



# Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing

By James Waller

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Political or social groups wanting to commit mass murder on the basis of racial, ethnic or religious differences are never hindered by a lack of willing executioners. In *Becoming Evil*, social psychologist James Waller uncovers the internal and external factors that can lead ordinary people to commit extraordinary acts of evil.

Waller debunks the common explanations for genocide- group think, psychopathology, unique cultures- and offers a more sophisticated and comprehensive psychological view of how anyone can potentially participate in heinous crimes against humanity. He outlines the evolutionary forces that shape human nature, the individual dispositions that are more likely to engage in acts of evil, and the context of cruelty in which these extraordinary acts can emerge. Illustrative eyewitness accounts are presented at the end of each chapter. An important new look at how evil develops, *Becoming Evil* will help us understand such tragedies as the Holocaust and recent terrorist events. Waller argues that by becoming more aware of the things that lead to extraordinary evil, we will be less likely to be surprised by it and less likely to be unwitting accomplices through our passivity.

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### **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

From the Turks' massacre of Armenians in 1915 through the Serbians' slaughter of Bosnian and Albanian Muslims during the 1990s, the 20th century was an era of mass killing. Social psychologist Waller (*Face to Face: The Changing State of Racism Across America*) develops a four-layered theory of how everyday citizens became involved. First considering factors in evolutionary psychology such as humans' instinctive xenophobia and desire for social dominance Waller examines psychosocial influences on the killers, from people's willingness to obey authority even when causing others physical pain (the famous Milgram experiments of the early 1960s play a role here) to elements of rational self-interest (subscribing to, or at least not dissenting from, the norms of a military or other group). Waller's third element focuses on how some groups can create a "culture of cruelty," in which initially reluctant individuals ultimately commit heinous acts. In his last and most interesting section, Waller shows how a perpetrator learns to see his victim as a less-than-human "other," so that, in some cases, the victim is even blamed for his or her death. There is no new research here, and Waller's theory is quite complex. But he clearly and effectively synthesizes a wide range of studies to develop an original and persuasive model of the processes by which people can become evil.

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#### From Library Journal

Cambodia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and, of course, the Holocaust these are but a few examples of mass killing and attempted genocide. When such events come to light, civilized people are revolted, comforting themselves by believing that the perpetrators must have been insane. Yet later examinations of these atrocities frequently reveal the agents to be perfectly ordinary human beings, leaving the following question unanswered: what could possibly turn normal citizens into mass murderers? In this important synthesis of social psychology, evolutionary psychology, and historiography, Waller (psychology, Whitworth Coll., Washington; *Prejudice Across America*) draws on the work of Stanley Milgram, Philip Zimbardo, and other theorists to examine this question, arguing that only when we are fully aware of why such evils take place will we be less likely to allow them to happen again. Combining eyewitness accounts with his own scholarly but accessible analysis of atrocities from the past century, Waller studies the common traits among mass killers, the social contexts of several killings, and the targets against whom such violence has been perpetrated. Out of this examination he creates a paradigm for analyzing mass homicide that will generate considerable reflection and discussion. Highly recommended for every academic library. Christopher Brennan, SUNY at Brockport

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#### Review

"Clearly and effectively synthesizes a wide range of studies to develop an original and persuasive model of the processes by which people can become evil... an excellent choice for readers just beginning to investigate the phenomenon."--*Publishers Weekly*

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