**Studying Perpetrator Ideologies in Atrocity Crimes**

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Voltaire is often quoted as warning that "those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities".[1] From the earliest stages of serious research on atrocity crimes,[2] many scholars have backed Voltaire's claim. Atrocities almost always come accompanied by righteous justifications, involving claims that – from most outsiders' perspectives – seem incredible and abhorrent. The Nazi Holocaust occurred against the background of a regime ideology, widely and intensely propagated into German society, that asserted a fantastic conspiratorial and biologically rooted threat from Jews and other subhuman peoples, and valorised a brutal, martial image of the ideal German citizen (Mosse 1981; Aronsfeld 1985; Koonz 2003). Khmer Rouge mass killings in Cambodia were the product of a paranoid vision of enemies buried inside Cambodian society, and commitments to a vast and catastrophic project of social transformation that attempted to liquidate the urban classes of society (Jackson 1989; Williams and Neilsen 2016). One of the most infamous organizations in the Rwandan genocide, *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines,* propagated the hate ideology of the Hutu Power group that had taken over the government, raging against Tutsi subhumans, devils and traitors and urging Rwandan Hutus to murder them (Melson 2003; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Recent mass killings by Daesh in Iraq have been accompanied by slick propaganda that intensely glorifies masked killers and warriors, whilst promoting an apocalyptic and Manichean vision of a clash between believers and heretical unbelievers (Farwell 2014). Extreme ideologies are one of the most visible features of atrocity crimes, and the notion that they provide essential reasons for the violence is a familiar one in both academia and public commentary.

Yet scholars are, in fact, divided over the role and importance of ideology – which I define as *a distinctive overarching system of normative, semantic and/or purportedly factual ideas which*

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[1] It is a slight misquote, Voltaire's concern was more expansively with "injustices", see: Torrey 1961, 277.
[2] Following the current United Nations (2014, 1-2) conceptualization, I take atrocity crimes to consist of *genocide, crimes against humanity* and *war crimes.*

*provides a general understanding of the political world and guides political behaviour*[3] – in explaining the atrocity perpetrators' behaviour. Some works strongly emphasise ideology as the central and largely sufficient motivational factor for perpetrators, who are presented as overwhelmingly committed 'true believers' in the atrocity-justifying ideology. A much larger collection of scholars, however, display a high degree of scepticism over ideology's relevance, and downplay it in favour of other factors. Perhaps the most common stance is to recognise that ideology plays a relevant role as one causal factor amongst others, but to generally leave the exact nature of that role underspecified.

In this chapter, I suggest that these disagreements can only move towards some productive resolution through what I will call a *neo-ideological approach* to theorising and studying the ideological dimension of atrocity crimes. A neo-ideological approach affirms ideology as a central causal factor, but contends that it plays a much more complex role than traditional depictions of mass ideological conviction suggest. This approach draws together a number of arguments I have made in recent publications regarding exactly how ideology influences the perpetration of violence (Leader Maynard 2014; Leader Maynard 2015a; Leader Maynard 2015b; Leader Maynard 2015c; Benesch and Leader Maynard 2016), but I do not present this approach as essentially of my own authorship. It should instead be seen as a consolidation of important advances in recent scholarship on mass killing and atrocity crimes (Semelin 1993; Semelin 2001; Semelin 2007; Bellamy 2012a; Bellamy 2012b; Straus 2012; Straus 2015), and on ideology (Jost 2006; Jost et al. 2009; Freeden et al. 2013; Leader Maynard and Mildenberger 2016). This approach provides the most plausible theoretical interpretation of existing research on atrocities, emphasises the need for more extensive comparative study of the ideologies of violent political organizations and regimes,[4] and provides an initial framework for such study.

I proceed in three sections. In part I, I briefly survey existing accounts of ideology's role in atrocity crimes and the explain their shortcomings and the puzzles they leave for understanding perpetrator behaviour. In part II, I then explicate what I am calling the neo-ideological approach. I identify the key theoretical moves that I believe scholars need to make to properly appreciate

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[3] Such 'broad' definitions of ideology are now the norm in most fields of ideology research, and work on political violence and conflict. For similar conceptualizations see: Hamilton 1987, 38; Freeden 1996, 3; Ugarriza and Craig 2012, 450; Sanín and Wood 2014, 216

[4] Including, importantly, those organizations that embrace certain forms of violence but choose to *eschew* atrocities – see Goodwin 2007; Thaler 2012; Straus 2015.

ideology's role in extreme violence against civilians, and summarise some of the empirical evidence supporting such claims. In part III, I then briefly illustrate and support the claims of this approach by considering the Great Terror in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, comparing the features of this campaign of violence to more familiar cases in atrocity studies such as the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide.

## 1. Moving Beyond Existing Perspectives

The strongest advocates of ideology's importance in atrocity crimes present perpetrators as deeply committed believers in the righteousness of mass violence – an account associated most prominently with the work of Daniel Goldhagen (1996; 2010). But this is not a widely supported position in current research. Empirical studies have repeatedly revealed that the stereotype of ideological true believers motivated by passionate hatreds and dogmas typically appears to match only a relative minority of perpetrators: whether in Christopher Browning's famous study of Police Battalion 101's role in the Holocaust (Browning 1992/2001), Scott Straus's and Lee Ann Fujii's fieldwork in Rwanda (Straus 2006; Fujii 2009), recent work on perpetrators of Khmer Rouge mass atrocities in Cambodia (Williams and Neilsen 2016), studies of attitudes to Stalin's terror in the Soviet Union (Arch Getty and Manning 1993; Davies 1997; Arch Getty and Naumov 1999; Figes 2002; Priestland 2007), or examinations of ethnic violence in the Wars in Yugoslavia (Mueller 2000; Gagnon 2004; Malešević 2006, ch.7 & 8). As I shall stress, this does not mean that non-fanatical perpetrators are entirely unaffected by ideology. But its prevalence is evidently more uneven and its causal role more complex that the strongest portrayals suggest.

In light of such research, many scholars adopt a much more sceptical stance on ideology's significance, and instead emphasise perpetrators' strategic or opportunistic motives for the violence (Posen 1993; Kalyvas 1999; Valentino et al. 2004; Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Downes 2008), or the role of small-group dynamics and local political pressures in inducing perpetration (Browning 1992/2001; Roth 2005; Fujii 2009). Such accounts find further support in quantitative conflict data, which reveals that patterns of violent atrocities frequently conform to the predictions of more 'rationalist' models which neglect ideology.

Yet a broad range of recent research on ideology's role in mass atrocities – and closely related forms of political violence – raises patterns that such sceptical stances regarding ideology cannot account for. Ideological differences across individuals, groups and societies do seem to

shape behaviour in powerful ways, and produce divergent responses to similar environmental conditions. As Scott Straus shows, for example, multi-ethnic, undemocratic and unstable societies confronted with crisis do not uniformly resort to ethnic warfare and genocide. When elites buy into exclusionary, out-group-denigrating ideologies that encourage a widespread perception of violence as beneficial and legitimate, genocide or "mass categorical violence" is likely. But elites with more inclusive ideological narratives of their society show considerable reluctance to perpetrate violence against minority groups (Straus 2015; Bellamy 2012b). Non-state actors, likewise, do not uniformly resort to atrocities against civilians whenever there could be military advantages to do so. Some groups eschew such violence on ideological grounds, while others engage in it enthusiastically (Ron 2001; Goodwin 2007; Thaler 2012; Asal et al. 2013; Sanín and Wood 2014; Costalli and Ruggeri 2015). The escalation of or resistance to violence is also often patterned in ways reflecting ideological attitudes of local groups or commanders (Semelin 1993; Matthäus 2007; Collier and Vicente 2013; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Perpetrators of terrorist atrocities also do not behave quite as sceptical models would predict – ideologies affect both how such organizations target their violence, and the level of violence they engage in (Drake 1998; Asal and Rethemeyer 2008b; Asal and Rethemeyer 2008a). These patterns confound the suggestion that ideology is essentially a post-hoc rationalization and epiphenomenal to perpetration (Kalyvas 1999, 251; Kalyvas 2006, 46; Waller 2007, 49; Fujii 2008, 570). Moreover, whilst research does not back up portrayals of perpetrators as uniformly true believers, it also does not support the suggestion that ideology is hardly ever internalized by perpetrators. Studies such as Omar Bartov's study of the letters and diaries of soldiers in Hitler's armies (Bartov 1994), Michael Mann's biographical analysis of fifteen hundred perpetrators in the Holocaust (Mann 2000), Yaavoc Lozowick's study of German bureaucrats under the Nazis (Lozowick 2000), or Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern's study of perpetrators of mass rape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Baaz and Stern 2009) typically find that whilst perpetrators often do not adopt extreme ideologies wholesale, they do internalize critical ideological components that serve to make their actions appear justified.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many scholars suggest that ideology is an important factor in atrocity crimes, but acknowledge its uneven internalization and suggest that it is only one of many influences on perpetrator behaviour. Several prominent risk assessment frameworks take this stance (Harff 2003; United Nations 2014), as do some of the most influential overarching works

on atrocity crimes (Fein 1990; Valentino 2004; Semelin 2007; Straus 2016). Some scholars construct perpetrator typologies which present an "ideological killer" or "fanatic" as one, but only one, type of perpetrator (Mann 2005, 27-9; Smeulers 2008, 244-260). Alternatively, atrocities themselves may be so categorized, with only a subset declared to be 'ideological' (Fein 1990; du Preez 1994, 66-78).

In general, however, such accounts remain vague on the exact role ideology plays. Typologies, though an advance in appreciating the heterogeneity of perpetrators, imply a problematic compartmentalization of ideology's relevance to only certain sub-sets of participants or cases – the most blatantly 'ideological' types – when real world ideologies clearly have influence over people besides the most committed 'true believers' (Neumann 2013, 881). More generally, research on atrocity crimes has not developed a clear account of the causal mechanisms or constitutive relationships that underlie observable ideological patterns or predictive macro-level variables, and explain how these link to actual perpetrator behaviour. Whilst this is not the aim of all scholarly work on atrocities, increasingly prevalent accounts of the character of effective scientific explanations stress that such indeterminacy leaves knowledge fundamentally incomplete (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010; Ylikoski 2013). The *United Nations Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes,* is typical of this indeterminacy and its problems. It affirms the relevance of ideology under its fourth 'risk factor', in the following terms:

> "[I]t is extremely important to be able to identify motivations, aims or drivers that could influence certain individuals or groups to resort to massive violence as a way to achieve goals, feed an ideology or respond to real or perceived threats… No one specific motive or incentive will automatically lead to atrocity crimes, but certain motives or incentives are more likely to, especially those that are based on exclusionary ideology, which is revealed in the construction of identities in terms of "us" and "them" to accentuate differences. The historical, political, economic or even cultural environment in which such ideologies develop can also be relevant" (United Nations 2014, 13).

This paragraph – the only mention the *Framework* makes of ideology – highlights how weak understanding of the specific role(s) played by ideology in perpetrator behaviour is likely to trickle down into a weakness in practically assessing ideological contributions to the risk of atrocities, since crucial risk assessment questions are left unanswered. Where do we look for motives based on an exclusionary ideology? Are 'us' and 'them' differences the only relevant indicator that an ideology may raise the risk of violence? Given how widespread such assertions of difference are, do they always suggest significant danger? How is the 'political, economic, or even cultural environment' relevant, and how do we assess when it, in combination with ideology, truly promotes atrocities?

Recent work on ideology's role in atrocities is beginning to address such indeterminacy (Bellamy 2012b; Straus 2015; Williams and Neilsen 2016; Hirose et al. 2017; Balcells 2017). But since different causal effects of ideology are focused on by different scholars, there is a need to consolidate the key insights of recent work into a consolidated synthetic framework for thinking about the role ideology plays in mass atrocities. I present the neo-ideological approach as such a framework.

## 2. A Neo-Ideological Approach

I summarise the neo-ideological approach as involving six key claims.

First, a neo-ideological approach resists the tendency to present ideologies as extraordinary, extreme, dogmatic, highly systematised or fanatically endorsed forms of political thinking. Such a presentation is inconsistent with the vast majority of contemporary specialist work on ideology, and with a basic awareness that political worldviews as widespread, mainstream and pragmatic as liberalism, conservatism, or social democracy are described in both lay and scholarly discourse as ideologies. The fact that many perpetrators of mass atrocities are, as many scholars stress, 'ordinary'[5] (Browning 1992/2001; Smeulers 2004; Waller 2007; Jensen and Szejnmann 2008), does not indicate that they are not influenced by ideologies since ideologies are themselves

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[5] Scholars are not always clear or consistent on exactly what is meant by 'ordinary' in this context. It is always intended to convey that perpetrators are not *psychologically abnormal* in the sense of psychopaths or intense sadists. Sometimes, however, scholars also seem to want to express that perpetrators are not fanatical adherents to "extraordinary ideologies" – see, in particular, Waller 2007. Either way, ordinariness is compatible with less fanatical or totalised forms of ideological influence.

profoundly ordinary.[6] As Aletta Norval summarises: "It is this emphasis on the *ubiquity* of ideology…that is at the heart of contemporary approaches to the question of ideology" (Norval 2000, 316). This is also a feature of recent work in the study of violence, conflict and atrocities. Francisco Gutierrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood argue that "all armed groups engaged in *political* violence – including ethnic separatist groups – do so on the basis of an ideology, that is, a set of ideas that include preferences (possibly including means toward realizing those preferences) and beliefs" (Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). Alex Alvarez similarly affirms that "ideology is a central feature of genocide generally… all genocides have an ideological component that is integral to enabling and facilitating the perpetration of this particular form of group violence" (Alvarez 2008, 215) since "all communal life is, to some extent, ideological" (Alvarez 2008, 217). Thus, contrary to the tendencies of earlier scholarship to associate ideology only with those atrocities committed on a blatantly totalitarian or exclusionary rationale (Chalk and Jonassohn 1990, 29; Fein 1990; Fein 1993, 98; Harff 2003, 61), a neo-ideological approach recognises that there is an ideological dimension to all atrocity crimes. The causal or explanatory significance of that dimension is open to question, but is determined by empirical enquiry and not simply by how we conceptually typologise the most obvious apparent rationale (retribution, greed, etc.) for the violence. To argue that ideology does play a significant role is to argue that distinctive systems of ideas about politics vitally shaped perpetrator behaviour. It need not involve the suggestion that perpetrators acted out of some sort of ideological "madness" and should actively affirm that there are reasons and rationales behind atrocity,[7] but ones that are importantly embedded in ideologies.

Second, and relatedly, a neo-ideological approach emphasises that the causal impact of ideology on atrocity perpetration does not solely occur through highly committed belief, and ideology is therefore not only relevant in explaining the behaviour of 'true believers'. There are two principal reasons for this. For one, all ideologies exert some psychological influence over many who are not wholesale converts – such as sympathisers and fellow-travellers who, without totally internalising a given ideology, *partially and selectively* internalise its claims in ways that

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[6] Only a distinct strain of political science research denies this – seeing ideologies as only really prevalent amongst political elites – see, e.g.: Converse 1964; Glazer and Grofman 1989. This rests, however, on a much more restrictive notion of ideology than that found in most other research – see: Jost 2006; Jost, et al. 2009; Leader Maynard and Mildenberger 2016.

[7] In contrast to the implicit picture of ideological explanations in, for example: Kalyvas 1999, 247 & 251; Waller 2007, 101-2.

can vitally bear on their willingness to participate in violence. Thus, Omar Bartov's study of German Army involvement in the Nazi atrocities found that most ordinary soldiers, whilst not fanatical believers in Nazism, did internalize many elements of the Nazi regime's framing of the war against the Soviet Union as a clash with an irredeemably evil 'Judeo-Bolshevism' and the Nazis' ideological valorization of violence and brutal, merciless warfare (Bartov 1994). Similarly, whilst ordinary Rwandans did not appear to be guided by 'ancient hatreds' or widespread internalization of Hutu Power ideology as suggested by traditional-ideological approaches, there were varying degrees of internalization of the regime's ideological representations of a coordinated Tutsi threat that 'activated' and polarized conceptions of Hutu and Tutsi identities (McDoom 2012, 132-155). A neo-ideological approach also distinguishes between two different roles for internalized belief: the actual *motivation* of participation in violence – providing the active impulse for a perpetrator to participate – and the *legitimation* of such participation – making it appear permissible to engage in the violence. These do not have to go together – perpetrators of mass atrocities who are motivated by more mundane strategic or material concerns may still have internalized ideological legitimations critical to their ability to see their behaviour as justified and avoid (often psychologically consequential) moral doubts. As political psychologists John Jost and Brenda Major point out: "the carrying out of extreme acts of exploitation, violence and evil is socially and psychologically feasible only to the extent that perpetrators are able to make their actions seem legitimate" (Jost and Major 2001, 5). Ideology may vitally enable or restrain such legitimation even when it is not implicated in perpetrators' motives at all.

The other reason not to allow a focus on ideology to restrict attention to true believers, however, is that ideologies can affect behaviour through causal mechanisms that do not require *any* sincere internalization of the ideology, but which are instead a consequence of the way ideologies generate *social structures*.[8] Every individual exists in ideological environments constituted by the apparent beliefs of the groups and organizations with which they interact, and those environments influence the individual's behaviour independently of their own beliefs (or lack thereof) in the ideologies in question. If, for example, one is a member of a paramilitary group which stridently proclaims a racist ideology, one is likely to repeat the claims and behaviour demanded by that ideology even if one does not, deep down, believe in them – it is costly to go against the grain. Or, if everyone in one's local community appears to believe that certain ethnic

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[8] I expand on this point in: Leader Maynard 2017a; Leader Maynard 2017b.

minority members are involved in plots against society at large, there may be significant social costs to contesting this notion, but by endorsing it, one can solicit support from government elites, outmanoeuvre local political rivals, publicly legitimate the theft of wealth from victims, and so forth. So the manifestation of ideology in social structures, incentivises conformity to the ideology even in the absence of internalization. Moreover, since all individuals face such incentives, it may not take many 'true believers' to hold such ideological structures together: even large numbers of non-believers may stay silent or publicly endorse radical ideologies, further strengthening an extreme ideology's apparent hold over the ideological environment.[9] The fact that deep belief in an ideology is not the underlying motivation for all this structurally induced behaviour does not change the fact that *ideology remains critical* to explain perpetrator behaviour – the nature of the meso level (organizational) or macro level (societal) ideological structures alters the micro-level behaviour of perpetrators.[10] This isn't to downplay internalization – ideological structures capable of inducing large-scale participation in mass atrocities generally require a considerable number of individuals committed to an atrocity-justifying ideology at the organizational centre and implementational peripheries to drive forward the violence, discourage defection, and prevent effective contestation of the ideological environment. But a neo-ideological approach focuses on the *joint impact* of the internalized and structural causal mechanisms through which ideology shapes behaviour.

Third, and building on this discrimination between different causal mechanisms linking ideology to behaviour, a neo-ideological approach emphasises that perpetrators of atrocities are not ideological homogenous: different individuals internalize different elements of ideology to differing degrees, and ideology typically plays different key roles for different sorts of perpetrator (Waller 2007, 185-6). A key insight of leading work on atrocity crimes is that these are generally *coalitional* campaigns of collective violence involving coordinated action between many different sorts of actors. Atrocities emerge out of the interaction of dynamic processes of policymaking, organization, mobilization, implementation, passive inaction by bystanders, and efforts at contestation and resistance – ideologies are implicated in all of these processes in different ways. They shape the choices and capacities of elite policymakers, provide the self-understandings and rationalizations of direct killers, and shape the institutional cultures of organisations linking

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[9] On such 'preference falsification' and its political consequences, see: Kuran 1989.
[10] On the micro/meso/macro distinction, see: Straus 2015, ch.2.

policymakers to direct killers (Bloxham 2008). In general, research on atrocity-justifying ideologies suggests that they tend to be more deeply internalized by, and play a more crucial role for, elite policymakers (Valentino 2004; Straus 2015; Kim 2016). Direct killers are more likely to either internalize dominant ideologies partially and inchoately, or participate through the social pressures generated by radicalized ideological environments (e.g. McDoom 2012; Neilsen 2015). In both cases, though, this is a generalization – some policymakers may lack deep commitment to the ideology, and there are always considerable numbers of direct killers who possess it. Ideologies are powerful, precisely because they can bind heterogeneous collectives of individuals into coordinated programmes of violence by providing a broad and mutually reinforcing plethora of available justifications.

Fourth, rather than presenting strategic or social-psychological explanations of mass atrocities as standing in opposition to explanations which emphasise ideology (Goldhagen 1996, 152-4; Roth 2004; Roth 2005), a neo-ideological approach stresses the critical interaction between strategic concerns, social-psychological conformity effects, and ideology. On the strategic side, it is true that ideologies often explain why individuals deviate from purely rational choice models of thought and strategic behaviour. Real world individuals are – as rational choice theorists are typically aware – not purely rational, and rely on cognitive frameworks such as ideologies to interpret the world and make decisions (Fearon and Wendt 2002; Walker and Schafer 2006). But the opposition of ideology to strategic or pragmatic concerns like security, power and material enrichment is a fundamentally false dichotomy. Real world individuals pursue such strategic or pragmatic concerns, but *whilst relying* on perceptions, assumptions, frameworks, expectations and interests shaped by their distinctive ideologies. In atrocity after atrocity, we find perpetrators evidently motivated by fear and the perception that those they kill are fundamentally threatening – but these perceptions are largely the product of ideological viewpoints, not objective realities. Atrocities are thus, as Jacques Semelin argues, *strategically functional from a certain ideological standpoint* (Semelin 2001; Semelin 2007). Moreover, a recurring feature of recent work on ideology's role in a wide variety of forms of political violence is the repeated finding that the interaction of power/security and ideology best explains outcomes (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008b; Staniland 2015; Balcells 2017). A neo-ideological approach thus contends that focusing on either ideology or strategy in isolation is deleterious.

On the social-psychological side, I have already emphasized how social-psychological conformity effects often explain how ideological structures can induce perpetrator behaviour even in the absence of internalization. But beyond this, a neo-ideological approach emphasises that the 'situations' to which human beings have a tendency to conform are not self-evident, objective facts about the world, but social scenarios perceived, mediated, and rendered meaningful through mental models and schemas, including internalized ideologies (Newman 2002, 51 & 60-62). Leading theorists of conformity effects, authority and group pressures actively affirm this, though some invocations of social psychology to explain atrocities do not (e.g. Roth 2004; Roth 2005). Philip Zimbardo, creator of the (in)famous Stanford Prison Experiment, has recently acknowledged that a core weakness in early work on the experiment was the neglect of ideology's role in constituting the 'system' of the prison scenario in which abusive behaviour was so encouraged (Zimbardo 2007, 226-7). The most powerful explanations of perpetrator behaviour will therefore be those that capitalise on the vital intersection between internalized ideology, ideological structures, and social-psychological tendencies (see also: Haslam and Reicher 2008).

Fifth, neo-ideological approaches emphasise that a broad range of ideological content can relevantly bear on the violence: the ideological justification of atrocity is not reducible to the inculcation of totalitarian political visions or hate-filled 'us/them' exclusionary identities, though of course these can matter. Ideologies provide multiple justifications for violence, and they also – critically – generally contain certain ideas that can restrain violence in certain contexts too. Ideologies can thus serve as a catalyst for atrocities but also as key restraint – and joint theorisation of their catalytic and restraining properties is necessary to explain the occurrence and scale of mass atrocities (Straus 2012; Straus 2015). In social contexts with ideologies that contain strong *justificatory mechanisms* for violence and weak *restraining mechanisms,*[11] people are encouraged, by both internalized and structural pressures, to engage in atrocities. By contrast, in social contexts with ideologies with comparatively weak *justificatory mechanisms* and comparatively strong *restraining mechanisms,* people are encouraged not to engage in atrocities. In other words, the *balance of justificatory pressure* within prominent ideologies, and the balance of relatively justificatory vs. relatively restraining ideologies in a particular group or society, substantially affects the likelihood of people perpetrating atrocities and, consequently, the scale of atrocities that do occur.

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[11] On notions of mechanisms, see: McAdam, et al. 2008; Hedström and Ylikoski 2010; Elster 2015, ch.2.

Comparative study of perpetrator ideologies across cases can make it possible to theorise generalizable patterns in the justificatory and restraining mechanisms that ideologies tend to deploy. Drawing together existing work in this area with my own research on several major cases,[12] I argue that there are six dominant recurring ways in which ideologies serve to make atrocities appear justified: by creating ideological perceptions of victims groups as highly *threatening*; by presenting members of those groups as *guilty* and thus deserving of violence; by *valorising* violence against civilians so as to make it appear a praiseworthy expression of duty, toughness or other positive virtues; by creating expectations of immense *future benefits* that will eventually outweigh the harm to victims created by atrocities; by *dehumanizing* victims; and by convincing perpetrators that there are *no other realistic alternatives* to violence (Leader Maynard 2015a; Leader Maynard 2015c, 70-71). Human beings tend to kill groups of civilians because they have internalized, to some degree, such ideas, and/or because such ideas have become embedded in their ideological environments to the point that even individuals who do not deeply internalize them face considerable structural pressure to perpetrate the atrocities justified by such ideas. Similar mapping of recurring ideological restraints on violence may also be possible. Studies of cases where atrocities are avoided, kept to a very low level, and/or face high resistance suggest that ideological perceptions of the *inefficacy* and costliness of violence; *inclusive* notions of identity that see potential victims as emotionally and morally connected to potential perpetrators; *stigmatisation* of violence such that it appears morally dubious, potentially shameful, or prohibited; and the ideological perception of available *alternatives* to violence as a way of resolving key political problems, are all likely to reduce the likelihood that potential perpetrators may see mass atrocities as justified (see, in general: Semelin 1993; Collier and Vicente 2013; Benesch 2013; Kogen 2013; Straus 2015).

Finally, a neo-ideological approach does not present ideologies as a static, fixed property of groups or regimes. Instead, it calls attention to vital processes of intellectual production, agency, propagation, radicalization and – just as crucially – contestation, which should all be seen as crucial components of the broader and non-linear trajectories that can produce mass atrocities. Ideological radicalization is a key part of the "extremist normative mobilization" (Simon 2012, 7) that precedes

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[12] Thus far my own research has analysed Nazi atrocities, violent repression in Stalin's Soviet Union and allied aerial bombing in World War II in some detail, coupled by analysis of the secondary literature on a broad range of other cases including the Rwandan Genocide, Khmer Rouge mass killing in Cambodia, and Jihadist terrorist atrocities by Al-Qaeda and Daesh.

atrocity, and which develops further *during* campaigns of violence (Fujii 2008, 569-70; McDoom 2012, 121). This does not render ideology 'effect rather than cause' – long-standing ideological environments provide more or less fertile ground for radicalization, and across cases of mass atrocity, justificatory ideas can be found to predate violence. The outcome of contested attempts at radicalization is not a foregone conclusion and is shaped by the existing balance of cultural and symbolic power in an ideological environment. When radicalization attempts succeed, however, both the individual mindsets and social pressures that produce atrocities are strengthened.

From a neo-ideological approach, then, there is not *one role* or *one mindset* that sums up ideology's impact on mass atrocities. The study of perpetrator ideologies involves rich interpretive analysis of the heterogenous ideological makeup of any case of mass atrocities, and the detailed unravelling of the multiple processes through which ideologies shape different sorts of violent behaviour at different parts of the apparatus of violence. Recognised in this light, it is clear why, though it operates in interaction with other factors and motives, ideology is central to all atrocity crimes. As Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan therefore suggest, "[t]he ideological notions and inimical preoccupations of groups must be studied and compared from one case to another, if we are to understand the political conditions for acts of genocide" (Gellately and Kiernan 2003, 375). A neo-ideological approach provides the most empirically plausible and theoretically sophisticated framework for such comparative study to occur.

| **Table 1 – Summarised elements of a neo-ideological approach** |
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| 1. Ideologies are not extraordinary or deviant but ubiquitous and inescapable features of politics. |
| 2. The causal influence of an ideology is not limited to its most committed 'true believers'. Ideologies shape perpetrator behaviour through both *internalized* and *structural* causal mechanisms, and can independently *motivate* and *legitimate* violence. |
| 3. Perpetrators are not ideologically homogenous, and ideologies typically play different key roles in different parts of the organizational apparatus of atrocity perpetration. |
| 4. Ideological factors operate alongside, and in critical interaction with, strategic and social-psychological factors. |
| 5. Multiple kinds of ideological content – both justifications for and restraints on violence – may bear on perpetrator behaviour. |
| 6. Ideologies are not static, so explanations of atrocity perpetration should analyse specific processes of individual and social radicalization towards violence as well as the broader potential for such radicalization in antecedent ideological environments. |

**3. Illustration: Stalin's Great Terror**

I conclude by illustrating the neo-ideological approach through a brief examination of the Soviet Great Terror of 1937-38 – a case intensely studied by historians and with abundant primary documentation, yet one that makes relatively rare and brief appearances in general scholarship on atrocity crimes. This brief exposition of the ideological dynamics of the Great Terror is obviously not a 'proof' of the general validity of the claims made in this chapter, which are rooted in broader comparative research on ideology's role across cases. But it serves to support those claims, and illustrates the way they explicate the critical contributions ideology makes when applied to real world atrocities crimes.

The Great Terror, though often presented as an internal purge of the Communist party, involved overlapping campaigns of violence directed against a broad array of groups the Stalinist regime considered potential enemies or "socially harmful elements" (Hagenloh 2000). In two years, 681,692 people were sentenced to death in state security trials, and several hundred thousand more perished in labour camps (Overy 2004, 194-5). Several familiar factors, largely unrelated to ideology, encouraged this violence, including a threatening international system, a highly authoritarian government, and challenging economic and social instability. Nevertheless, the Great Terror cannot be presented as simply the most rational response by the Soviet regime to insecurity and crisis: the threats targeted by the Red Terror were largely the fictitious or hugely exaggerated constructions of Stalinist ideology, the violence and associated upheaval in many respects weakened state security (especially through the tremendously self-harming purge of the senior ranks of the Red Army), and Stalin's Five Year Plans, while miserable for many, had not precipitated the sort of dire economic crisis sometimes posited as a trigger of mass violence. Threat, authoritarianism and crisis all played a role in the Great Terror, but it is inexplicable without taking the ideological perceptions of the Stalinist elite and the ideological influences on mass participation into account.

Those ideological dynamics are in many respects similar to that of other atrocity crimes. Consistent with the sixth element of a neo-ideological approach, critical processes of radicalization worked off a fertile ideological inheritance. Much as Nazi ideology involved the radicalization and propagation of ideas rooted in longer-standing far-right German nationalism and 19th Century Volkish ideology (Mosse 1981), or Hutu Power ideology in Rwanda radicalized colonially propagated ethnic myths and cultural concepts of the 'Hutu revolution' of 1959-1961 (Straus 2015,

277-81), Stalinism emerged out of the milieu of Revolutionary Marxist ideologies that took their most vehemently bellic form in Marxist-Leninism (Ryan 2012). Marxist-Leninists had long claimed that revolutionary violence was inevitable and necessary. As Lenin wrote in 1906:

> "We would be deceiving ourselves and the people… if we concealed from the masses the necessity of a desperate bloody war of extermination, as the immediate task of the coming revolutionary action" (Ryan 2012, 40).

Dehumanization was rife in this vision – as Michael Mann summarises:

> "From 1920 Lenin described enemies in terms eerily anticipating the SS: 'bloodsuckers,' 'spiders,' 'leeches,' 'parasites,' 'insects,' 'bedbugs,' 'fleas,' the language suggesting threatening and dehumanized enemies infecting the people requiring cleansing" (Mann 2005, 322)

Marxist-Leninist ideology also contained few restraints on violence, since moral qualms were taken to indicate a muddleheaded failure to see through bourgeois hypocrisy. Moreover, Marxist-Leninist ideology asserted that the eventual outcome of revolutionary violence would be a utopian society – and it was *guaranteed* that violence would bring about such a society thanks to the unshakeable economic laws revealed by Marxism. As a necessary step to such a society, with all the benefits it would bring, violence was a small cost, and Lenin promised that in the future "the cruelty of our lives, imposed by circumstance, will be understood and pardoned. Everything will be understood, everything" (Lukes 1985, 121). Soviet leaders and citizens were not blameworthy for the violence they enacted – this was imposed by the necessary context of a revolutionary struggle.

As part of Lenin's Bolshevik movement, Stalin was socialized into this ideological system, and it constituted the dominant (but, consistent with the third element of a neo-ideological approach, not uniformly internalised) ideology of Soviet society on his effective takeover of power around 1928. It was clearly a worldview already permissive of violence, with core ideas matching the six recurring justificatory mechanisms described under the fifth element of a neo-ideological approach. It also engendered a highly authoritarian system under Lenin's principles of 'democratic

centralism', in which control over the Bolshevik (later 'Communist') party was tightly concentrated in a small vanguard of elite figures around the Politburo and Central Committee. Consequently, the Soviet regime had vast, though not entirely monolithic, control over information, cultural production and intellectual activity throughout society and invested intense efforts in propagating its ideology to the Soviet population at large (Overy 2004, chs. 3, 6, 7 & 9).

Yet Soviet violence and terror under Lenin did not approach the scale of the Stalinist regime, despite a civil war context of far more imminent, severe and objective danger. Stalinism involved further radicalization – principally through a deeply intensified vision of internal threats to the regime. A largely top-down dynamic of radicalization – similar to that in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s (Browning 2005), or Rwanda in the early 1990s (Fujii 2004; Straus 2015, 292-304) – occurred throughout the first decade of Stalin's political dominance, and intensified in the years running up to the Great Terror. Stalin and his entourage – partly in response to crises and unplanned events such as the still murky assassination of the senior party figure Sergei Kirov in December 1934 – developed an ideological vision of a vast internal conspiracy within Soviet society, and disseminated this vision to each other and to the broader party elite. Goldman explains how, in early 1935:

> "Stalin reviewed the political situation in a secret letter that was circulated to all party organizations for discussion. Summarizing the leadership's current thinking on the Kirov murder [of the First Secretary of the Leningrad Communist Party in December 1934], the letter claimed that Nikolaev, Kirov's assassin, had been a member of a 'Zinovievite group,' based in Leningrad, that was responsible for the crime. This 'Leningrad center' in turn reported to a 'Moscow center,' which had been unaware of the actual assassination plan, but was fully cognizant of the 'terrorist moods' of the Leningrad Zinovievites… While outwardly professing loyalty to the Party's policies and leaders, they were really two-faced 'double dealers' (*dvurushniki*), 'Judas betrayers with party cards in their pockets,' who 'masked' their true intentions" (Goldman 2011, 33-4).

Via such letters, as well as speeches to the Communist Party Central Committee, Stalinist constructions of threat and attributions of guilt took hold over the leading organisations and individuals of the Soviet state apparatus. Against those who thought that the prior violence of dekulakisation in the early 1930s had removed enemies of the Soviet regime, Stalin warned: "Wrong! Thrice wrong! Those people exist… we did not physically destroy them, and they have remained with all their class sympathies, antipathies, traditions, habits, opinions, world views and so on" (Fitzpatrick 2000, 137). He asked the February-March 1937 Central Committee plenum, the main initiation point of the Great Terror, "why have our leading comrades been so naïve and blind that they could not make out the face of these enemies of the people?" (Goldman 2011, 75-6). Other members of the elite reproduced Stalin's claims. Sergo Ordzhonikidze, Commissar for Heavy Industry from 1932 to 1936, gave a speech to his immediate subordinates in February 1937, stating: "The criminals have been caught, they have been shot. If there are more criminals in the future, they too shall be caught. We shall shoot all the swine that we find… Unless there is a shake-up, we'll all rust" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 292-4). And Kaganovich told the February-March plenum:

> "We never imagined before 1936 to what depths Zinoviev and Kamenev... could have sunk... This is why we must no longer, in my opinion, continue this magnanimous [policy] of ours. Our party must be purged of these people... We must do away with these people in order to keep them from harming us. (Applause)" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 389).

And in initiating the infamous 1937 purge of the Red Army, Stalin likewise told party leaders that "without a doubt a military-political conspiracy against Soviet power [has] taken place, stimulated and financed by German fascists" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 444).

Alongside this rationale for violence – which, consistent with the fourth element of a neo-ideological approach, revolved essentially around *ideologically constructed* notions of security and threat – other recurring justificatory mechanisms played a supporting role. Claims of threat were supported by a heavy dose of dehumanization, not only by Stalin himself (van Ree 1993, 53-4 & 56), but also the wider ranks of the Soviet elite. Kaganovich expressed his view (with distinct echoes of Nazi medicalised discourse) that:

> "You must think of humanity as one great body, but one that requires
> constant surgery. Need I remind you that surgery cannot be performed
> without cutting membranes, without destroying tissues, without the
> spilling of blood? Thus, we must destroy whatever is superfluous" (Glover
> 1999, 256).

Ezhov, Head of the NKVD throughout the Terror, similarly assured the Bolshevik Central Committee "that we shall pull up this Trotskyist-Zinovievist slime by the roots and physically annihilate them" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 308).

The promise of immense future benefits, meanwhile, made violent suffering in the present regrettable, but ultimately worthwhile. As they testified decades later, many Soviet citizens in this period "were convinced that we were creating a Communist society, that it would be achieved by the Five Year Plans, and we were ready for any sacrifice" (Figes 2002, 91). The violence involved was highly valorized, by appeals to Communist virtues – Stalinists preached the overriding importance of party unity and loyalty to the party leadership, demanded "vigilance" in fighting against dissidents, and idolised harshness. As Fitzpatrick writes: "Discipline and unity were high on the list of party values. They were spoken about in almost mystical terms even in the 1920s… every Communist was bound to obey unswervingly any decision of the party's highest organs" (Fitzpatrick 2000, 19). As one mid-ranking Moscow communist confessed to his diary:

> "How can I judge, a rank-and-file party man? Of course sometimes doubts
> sneak in. But I cannot fail to believe the party leadership, the Central
> Committee, Stalin. Not to believe the party would be blasphemy"
> (Fitzpatrick 2000, 215).

'Vigilance' became a virtuous euphemism for participation in all manner of repression, with resolutions passed by factory committees promising: "We will raise our revolutionary vigilance and root out and annihilate to the end all enemies of the people" (Goldman 2011, 266). Central party organs persistently drove on the violence by attributing the revelation of the worst 'enemies' to a "totally extraordinary blunting of Bolshevik vigilance" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 194),

"political myopia and loss of class vigilance" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 166), and situations where "a proper Bolshevik vigilance is still lacking" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 269). Simultaneously, restraint or reluctance to engage in violence was – as is typical in atrocity crimes – denigrated as indicating shameful weakness. As in Nazi Germany, valorization of brutal violence and harshness thereby created a fundamentally different normative environment, in which empathy and compassion were presented as shameful, and obedient participation in mass violence became virtuous loyalty to the party and its purposes.

Consistent with the second element of a neo-ideological approach, it is evident that such ideological claims promoted participation in violence through both internalized and structural mechanisms. There is now a broad degree of consensus amongst historians that such ideological justifications were internalized by large numbers of Soviet citizens amongst both the political elite and ordinary citizens, although, consistent with the third element of the neo-ideological approach, the degree and form of uptake and its role in encouraging participation in the terror varied. Gábor Rittersporn argues that: "everything points to the assumption that Soviet citizens of the epoch were inclined to lend credit to the regime's propaganda about the subversive activities of plotters and foreign agents" (Rittersporn 1993, 100). As Orlando Figes summarises: "some were appalled by the brutal violence. Some were even sickened by their role in it. But they all knew what they were doing...and they all believed that the end justified the means" (Figes 2002, 92). Alexander Solzhenitsyn later recalled: "Twenty-year-olds, we marched in the ranks of those born the year the Revolution took place, and because we were the same age as the Revolution, the brightest of futures lay ahead" (Fitzpatrick 2000, 212). Even during the peaks of Soviet repression, "the attitude Solzhenitsyn describes," reports Fitzpatrick, "was common among – perhaps even typical of – young people, as long as their own families were not affected" (Fitzpatrick 2000, 212). And, rather than being a rhetorical façade for public consumption, ideology was strongest of all amongst Stalinist elites. As John Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov emphasize, "the Stalinists said the same things to each other behind closed doors that they said to the public" (Arch Getty and Naumov 1999, 22; Gould-Davies 1999, 92; Priestland 2007, 4).

Yet at the same time, sincere ideological internalization was not the only link between Stalinist understandings and actual participation in the violence. The Terror can be understood only by attending to the structural dynamics of spiralling denunciations in factories and other workplaces, party organisations, housing blocks, village communities, professional associations,

and state institutions (Goldman 2011, 49-52; Viola 1993; Thurston 1993; Fitzpatrick 2000, 135-6). The motives underpinning denunciation were many: there was sincere and often self-righteous ideological conviction, but also petty local rivalries and animosities, economic failures and frustrations, careerist ambitions, and, perhaps most importantly, escalating strategic calculations fuelled by fear, as individuals found themselves in prisoner's dilemmas with enormous incentives to pre-emptively denounce to maximise their own chances of survival (Viola 1993, 97-8). The majority of those involved in denunciations showed limited understanding of high Stalinist ideology, and many may not have internalized the regime's claims with any deep conviction. But under the pressure of the prevailing ideological environment, all these more mundane motives became vitally clothed in the ideological language of the Stalinist regime, a language capable of prompting the deployment of violent force by state-security. In most contexts, pay disputes between workers and managers, blame-games surrounding mechanical malfunctions, rural animosity towards outsiders, ambitions about one's career, and resentment rooted in personal relationships do not trigger violent repression. Stalinist ideology incentivized and rationalised acts of denunciation, and motivated the perpetration of violence by the more ideologically convicted and the organizers of state violence.

The case of the Great Terror is, in sum, consistent with the neo-ideological approach and illustrates key patterns – a conducive prior ideological environment, a process of radicalization, recurring justificatory mechanisms, ideological heterogeneity, and links to violence through both internalized belief and instrumental social pressures – that appear to be found across atrocities. This is not to downplay important ideologically differences cases. For example, whilst Stalinism involved considerable violence against non-Russian ethnic groups, it lacked any deep conception of racial science or ethnic essentialism common in Nazism or other ethnonationalist ideologies. Minority nationalities were targeted by the Soviet state because they were suspected of disloyalty and conspiracy, not because they were deemed racially inferior or intrinsically inadmissible to a Communist society. Indeed, a considerable proportion of Stalinist violence was not "mass categorical violence" at all (Straus 2015, 17), but was targeted along the flimsiest suspicion of guilt and threat, generated by mistakes, petty transgressions and erroneous denunciations. An important consequence of this is that, whilst many waves of Stalinist violence plausibly constituted genocide (Naimark 2010), the regime made far greater use of internal exile and imprisonment in labour camps than exterminatory massacre. Distinctive ideological features of the Stalinist case

are thus identifiable, and consequential. This emphasises that, more generally, whilst there are key continuities in the overarching ideological dynamics of atrocities, the ideological detail of each case remains distinct.

## Conclusion

Proper appreciation of the central but complex role ideology plays in atrocity crimes emphasises the need for deeper study of perpetrator ideologies and their effects on violent practices. Such study is needed to test and challenge the component claims of the neo-ideological approach as much as to support them. I have argued that the approach is a significant step forward, but it is far from infallible or definitive. It is a statement of what, in my view, are the proper theoretical conclusions to draw from the existing body of empirical research on ideology's role in shaping perpetrator behaviour given the state of our present knowledge of atrocities. This makes it the appropriate framework for providing starting theoretical assumptions, pointing to key research questions, and coordinating analytical arguments across future research on perpetrators.

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