

The Role of Instigators in Radicalization to Violent Extremism

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Abstract

The present article constitutes a chapter of the final report of NATO HFM-140/RTO Task Group on Psychosocial, Organizational, and Cultural Aspects of Terrorism. The author served as the sole Canadian representative on this RTO Task Group. In this article, the author proposes the importance of clearly distinguishing between perpetrators of extremist violence and instigators of such violence. The first part of the paper examines why behavioural science theorists might be reluctant to focus on instigators and makes the case that such a focus is nevertheless important. The second part of the paper examines characteristics that differentiate instigators from perpetrators of collective violence. The final part touches upon some of the psychological factors that might be indicative of a tendency to favor violent solutions to real or perceived conflict.

Executive Summary

Introduction. The present article constitutes a chapter of the final report of NATO HFM-140/RTO Task Group on Psychosocial, Organizational, and Cultural Aspects of Terrorism. The author served as the sole Canadian representative on this RTO Task Group. The present chapter is based on an earlier presentation delivered to the Task Group at NATO Defence College in 2006. It also updates some earlier sources by the author, which are cited in the chapter.

Results. In this article, the author proposes the importance of clearly distinguishing between perpetrators of extremist violence and instigators of such violence. The main point is that instigators play a critical role in the *origination* of collective violence, whereas perpetrators play a critical role in its *execution*, and the latter tend to operate in the service of instigators.

The first part of the paper examines why behavioural science theorists might be reluctant to focus on instigators and makes the case that such a focus is nevertheless important. The author notes that instigators are often portrayed by psychological theorists as less explicable than perpetrators in terms of normal psychological processes and that attempts to focus mainly on understanding perpetrator behaviour may stem from their greater proximity to actual killing. The author argues, however, that it is precisely because instigators can motivate larger number of perpetrators to commit violent acts that their behaviour deserved research attention.

The second part of the paper examines characteristics that differentiate instigators from perpetrators of collective violence. The author proposes that, compared to perpetrators, instigators are less interchangeable, they tend to act as catalysts that transform preconditions for violence into actual violence, they exert power across a broader spectrum that includes control over capital and information as well as force, and they tend to use appeals to nationalism to recruit support for their cause.

The final part touches upon some of the psychological factors that might be indicative of a tendency to favor violent solutions to real or perceived conflict. The author emphasizes the potential importance of psychological factors such as threatened egotism (in a limited number of cases), totalistic (“black-or-white”) thinking, perceived threat to the integrity of one’s in-group by malevolent out-groups, and need for power.

Significance and future directions. This article makes the case for the importance of study instigators. It proposes that future research ought to examine both the stable characteristics of instigators of extremist violence, and how changes in these characteristics predict changes in support for violent measures. Ultimately, the hope is to move past merely post-hoc explanations of violent extremism and collective violence to models that offer some predictive or at least indicative utility as early or urgent warning systems for extremist violence. If instigators act as catalysts for such violence and play a non-interchangeable role, as proposed in this paper, then forecasting their intent and behavior ought to be a high priority for those tasked with countering violent extremism.

Psychological theory geared towards understanding collective violence, whether by violent state or non-state actors, has tended to focus on three groups: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Miller, 1999, Staub, 1989). In this paper, I propose that the category “perpetrators” needs to be refined or, rather, divided (also see Mandel, 2002a, 2002b; Victoroff, 2005). Specifically, those who instigate collective violence need to be distinguished from those who subsequently carry it out. We may call the former *instigators* and the latter *perpetrators*.

The main point is that instigators play a critical role in the *origination* of collective violence, whereas perpetrators play a critical role in its *execution*, and the latter tend to operate in the service of instigators. Of course, in some instances, the two sets of agents overlap. The lone-wolf terrorist (e.g., Theodore Kaczynski) epitomizes the case of strong, if not perfect, overlap, but also illustrates its limits. As the complexity of terrorist operations and the size of a terrorist organizations increase, the likelihood of instigators and perpetrators being one and the same steeply diminishes. As organizations grow, they also tend to grow more complex and, accordingly, the functions of their various members tend to become more differentiated. This is no different for organizations of violence. Hence, we should not be surprised to see a division of labor there too.

Instigators: Why Study Them? Why Don't We Study Them?

Given that it is the goals, plans, and acts of instigators that set in motion a complex, causal chain of events leading to collective violence, the importance of understanding the “psychology of instigation” should be evident. The significance of examining instigators, however, has often been downplayed in favor of understanding how presumably ordinary members of society can be led into becoming perpetrators of collective violence. For example, as Staub (1989) stated in reference to the Holocaust, “there will always be wild ideas and extreme ideologies. For us the question is how the German people came to follow a leader and a party with such ideas, and how they came to participate in their fulfillment” (p. 98). The implication here is that Hitler was possessed by these crazy ideas, and what is really important is not why he became possessed by them but rather why he was able to influence other “normal” people. By extension, this argument suggests that instigators are less worthy of research attention than the mass of perpetrators that may follow them, or the even greater mass of bystanders who may either support or oppose them, because instigators tend to be abnormal—possessed as they were by “wild ideas.”

One reason for this focus is social psychology's aim of formulating accounts that generalize to the mass of ordinary people. Instigators of collective violence, with their “wild ideas” and “extreme ideologies” do not seem to fit this mold. These theorists do not deny the importance of instigators, but view them as largely inexplicable in terms of the psychological processes used to describe “ordinary individuals.” Consider Stanley Milgram's statement that “the psychological adjustments of a Wehrmacht General to Adolf Hitler parallel those of the lowest infantryman to his superior, and so forth, throughout the system. *Only the psychology of the ultimate leader demands a different set of explanatory principles* (1974, p. 130, my italics).

Another reason for the reluctance to focus on instigators may be the concern that people will misconstrue explanations of their behavior as exculpatory statements. Indeed, this concern may be well founded: Miller, Gordon, and Buddie (1999) observed that explaining a perpetrator's behavior increased the likelihood of condoning that behavior. Of course, the same argument

could be used to justify why it would be better not to even try to explain perpetrators behavior.

Other possible reasons include the fact that perpetrators greatly outnumber instigators, and perpetrators tend to carry out the actual killings; thus, they may seem more important to understand. I would argue, however, that it is precisely because instigators can lead so many others to participate in acts of collective violence, or stand idly by while it unfolds, that we need to try to understand them as well as their followers and bystanders. In effect, if a behavioral science of the instigator was developed to the point where we were able to at least indicate with a fair degree of reliability which aspiring instigators were most likely to foment violent extremism, then such models might one day provide useful strategic and operational intelligence for counter-terrorism operations.

Studies of the integrative complexity (i.e., the degree of differentiation and integration of ideas or perspectives) of state leaders suggest that the goal of moving beyond post-hoc explanatory theories of motivation for violent extremism to indicative models of adversarial intent may be attainable. Several archival studies of leaders' or senior officials' statements across different historical periods during times of inter-state crises reveal that the decision to go to war is usually preceded by a significant decline in integrative complexity (e.g., see Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977; Walker & Watson, 1994; Wallace, Suedfeld, & Thachuk, 1993; for a recent review, see Suedfeld, Cross, & Stewart, 2009). Using this kind of dynamic analysis, along with profile analyses of state and non-state leaders, micro-level early warning models of instigators of violent extremism might one day be developed.

Characteristics of Instigators

Non-interchangeability

A defining feature of instigators, which serves to distinguish them perpetrators, is the non-interchangeable role that they serve in the development of collective violence. Underscoring this point, Ian Kershaw states "whatever the external circumstances and impersonal determinants, Hitler was not interchangeable" (1998, p. xxvii). The same could not be said even for top-ranking Nazi perpetrators of the Final Solution, such as Himmler or Heydrich. In rerunning history with Hitler, one can imagine substitutions for the others that would still leave the core features of the historical episode intact. Perhaps a substitution of Heydrich would have slowed the Final Solution and saved many lives that were lost, but it would not have prevented the Holocaust—at least, that is not easy to imagine *but for* Heydrich. In a similar vein, we can easily imagine substitutions of individual 9/11 terrorist hijackers and, yet, still imagine that the attacks would have taken place in essentially the same manner with different perpetrators. The same cannot be said for bin Laden. That is, it is much easier to imagine: "No bin Laden, no 9/11." The more general point is that most perpetrators of violent extremism, including high-level bureaucrats of systems of collective violence, will pass a counterfactual test of "undo-ability," whereas most instigators will fail the same test.

I am not aware of any study that has formally tested the non-interchangeability of instigators hypothesis. Nevertheless, I suspect that if one were to elicit the views of terrorism and political violence scholars or counter-terrorism practitioners about the non-interchangeability of instigators and perpetrators, a reliable and large difference would be found. This hypothesis could quite easily be tested in future research.

Catalysts of Violence

Instigators often achieve their non-interchangeable position by appealing to a mass audience. They may offer hope to their followers, usually in times of social crisis in which many are searching for meaning and a sense of belonging in their lives. This hope is energizing and provides a common vision, but it is often a vision that rests on hatred, distrust, and justification of violence. Hitler capitalized on Germany's high propensity for violence during a period of dramatic social unrest and consolidated immense power in the process. In exchange, he imparted a new form of coherence to an unstable social system, albeit one that culminated in incalculable misery and destruction and that proved to also be unstable. In so doing, his role was figural against a background of other enabling conditions and transformed those conditions. As Yehuda Bauer put it, Hitler was "the radicalizing factor" (1994, p. 308). Bauer's statement is indicative of an important point about instigators. It is characteristic of instigators, but not perpetrators, that they serve a *catalytic* or *radicalizing* role in the development of collective violence. The characteristic fits bin Laden as well: his key role as Al Qaeda's first in command, quite arguably, has been to incite and sustain widespread hatred toward the West and Israel. That is why the periodic releases of his tapes calling for renewed *jihad* have been damaging even if they are short on specifics. They inspire the idea, "Be creative. Find your own way of carrying out *jihad*. That is *your* duty to God."

The catalytic function served by instigators does not mean, however, that they are "initial causes" of collective violence. Rather, instigators increase the *propensity* for collective violence and intentionally act to *accelerate* its pace and *direct* its focus once it has started. For example, the racial antisemitism propagated by the Nazis under Hitler had as one of its own proximal causes the many antisemitic German writings and speeches of the late 1800s. If Hitler had not been exposed to these ideas as a young adult, it is unlikely that he would have turned out to be "Hitler" (Mandel, 2002b). Few instigators of collective violence construct their justifications for violence without influence from a mix of ideas that have already permeated the instigator's culture to some extent. In this sense, instigators can be seen as the conduit between the cultural background and the expression of violence that they help bring to the foreground.

Cross-spectrum Power Holders

In his analysis of power in contemporary societies, Alvin Toffler (1990) defined three forms: *low-grade* power relies on physical force or the threat of violence, *medium-grade* power relies on control of capital wealth, and *high-grade* power relies on access to, and control of, information and knowledge. A critical factor that distinguishes instigators from other perpetrators is the acquisition of power across this power spectrum. Instigators are likely to achieve higher positions of authority than perpetrators (including dictatorial or even quasi-messianic status). The roles that even high-ranking perpetrators take on tend to be shaped and sanctioned by these ultimate leaders (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). Unlike most perpetrators, instigators may attain the power to mobilize armies, paramilitary forces, and the police. Although the ability to achieve control over state apparatus may be limited for non-state instigators, their power in this regard will still tend to be greater than that of the perpetrators they lead.

Instigators are likely to have greater powers than perpetrators in many other respects as well. They tend to have better control over sources of financing and use of organizational resources. If they rise to power as state leaders they will have greater powers to change laws,

while as non-state actors they will have greater powers to challenge the validity of existing laws that do not serve their interests. Unlike perpetrators, a key task of instigators is to influence the attitudes of the masses in ways intended to serve their strategic intent. In short, instigators not only have the power to authorize individuals to participate directly in collective violence, they also have greater powers than perpetrators to shape bystanders' reactions to these events and establish the social parameters for depersonalization and stigma (Goffman, 1990) and dehumanization and moral exclusion (Bandura, 1999). In other words, whereas perpetrators with the support of their bureaucratic apparatus carry out violence, instigators play a key role in establishing the social preconditions whereby that violence is likely to be perceived as justified by sufficient numbers of active participants and passive bystanders to make its operational and strategic success possible.

Propagators of Nationalism

As LeBon (1896) emphasized over a century ago, the effective instigator energizes his followers by agitating their emotions and by appealing to the sentiments that guide their reason. In modern history, *nationalism* has been one of the most effective political strategies for accomplishing this goal (Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1986), and its success is fundamentally due to its psychological power.

On the one hand, nationalism creates an egotistic sense of in-group cohesion by emphasizing the shared greatness of a people. On the other hand, it exacerbates feelings of threat by pointing to the nation's precariousness, feelings of hatred and a desire for revenge by pointing to those deemed responsible for its hardships and failures, and feelings of insult due to the belief that one's nation has not received the respect it deserves.

As Isaiah Berlin noted long ago in an essay entitled, *The bent twig: On the rise of nationalism* (reprinted in Berlin, 1991), nationalism is often motivated by some form of collective humiliation. The same message was articulated decades later in Staub's (1989) book, *The Roots of Evil*, and later still in Stern's (2003) *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. It is interesting to note that when bin Laden in his August 23, 1996, *Declaration of War Against the Americans Who Occupy the Land of the Two Holy Mosques* issued a call for *jihād*, the call was for "a guerilla war, where the sons of the nation, and not the military forces, take part in it" (Federation of American Scientists, 2001). That is, bin Laden appealed not to Arab or Muslim states, but to the "Moslem nation."

Chiot (1994) has documented that, in case after case, twentieth-century tyrannies have been characterized by a combination of perceived national superiority coupled with perceived national threat and/or a collective sense of insult from the outside world. The Nazi image of a German master race threatened by an international Jewish plague that mocked Germany and her people illustrates the point. Similarly, bin Laden points to the "humiliation and disgrace" hurled on the Islamic world by the West "for more than eighty years" (Lewis, 2003). The reference to "eighty years" may not be evident to most Westerners of our generation, but it would not fail to have significance for Muslims likely to recall that in 1918 the Ottoman sultanate, the last Muslim empire, was defeated, occupied, and later partitioned by the British and French empires into Iraq, Palestine, and Syria (and later Lebanon). As Bernard Lewis (2003) points out, these insults must be understood in historical context, both in terms of the geopolitical reality that since the birth of Islam, Muslim empires ruled most of the civilized world for the next millennium and were exporters of civilization to the emerging West, and also in terms of the religious tradition of

jihād, with its dual connotations of militant struggle and duty to God.

According to bin Laden, “hostility toward America is a religious duty, and we hope to be rewarded for it by God” (PBS Frontline, 2001). The reframing of calls for violence as “duties” or “moral obligations” is a popular technique of instigators to legitimize collective violence. By linking the perpetration of terrorism to a religious duty, bin Laden uses God as the ultimate authority. In effect, bin Laden has claimed that if you fail to try to kill Americans, you have failed in your duty to God. Such messages can instill powerful feelings of moral obligation to an ideal or cause. Hannah Arendt (1965) noted in her famous report of the Adolf Eichmann trial how a strong sense of obedience to Hitler and his ideals served as an important source of Eichmann’s diligence in overseeing the transport of Jews to death camps during the Holocaust—so much so that Eichmann was willing to violate orders by his superior, Heinrich Himmler, toward the end of the Holocaust to stop transporting Jews to the death camps in order to follow what he believed was Hitler’s wish.

Nationalism and religious fundamentalism play upon a key aspect of human social cognition—the tendency to categorize individuals into groups. As we know from Tajfel’s (1981) classic work using the minimal group paradigm, people will discriminate in favor of in-group members and against out-group members even when the basis of social categorization is trivial (such as when an experimenter tells participants that their test scores reveal a preference for paintings by either Klee or Klimt). Nationalism is particularly effective at creating this sense of *us* versus *them* because nations (unlike states) tend to be defined in terms of features that are of high personal and social importance, such as ethnicity, race, religion, ideology, and language (Azzi, 1998). Consequently, the nation is likely to be seen not merely as an aggregate but as a cohesive *entity* (Campbell, 1958). For example, German *völkisch* nationalists conceived of their nation as an organic whole whose members were united by blood bonds that went back to the beginning of human history (Stackelberg, 1999). Religious fundamentalism goes even further: not only are there blood ties, there are also duties to God that serve to unite the *ummah* or nation of Muslim believers.

What Motivates Them? Psychological Determinants

For those of us who share very different political views, social perspectives, and cultural ideals from the instigators and their movements we wish to better understand, it may be tempting to think that instigators are savvy manipulators of the public that use nationalism merely as a means of political expediency and power grabbing. To be sure, successful instigators will use the sentiments of the masses to gain power and will most often do so strategically. But, it would be shortsighted to think that instigators were merely being Machiavellian, but that, privately, they were unconvinced of their own arguments. Rather, it appears that in many cases the motivation to instigate comes from a genuine sense of the same sentiments that instigators propagate or incense in their supporters.

Surely, there are numerous psychological factors that play a role in each case history. As I have examined elsewhere (Mandel, 2002b), Hitler’s rage seems to have been provoked in no small measure by an extreme form of *threatened egotism*, which as Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) define, refers “both to favorable appraisals of self and to the motivated preference for such favorable appraisals, regardless of whether they are valid or inflated” (p. 6). These authors have reviewed considerable literature indicating that violence is more likely to be carried out by people with high but unstable self esteem than by people with either high and stable self

esteem or low self esteem. In a similar vein, a recent vignette study conducted by my colleagues, Chelsea Ferriday and Oshin Vartanian, and I demonstrated that expressions of aggression (namely, willingness to deliver painful noise stimuli as feedback) toward another person were particularly likely if that person had just delivered negative feedback on the actor's performance to him or her in a public context and if the recipient of that feedback (that is, the participant) scored relatively high on a scale of narcissism.

There is of course an interesting parallel between this person-level characterization of the threatened egotist (or narcissist) and the group-level characterization of the threatened nation. Both share the elements of positive self-regard and a need for such positive appraisals, coupled with a sense of frustration that their deserved standing has been marred. But, it is unclear how well threatened egotism serves as an important psychological factor if we look across the spectrum of instigators. For instance, whereas Hitler met with much personal failure and was on the brink of destitution by the start of WWI (Kershaw, 1998), bin Laden came from one of the wealthiest Saudi families. On the other hand, bin Laden suffered a huge loss when his father divorced his mother and she was cast out. This may very well have caused a deep threatened sense of self. The hypothesis that threatened egotism played a key role in bin Laden's rise as an instigator, intriguing as it is, nevertheless remains speculative at this time.

Perhaps a more likely generalizable candidate for the indication of figures who may turn out to be instigators of collective violence is totalistic thinking, by which I refer to a constellation of factors including intolerance of ambiguity, an undifferentiated view of key issues, and an overriding confidence in the veracity and moral soundness of one's own belief and the falsity and moral corruptness or "evilness" of those who adopt alternative views (Mandel, 2002a).

Totalistic thinking has been central to many examples of armed conflict and collective violence. For Hitler, Germany was locked in a mortal struggle with two possible outcomes: utopia or perdition, with the Jew as the mortal enemy of the German (*Mein Kampf* means "my struggle"). For bin Laden, the struggle is between the true Moslem believers and the rest of the infidel world (one connotation of the term *jihad* is "struggle").

Two key factors emerge as important aspects of the instigator's justification for violence. First, there is a reduction of alternative perspectives to two sides that are seen as diametrically opposed and, thus, not in a position for negotiation. One's own side is unequivocally good, while the other is evil (Mandel, 2002a). Second, the stakes of the conflict are perceived as no less than existential in nature, thus conveying the clear message: *If the ends were ever to justify the means, the time is now*. Victory is thus associated with continued survival, while defeat is paramount to death. These aspects of the totalistic mindset may prove to be important preconditions for "radicalization" (Mandel, in press), that imprecise term often used these days to convey what goes on before the terrorists' bombs go off.

For instance, there is mounting experimental evidence that having one's attention directed to one's mortality can affect attitudinal support for violent measures (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008). For example, Pyszczynski et al. (2006) found that Iranians reminded of their impending death offered stronger support for martyrdom missions to kill Americans than Iranians not reminded of their death. These authors also found that American conservatives reminded of their mortality were more likely than control participants to support extreme military operations aimed at capturing or killing bin Laden that would also kill thousands of innocent people. The all-or-nothing "heaven or hell" rhetoric of instigators may reflect a similar process in which the morality of one's in-group (e.g., "the Aryan nation" for Hitler) is imagined as inevitable unless perceived threats from potentially hostile adversaries are

effectively eliminated. To date, no published studies have examined the effect of *collective* morality salience on support for violence, although my colleagues, Emily-Ana Filardo and Oshin Vartanian, and I are currently conducting an experiment that examines this issue.

As well, as noted earlier in this paper, considerable research has already documented that inter-state crises that culminate in war are usually accompanied by a significant decline in the integrative complexity of at least the leader of the aggressor state (e.g., Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977). Other work taking a trait rather than state approach has also shown that low conceptual complexity (essentially a trait variant of integrative complexity) is associated with higher distrust and aggressiveness (Driver, 1977; see Suedfeld et al., 2009, for a review). Hermann (1980) has shown that leaders adopting an independent style—namely, low conceptual complexity coupled with a high need for power, high perceived control, in-group favoritism, and out-group distrust—were more likely to pursue hostile policies toward other countries than leaders who had a participatory style consisting of the opposite characteristics. In a related vein, Smith, Suedfeld, Conway, and Winter (2008) found that, compared with Middle Eastern Islamist non-terrorist organizations, Middle Eastern Islamist terrorist organizations referred more positively to their own moral, religious, and aggressive values (and more negatively to the religious values of “infidels”), used more imagery for power, achievement, and in-group affiliation, and communicated at a lower level of integrative complexity.

These studies and many others support the idea that acceptance of violence as a means of dealing with conflict may be foreshadowed by an increase in a totalistic frame of reference that has little tolerance for alternative perspectives or shades of gray, especially when coupled with a high need for power and a perceived zero-sum competition with out-groups. Future research ought to examine both the stable characteristics of instigators of extremist violence, employing appropriate matched controls where possible, and how changes in these characteristics predict (or postdict) changes in support for violent measures. Such research is challenging because researchers with the technical skills to conduct archival research using thematic content analytic techniques (e.g., integrative complexity coding) may lack access to complete and accurately translated tracts of text. In order to do so effectively, behavioral scientists with the requisite skills may need to team up with governmental defence and security organizations. Such scientist-practitioner partnerships will be important if we want to move beyond vague stage models of “the radicalization process” and arrive at a deeper understanding of the instigation and perpetration of violent extremism.

Ultimately, the hope is to move past merely post-hoc explanations of violent extremism and collective violence to models that offer some predictive or at least indicative utility as early or urgent warning systems for extremist violence. If instigators act as catalysts for such violence and play a non-interchangeable role, as I have argued in this paper, then forecasting their intent and behavior ought to be a high priority for those tasked with countering terrorism and violent extremism.

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