully's bidding by taking an active part, but do not actually plan or instigate the genocide.

C. **Active Supporters**—who cheer the Bully on and seek to reap the social, economic, political, and material gain resulting from the policy and procedures of the Bullies.

D. **Passive Supporters**—who get pleasure from the pain inflicted on the Target by others.

E. **Disengaged Onlookers**—who watch what happens and say, "It is not any of my business" or "It is a civil war," or cite "ancient animosities"; or turn a blind eye and pretend they don't see; or simply don't take a stand.

F. **Potential Witnesses**—who oppose the actions of the bullies and know they ought to help those targeted but, for a variety of reasons and excuses, do not act.

This vicious social arrangement makes the killings possible by inviting the merger of role and person that, in turn, creates the capacity for internalizing the evil and shaping later evil behaviors. In other words, each person in the scenario becomes a character actor—someone who specializes in playing the role of an unusual or distinctive character. Slipping into a role offered in the genocide circle, it is easy for the bystanders to become invested in the logic and evil-doing practices of the instigating organization and become not just complicit but "owned by it." In this tight-knit circle, characters find that the more cruel acts they perform, the more it enhances their reputation with the bullies (planners, instigators, and perpetrators) and among their peers. As this culture of cruelty flourishes, the characters are acting less and less out of obedience and compliance; in fact, they are often initiating and flaunting their own gratuitous and creative cruelties.

It is not a fluke that all three genocidal regimes—Young Turks, Nazis, and Hutu Power—introduced programs of nationalist indoctrination and paramilitary training for youth: Türk Gücü Cemiyeti, Hitlerjugend, and Impuzamugambi.

In *Defying Hitler*, Sebastian Haffner's disturbing 1939 memoir chronicling the rise of Nazism, the author, a law candidate, describes the insidious day-to-day changes in attitudes, beliefs, politics, and prejudices that began, for Germans, the slow descent into a "trap of comradeship" in which this culture of cruelty flourished as many of them became "owned by it." "Comradeship," as the Nazis meant it, became a "narcotic" that the people were introduced to from the earliest age, through the Hitler Youth movement (Hitlerjugend), the SA, military service, and involvement with thousands of camps and clubs. In this way, it destroyed their sense of personal responsibility and became a means for the process of dehumanization.

Haffner describes how this comradeship, in just a few weeks at a camp, molded a group of intellectual, educated men into an "unthinking, indifferent, irresponsible mass" in which bigoted, derogatory, and hateful comments "were commonplace, went unanswered and set the intellectual tone."

The Nazis used a variety of psychological stimulations and manipulations to this end, such as slogans, flags, uniforms, Sieg Heils, marching columns, banners, and songs, to help create a dangerous, mindless “group think.” One of the most disturbing aspects of this comradeship was how the men in the camp began to behave as a collective entity, who “instinctively ignored or belittled anything that could disturb our collective self-satisfaction. A German Reich in microcosm.” This collectivity is the “and” in Arthur Eddington’s mathematical formula. The bullies and the bystanders become a deadly combination that is more than the sum of its parts.

Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.
--Voltaire

G. Resister, defender, witness: There is an “or” that has the potential to radically change this formula. The fourth character, directly across from the bully, the antithesis of the bully, gives us hope that we can break out of this *trap of comradeship*. This character wears three different and vital garbs—those of the resister, the defender, and the witness. This character is one who will actively resist the tactics of the bully, stand up to the bully, speak out against the genocidal regime, and/or protect, defend, and speak up for those who are targeted. The cycle of violence can be interrupted when even one person has the moral strength and courage to resist the *genocidaires*, defend those who have been targeted, or give witness to the cruelty in order to get it stopped. This character is an awkward and embarrassing reminder that choices are possible, even in the midst of genocide.

In all three genocides, it was found that if one person (or a small group of dedicated people) refused to go along with the *genocidaires*, some others who were potential witnesses actually became witnesses, defenders, and/or resisters themselves. This group readily admitted that if it were not for those who took the lead in desisting, they probably would not have had the courage to do so themselves. In his research on “atrocities producing situations,” Robert J. Lifton came to the conclusion, “There’s no inherent human nature that requires us to kill or maim.... We have the potential for precisely that behavior of the Nazis ... or of some kind of more altruistic or cooperative behavior. We can go either way. And I think that confronting these extreme situations is itself an act of hope because in doing that, we are implying and saying that there is an alternative. We can do better.”

Herbert Kellman’s three conditions—unquestioning obedience to authority, routinization of cruelty, and dehumanization of a targeted group—help to set the stage for genocide and provide a necessary backdrop. Any time these three conditions exist in a society, a gang of bullies in positions of power can walk on with their genocidal script, get all the characters to rehearse, and raise the curtain on the first act.

People whose obedience is based on value orientation don’t merely obey; they take an active role in formulating, evaluating, and questioning the politics of the state. It is those who question and challenge who were seen as a grave threat to the genocidal regime because, even in the face of routinization of cruelty and the dehumanization policies and procedures, their moral inhibitions against violence remain strong. Railing against such cruelty and inhumanity often energizes resisters, defenders, and witnesses, growing even more daring, more convicted, more resourceful, and more committed to rescuing those who the regime has targeted for extermination.

