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Chapter 1

Human Killing Machines

Despite a certain degree of progress, human history has been regularly marked by violence. People have evolved in many ways over the years, with great advances in politics, art, culture, and science. However, these developments have been offset by our darker side. Simply put—people have gotten smarter, more efficient, and more effective across the board, and tactics for violence have also continued to improve. As one of Mark Twain’s more compelling characters explains, “Cain did his murder with a club; the Hebrews did their murders with javelins and swords; the Greeks and Romans added protective armor and the fine arts of military organization and generalship; the Christian has added guns and gunpowder.”¹

Explosives, tanks, submarines, guided missiles, nuclear weapons, and now robotic killing machines—yes, the U.S. military actually expects a substantial fighting force of robot soldiers to be operational in less than a decade. “They don’t get hungry,” explains Gordon Johnson of the Pentagon’s Joint Forces Command. “They’re not afraid. They don’t forget their orders. They don’t care if the guy next to them has just been shot. Will they do a better job than humans? Yes.” Robot soldiers are not just a future possibility, says Johnson: they are a certainty.²

Ultimately, robotic killing machines may actually prove far less dangerous than their fully human counterparts. Humans do get hungry, they do get afraid. They do forget their orders and they do care if the friend next to them has just been shot. But their biggest weakness is the way they can allow themselves to be trained, indoctrinated, and reprogrammed by powerful organizations which claim to serve the greater good. Ultimately, it is *human killing machines* and the systems which produce them that remain the greatest man-made threat to the world today.

After all, violence is at its most dangerous when it is woven into a larger system. Random violence, spurts of anger, or crimes of passion may cause harm here and there, but when violence becomes the tool of a system that sanctions it as a necessary evil, the real carnage begins.

In such cases, the well-trained agents who carry out violence are usually removed from the decision-making process—they follow orders to storm hills, sack villages, interrogate prisoners, or execute the condemned without fully weighing the implications of their behavior. Sometimes this can be good: armies need disciplined soldiers who do not question every command from above. A purely democratic setup would cripple military effectiveness. On the other hand, such unquestioning obedience can be abused with devastating consequences, as it was during the Holocaust.

The Nazis' institutionalized form of genocide was perhaps the most horrifying element of their campaign. As Tzvetan Todorov attests, "The specificity of these crimes resides . . . principally in the Nazi project of *systematic murder* . . . no real parallel can be found for the systematic destruction of the Jews and of the other groups the Nazis deemed unworthy of existence."³ In his landmark assessment of the Nazis' deadly system, Raul Hilberg similarly points out that "Never before in history had people been killed on an assembly-line basis."⁴ Instead of building cars or sewing machines, the obedient German workers produced death and destruction. Even a commander of Auschwitz confessed, "Our system is so terrible that no one in the world will believe it to be possible."⁵ It is no coincidence that he did not say the German people, the Nazis, the Nazi doctors, the SS, the death camp guards, or even Hitler and his associates were particularly evil or terrible. He pointed to the *system*.

It takes a multifaceted system to indoctrinate people and produce a dutifully violent workforce, then fuse it with the best (or worst) that modern technology and modern management strategies have to offer. This is a deadly combination. Alone, even the most bloodthirsty individual could do relatively little damage with Cain's club. Give him modern weapons, and that man's destructive yield increases exponentially, but it is still relatively limited. Perhaps he can blow himself up in a crowded café, attempt to hijack an airliner and use it as a guided missile, or go berserk with a machine gun at a local school. But an ambitious, resourceful, and effective organization could use that man, along with hundreds of other people, to procure a weapon of mass destruction, gather critical intelligence on the patterns, tendencies, and weaknesses of enemies, and obtain the requisite documents and covert transportation for a savage bloodbath of unprecedented magnitude.

And of course, WMDs are not required for genocide or mass killing. A well-run organization can nearly perfect the task of killing by training its agents to carry out pre-programmed missions of violence. While purges, slaughters, and massacres were not new to the twentieth century, the Nazis used the leading

weapons, transportation, and administrative techniques of that time to increase the efficiency of their bureaucratic killing process.⁶ As Richard Breitman details, the Nazis combined “sophisticated technology and barbaric mass murder . . . in a highly industrialized society,” with truly horrible success.⁷

In recent years, terrorist organizations have similarly combined modern technology and advanced management techniques to produce death and destruction. Despite their successes, they have yet to reach their frightening potential. In *Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies Against America*, Walid Phares envisions the dangerous possibilities if Al Qaeda had waited seven more years before striking the U.S. on 9/11. What if they had prepared more diligently, allowed more operatives to infiltrate America, continued to exploit slumbering U.S. security officials (who only awoke after 9/11), and struck on September 11, 2008? Imagine a 9/11 with twenty-four planes being hijacked, truck and car bombs exploding at the FBI building and other significant targets, hundreds of snipers around the nation, including some armed with shoulder-fired missiles, dirty bombs in shopping malls and other public places, a widespread computer attack, and hostage-taking at local schools. In Phares’ nightmare scenario, the U.S. is virtually brought to its knees, and Al Qaeda terrorists strike a much more devastating blow than they did in 2001—one which cripples the U.S. domestically and destroys much of its national infrastructure.⁸ A multi-pronged attack that could wreak such devastation could only be produced through a terrorist organization’s use of modern management techniques, coordinated resources, and a sufficiently indoctrinated workforce with little concern for traditional moral values.

This book exposes the coercive methods which violent systems employ to condition and control their agents. By applying a model of systematic indoctrination to two famous psychological experiments and detailed case studies of Nazi Germany, Al Qaeda, modern day Iran, and Abu Ghraib, it will reveal how relatively ordinary people in different cultures and contexts can be transformed into obedient, violence-prone agents. The analytical framework is an extension of Stanley Milgram’s experiments on *Obedience to Authority*, Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment, Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman’s research *On Killing*, Ervin Staub’s theories on *The Roots of Evil*, Roy F. Baumeister’s investigation of *Evil*, James Waller’s research on *Becoming Evil*, and other leading scholarship.

The model also builds on Robert Johnson’s 1986 article “Institutions and the Promotion of Violence,” which outlines common links between institutional violence in a variety of contexts, including death camps, military battlefields, state prisons, police divisions, and industrial work environments.⁹ Johnson explains how organizations use specific strategies of authorization, bureaucracy, isolation, insulation, and dehumanization to shape their members:

The primary condition of institutional violence is some form of authorization to harm others by acts of commission or omission. These authorizations take hold

in institutions that are organized in the form of bureaucracies which are isolated from mainstream moral values or at least shielded from regular review and judgment in light of those values. These organizations, moreover, socialize their personnel so as to insulate them from awareness or appreciation of the moral dimensions of their behavior. Together, authorization, bureaucracy, isolation, and insulation foster dehumanization [which], in turn, is the key condition required to engage in or permit violence “without moral restraint.”¹⁰

When implemented properly, this recipe for violence conditions employees to carry out violence on command. However, not all people are equally well suited for the job, so careful recruitment and training of new workers is critical to ensure reliable productivity. Overall, this model is particularly useful for explaining—without excusing—violence produced in institutional contexts.

While the terms Johnson uses may seem somewhat abstract, they are concepts everyone can connect to. We have all been authorized by parents or bosses to complete tasks without fully understanding why. We have all worked or played in bureaucratic team settings, where we lack control and vision over the complete process. We have all appreciated that distance and isolation allow us to keep our secrets safe. Many of us have been dehumanized by others calling us names or making fun of us, and we may have dehumanized others, calling a dishonest man a “dog” or a “snake,” a tattletale a “rat,” or a sloppy eater or overweight person a “pig.” And many of us have experienced the pressures of overarching systems or organizations that try to influence our behavior in specific ways.

However, this book will reveal a much darker, more insidious threat than subtle social pressures. When many people undergo systematic indoctrination at the hands of an organization with violent intentions, the ethical and social restraints that typically keep them in line seem to disappear. Suddenly, it is a whole new world with “no holds barred.” The organizations’ new “machines” commit acts of violence without typical moral reflection or hesitation—they obediently perform brutal violence on command, even when it means abusing or killing people.