

## Desk Killers

**Ross** [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. The horrific events have been extensively documented, but not until now has the corporate sponsorship of the Holocaust ever been methodically laid out. Rarely do we hear that it was corporate interests coupled with desk bound administrators that drove one of the most abhorrent chapters in human history. Joining me to discuss the desk killers in history and today is the author of 'I, You, We, Them', Dan Gretton. Dan, welcome. Thank you very much for coming by.

**Dan Gretton** [00:01:05] Thanks for inviting me.

**Ross** [00:01:06] Dan, occasionally you come across a book of this size and calibre and it takes, well it's certainly taken me aback. John Berger says in the quote on the front, 'Great books never occur out of the desire for greatness, but often out of a possessed persistence in the face of a chosen, an immensely difficult task'. And this is such a book. Congratulations on it.

**Dan Gretton** [00:01:29] Thank you.

**Ross** [00:01:30] 'I, We, You, Them'. And the tagline which is Most instructive 'Journeys Beyond Evil. The Desk Killers in History And Today'. Desk killers. What's a Desk Killer?

**Dan Gretton** [00:01:40] Well, it comes originally from a German concept, one of these really long German compound nouns, schreibischtater, which literally means desk perpetrator. But that's a bit of a mouthful. So really, one of the reasons for writing this book is I want to get this term the desk killers into public discourse.

**Ross** [00:01:59] Why?

**Dan Gretton** [00:02:00] The origin of the term was the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, and Eichmann was probably the archetypal Desk Killer, the organiser, the bureaucrat, who very rarely left his office in Berlin but was responsible for killing hundreds of thousands, millions of people. And if you think about the way corporations work today, if you think about the hundreds of thousands, millions, of people have been killed through essentially people typing from their desk or sending memos or sending emails. It's such a potent concept. And it is amazing to me that this is the first substantive book that has ever been written on the Desk Killers.

**Ross** [00:02:38] And is it the depersonalised nature of that individual who will send emails and whatever it might be, words, around the world. Those words have actions. And ultimately what you're saying is there needs to be a responsibility for that process.

**Dan Gretton** [00:02:54] Totally. Absolutely. But I mean, the origin of this work. I mean, it's been a massive project. It's about 22 years since I started work on the ideas behind this book.

**Ross** [00:03:01] But there must have been a sort of Genesis moment because we can talk about the depersonalization and Desk Killers. But where did all that start? What's the historical context to this. Was there a light bulb moment?

**Dan Gretton** [00:03:13] Well, there were actually three light bulb moments. And the first of those three was when I was 22 years old, '87 early '87. And I spent two days completely mesmerized in a cinema in central London, the Curson Cinema, watching Lanzmann's film, nine and a half hour film on the Holocaust, which blew me away. And I still think it's one of most extraordinary films ever made, certainly the most important film made ever made about the Holocaust. And there was one part of that film which went 'bang'. And it was this memorandum being read out by Lanzmann. And it's basically an entirely bureaucratic, almost corporate, language. And the words, you know, going through it, the words are, you know, since December 1941, 97000 have been 'processed' by the three vehicles in service, but no major incidents. However, in the light of observations, the following technical changes are needed. The normal load is 9 per square metre.

**Video clip from Shoah** [00:04:41] In Saurer vehicles which are very spacious, maximum use of space is impossible, not because any possible overload, but because loading to full capacity would affect the vehicle's stability. So reduction of the load space seems necessary. It must absolutely be reduced by a yard instead of trying to solve problems, as hitherto, by reducing the number of pieces loaded. Besides which, this extends the operating time, as the empty void must also be filled with carbon monoxide.

**Dan Gretton** [00:05:12] In this entire memorandum, no human beings were talked about. This essentially was talking about how we can change trucks to become effective mobile gas chambers. That's what they were talking about. And in the book, very early on in the book, I actually visit with my colleague Jay, we visit the little town in Switzerland where these trucks were manufactured. And again, that's one of the unknown stories of Holocaust. They weren't made in Germany. They were made in Switzerland and exported. And so we go to the little place in Switzerland, which I call the town of organised forgetting. And we interview people connected to Saurer, the company, a company still working today, not in trucks, but they're working in textile equipment.

**Ross** [00:05:54] The depersonalization, just coming back to the idea of this language, because the army have to also do this because we can't say we're shooting human beings, you have targets or whatever it might be, to be able to strip away any kind of conscience. And what you see in here is a totally stripped back and very ruthlessly efficient way of delivering death.

**Dan Gretton** [00:06:16] Absolutely correct. And the thing about that is that could have almost been a historic document. It wasn't, it read to me like an entirely contemporary memorandum being sent from one business associate to another.

**Ross** [00:06:27] And this is coming back to the language?

**Dan Gretton** [00:06:29] That was to do with the language. So that was the first moment. Forwarding on about 10 years, I was then one of the directors of an arts organisation called Platform.

**Ross** [00:06:38] Is this the second light bulb?

**Dan Gretton** [00:06:38] This is the second light bulb moment. Mid-1990's. And we were starting to do work looking at the environmental and human rights impacts of companies. And we got word that in Nigeria, Shell were causing total environmental havoc. And as you may remember, at that time, there was an inspirational writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa who started leading a Ghanadian, you know, non-violent resistance struggle, amazingly effective. And three or four hundred thousand Ghanadian's came out. Shell had to withdraw and the other oil companies, including Chevron. They had to withdraw from the Niger Delta. I mean, the destruction there was like something out of a film. There were gas flarings carbonizing the landscape, going right through villages, destroying the fish, destroying the mangrove swamps.

**Video clip: Ken Saro-Wiwa** [00:07:27] Indigenous people have been cheated through laws, for protests operated in Nigeria today. Through political marginalization they have driven certain people to death in recovering the money that was stolen from us. I do not want their blood spilled, not of any Ghanadian man, not of any strangers amongst us. We are going to demand our rights peacefully, non-violently, and we shall win..

**Dan Gretton** [00:07:58] And then, of course, what happened, to kind of cut a long story short, is that Ken Saro-Wiwa became too dangerous for the Nigerian government and for Shell. He was framed together with eight colleagues on completely fictitious charges. There was a kangaroo trial and on the 10th of November 1995, he was executed. Those nine men were executed in Port Harcourt. And that was the second moment where I thought if you worked at Shell, if you worked at one of those oil companies and that had just happened, how would you just continue business as normal? You just go into work the next day at the Shell Centre here in London, you just carry on? What would you have to do to your mind to enable that sort of terrifying responsibility that your company has caused that kind of damage? And then nine innocent people have been executed.

**Ross** [00:08:48] And then you still are able to go back to your desk?

**Dan Gretton** [00:08:50] Yes, go back to your desk and carry on. And I then really began to think that surely the secret connecting the Saurer Memorandum, the secret of that and connecting the shell and the Nigeria and Ken Saro-Wiwa, it must be to do with the psychology, something about our human psychology that enabled this process to happen. And the third moment happened just a few years later in '97, I think it was. And you may remember the wonderful writer Gita Sereni?

**Ross** [00:09:18] Yes.

**Dan Gretton** [00:09:18] Who's done probably the greatest work on what we call perpetrator psychology. So in the seventies, she wrote a seminal book on Franz Stangl, the Treblinka commandant - catholic, by the way, and responsible for about about a million people being killed at Treblinka. But the longest book she wrote was about Albert Speer.

**Ross** [00:09:38] And just for people who don't know, he's a sort of chief architect, Hitler's chief architect. Is that too grand?

**Dan Gretton** [00:09:46] You're right. He started as Hitler's architect. More terrifyingly, in 1942, he was promoted and he became the minister for arms production and weapons manufacture. And he was a brilliant organiser. I mean, some historians say the war lasted an additional year because of Speer's organisational skills. So he has enormous responsibility. But Gitta Sereny spent the last two years of Speer's life interviewing him. And it's a remarkable book because she really tries to get close to him. Historians feel maybe she got too close. I don't think so, because she was trying to lure him into being honest and finding out about what was going on in his mind. There was one line in the book and I suddenly thought, no, this is the third moment. This is the third light bulb moment, because this is the moment when I put everything together in a way, the whole project really came together because Sereny's interviewing him. And then he says this: 'Hitler required us not only to compartmentalize our activities, but also our thinking. He insisted that each man should only think about his task and not be concerned with that of his neighbour'. And I suddenly thought that must be the key. It's compartmentalization and coming from the mouth of Speer. And then the second thing of Speer's that really impacted on me wasn't in Gitta Sereny's work, it was actually in Speer's own autobiography, which I was then reading subsequently to reading Sereny's book. And this one was perhaps even more extraordinary than that first quote because I found the following quotation where Speer talks about writing to Hitler in 1944 when he's been leading the Nazi war machine, you know, organising weapons. And Speer writes this to Hitler in 1944: 'The task I have to fulfil is an unpolitical one. I have felt at ease in my work only so long as my person, my work were evaluated solely by the standard of practical accomplishments'. And then Speer says 'today it seems to me that I was trying to compartmentalize my mind. And that was the thing that then I realised that was the key to everything. And that links the three light bulbs together.

**Ross** [00:12:04] And brings us to today, because actually that could be written in corporate language or legalese?

**Dan Gretton** [00:12:10] Absolutely.

**Ross** [00:12:11] And so actually, I just do this. And what happens down here, I bear no responsibility?

**Dan Gretton** [00:12:15] Absolutely right. Totally.

**Ross** [00:12:16] And that really gets to the crux of the book, doesn't it?

**Dan Gretton** [00:12:19] It does. That's at the heart of the book, because what I'm writing about, I wouldn't have spent all of this time, you know, 22 years of thinking, 10 years of writing. I wouldn't have done that if I was writing a purely historic book. It would only be a value to academic historians. I want this book to speak to everybody in our society who's concerned about human rights, environment, corporate power today. I mean, activism, climate change. I mean, all of these things you can find that compartmentalization in everything in our world today.

**Ross** [00:13:01] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the Desk, Killers with Dan Gretton. Let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc index. First up, we've got a tweet from Dr. Brandon Brussard: 'War is killing organised mass murder glorified with uniforms, justified by liars with huge profits for bankers and politicians'. Next up, from Occupy Wall Street, New York City. 'It's not a video game. PTSD is causing drone pilots to quit in record numbers'. This is what we could talk about in the context of Desk Killers. Well, I mean, these people might be in a shipping container in a desert in Nevada.

**Dan Gretton** [00:13:39] They are. They're operating them from exactly that - from Nevada. I write about this in a very early point in the book. I think it's absolutely terrifying. They're advertising for some of these drone pilots now using the language, 'do you enjoy playing video games'?

**Ross** [00:13:53] Next from Rejoin and Reform: 'The full and life expectancy is proof that austerity kills. It does. One hundred and fifty thousand unnecessary/early deaths. And the whole thing was totally unnecessary, the work of silly boy-men, Cameron and Osborne. Criminal or should be'.

**Dan Gretton** [00:14:15] It doesn't have to be in the context of warfare. It doesn't have to be in the context of an oil company. It could be in you know, there's a civil servants working in the Department of Social Security. And I think that figure of 150000 is extrapolating from a 2014 study which found in one year there'd been 30000 deaths. There was a University of Oxford study, I believe. And again, in a vast bureaucracy. How do you account for responsibility in that way? And I think, inevitably, whether it's 30000 or 50000, there have been, you know, tens of thousands of deaths because of policies organised from Downing Street and the Treasury.

**Ross** [00:14:54] And finally from The Foreclosure: 'The banks destroy lives and plunder wealth with nothing more than photo shopped images and bulk white paper. A million dollar profit can be generated from less than ten dollars of paper, ink and postage. Computers and copiers are the weapons of middle class destruction'. When it comes to Desk Killers, let's talk about the banks, because on this program we've covered almost all of them - forging signatures, repossessions, smashing businesses apart. They're not stereotypical?

**Dan Gretton** [00:15:26] I mean, the banks and insurance companies were also at the heart of what I'm writing about here, particularly in history. But one of the invisible signs of the Holocaust was, of course, that all that all the main German banks, Deutsche Bank, Dresdner Bank, Allianz Insurance Company. I mean, these made enormous profits during the 12 years of Naziism. Their loans went to build the concentration camps and extermination camps. Allianz were actually insuring camps, would you believe. At the height of the Holocaust, they had representatives going around, checking up on their policies? I mean, these are, again, kind of invisible histories we're talking about here. That's another aspect of what I'm writing about, whole histories that we haven't been looking at in the right way.

**Ross** [00:16:07] Which neatly brings us to our Book of the Week, which is a triumph. I mean, congratulations on it. But do just pitch it to us? 'I, You, We, Them; Journeys Beyond Evil: The Desk Killers In History and Today'. Why should we read it?



**Dan Gretton** [00:16:22] If you're interested in humanity, psychology, history, genocide, human rights, read this book.

**Ross** [00:16:30] Congratulations on it. There have been numerous books and films made about the Holocaust. One of the things that isn't really touched on and one of the things that you have done brilliantly is talk about the corporate history of this event. Walk us through it.

**Dan Gretton** [00:16:45] Actually, I'd like to start by reading a quotation from about how we look at history. And this quotation comes from the great writer, W.G. Sebald. And in his last book, at the end of a description of a battle, he writes this: 'Our concern with history is a concern with pre-formed images already printed on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered'. And that was such a brilliant line. And I'd already started the research on the book and it led me straight into looking at this map we've got here. If we want to think about the truth lies somewhere elsewhere as yet undiscovered, just look at this image in some detail. It repays it. This is a contemporary map of the town of Oswiecim which, of course, the Germans rechristened Auschwitz. When people go to this town, 99.9 per cent of people go to this little area here, which is where the museum is and where the famous arch, Arbeit macht frei is. And this was the original camp, the political camp. Only a minority of people go to Birkenau, which is where the gas chambers were, just about a kilometre and a half to the west, here. And almost nobody, I mean, we're talking about maybe a few dozen people a year, actually make it over to this vast chemical site in the eastern part of Oswiecim. And this is where the second biggest corporation in the world in 1942 who were I.G. Farben, who we know today as companies like Bayer, Hoechst, Agfa. And they created this massive factory about three or four kilometres to the east. And this is where Primo Levy, John Amery and Elie Wiesel they worked as slave labourers at a camp called Monowitz. Now, if you go here today this site has been almost extinguished from history.

**Ross** [00:18:52] Right?

**Dan Gretton** [00:18:52] There's no memorialization here at Monowitz. There's a tiny little memorial there you can hardly see. And this is still working as a chemical factory today, a Polish chemical company. And I just think as an image of how we look at the Holocaust, this should be known by everybody interested in history.

**Ross** [00:19:10] If we are here and here, you've given this corporate upside, huge focus.

**Dan Gretton** [00:19:18] Well it deserves huge focus.

**Ross** [00:19:20] Because ultimately what you're saying is that was the driver?

**Dan Gretton** [00:19:21] The entire Holocaust couldn't have happened without collusion between the corporations and the Nazi state. I mean, this concentration camp at Monowitz, this is what we would call today a Public Private Partnership. It was funded by I.G. Farben. And the labour was supplied by the Nazi SS. It was essentially a private partnership between the SS and I.G. Farben. And this is not known, it's not widely known.

**Ross** [00:19:48] In today's terms it's a PFI deal?

**Dan Gretton** [00:19:50] Totally, yes.

**Ross** [00:19:50] .Again, you bring the book back to the relevance of today and the importance. Because what you're constantly doing is saying, look, this historical context, there's nothing new here. And we can slide very, very quickly and possibly are sliding into this kind of thinking again?

**Dan Gretton** [00:20:07] I mean, it's all around us. I mean, a few weeks ago, I don't know if you saw in the newspapers these two American psychologists were on trial giving evidence, James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen. These are the psychologists, medical men, who came up with the criteria that enabled people to be tortured, the enhanced interrogation programme under Bush in the early 2000s.

**Ross** [00:20:31] And this is at Guantanamo?

**Dan Gretton** [00:20:32] This is at Guantanamo and other sites actually around the world. And there's a whole chapter in the book where I talk about lawyers working in Washington who are sending memoranda to each other, not dissimilar to the Saurer Memoranda, which is about how we can torture people without using the word torture. Two educated legal brains. And so all the time in this book, I'm saying it's not only about looking at history and in a totally different way, it's also about looking at our world and seeing these patterns of behaviour everywhere - government departments, pharmaceutical companies, oil companies, lawyers in Washington.

**Ross** [00:21:09] There are 10 planks, if you like, or principles that ultimately you've distilled this wonderful piece of work down to, but have come out of it. What are they? Just run us through a few.

**Dan Gretton** [00:21:20] A few, a few of them. I mean, in fact, in this book, I flag up there are ten.. This has come out of 20 years of thinking.

**Ross** [00:21:25] Yes.

**Dan Gretton** [00:21:26] And I wanted to give readers a way of being able to kind of try and get a handle on how we can break down this kind of psychological process.

**Ross** [00:21:35] And I just didn't want to ask that much. I like to sum it up in one sentence.

**Dan Gretton** [00:21:38] Well you can't. That's almost impossible. But there are things like, for instance, I talk about incrementalism, the tiny steps by which quite a decent, humane individual can become corrupted. And I give examples in the book. I mean, looking at Stangl say the Treblinka commandant, there are 22 little steps by which he goes from being, you know, quite an idealistic boy to being the commandant of Treblinka. And that's an amazing thing. I also in the book, I interview really, really senior former oil executives and energy executives who are now retired. It took a year to set some of those interviews up. And the most extraordinary thing is I was asking them to track themselves from being the child who

was interested in geography and geology, very idealistic about the world, to being the lawyer who worked at Shell at the time that Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed. And that process, again, step by step, by step by step by step, people get involved in these massive organisations.

**Ross** [00:22:41] But it doesn't happen overnight. You're saying that incremental and by osmosis because of the culture within that.

**Dan Gretton** [00:22:47] Absolutely. And there are other things like, um, peer conformity. If you see other people all around you accepting things as normal, whether that's the people in the drones in Nevada, people working on the drones or whether you're talking about the doctors who were working at Auschwitz selecting people. I mean, doctors on the ramps selecting who would go to the gas chamber who took the hippocratic oath. So peer conformity is vital. Dehumanization of language, distancing yourself from the act of violence. There's also things about workaholicism. What I call the narcissism of frenzy when people are working at such high speeds, they're not actually tracking the ethics of what they're doing anymore. And then, of course, looking away or wilful ignorance, I mean, that perhaps is one of the underpinning ones of actually not looking. And again, in this context, there are two remarkable examples I can give of this looking away. One of them was which Speer who had a total crisis in late '43 for one of the only times in his life he leaves the office in Berlin and he goes to Dora, which was an underground factory where massive factory where they were making the V-2 rockets. And it's terrifying for Speer because he's no longer at his desk. And he's looking into the eyes of the slave labourers. And there are people, bodies piled up at the side. And after this moment, Speer has a total breakdown, physical and mental. He's away for weeks. He goes up to Finland to try and recover. He's been in hospital for weeks in Germany. And that's the moment in January, February '44, where he suddenly sees Hitler as totally insane. And the other example with this is a friend of mine who does a lot of work on oil companies, was recently interviewing the chief exec of Shell, a Dutchman. And they were talking about Nigeria. And quite fascinatingly, he said, 'ah, Shell, don't send people to Nigeria because if the senior people see with their own eyes what is going on there. If you see you have responsibility'. One of the things that really I found troubling in the 90s, particularly after the Shell-Saro-Wiwa stuff happened. You may remember there was this term that started being used about 96, 97, Corporate Social Responsibility. And it's still used, you know, and more and more I think about it, I think that's there's a huge problem. And I think we need to move totally away from that idea of corporate social responsibility.

**Ross** [00:25:19] CSR.

**Dan Gretton** [00:25:19] CSR. Because what that does is it essentially lets corporations off the hook. If you think about it, in a large organisation like an oil company, if you have a CSR department, that takes away almost all of your responsibility, if you're out in the field in Nigeria because you think, oh, well, the CSR people, they're good. They're doing the ethics. We don't have to worry about it.

**Ross** [00:25:40] So what you want to replace it with?

**Dan Gretton** [00:25:41] I want to replace it with I think people should be held individually accountable for the actions they take in corporations. I mean, I've got minutes of Shell meetings at the time that Saro-Wiwi was executed. I know the names of all of those people



who were at those meetings the day before. And those people one day will be in The Hague. Those people one day will be being held individually responsible for their corporate crimes. And that's absolutely as it should be. I mean, there was a great activist. We consider now, you know, this relates directly to the kind of climate catastrophe around us all. You know, I mean, the Desk Killers are massively involved in that as well. And I was very arrested by this some phrase that comes from an activist called Utah Phillips in America. And he said: 'The planet is not dying. It is being killed and the people killing it have names and addresses'.

**Ross** [00:26:34] These ten principles thought depict the modern workplace quite well?

**Dan Gretton** [00:26:38] Pretty much, yep.

**Ross** [00:26:39] So the Desk Killer is alive and well?

**Dan Gretton** [00:26:42] .They're all around us.

**Ross** [00:26:43] How when someone's watching this programme, how do you begin to....? Because that's terrifying. What's the one thing that we can do is it is the first thing...?.

**Dan Gretton** [00:26:51] The flippant answer is read this book.

**Ross** [00:26:52] Of course. But it is the first thing, is just read the book and then become aware of this wilful ignorance of the way these people carry about their work.

**Dan Gretton** [00:27:01] Everything starts with awareness. Everything starts with awareness and education - everything. So that's the beginning point.

**Ross** [00:27:06] Can I just say congratulations on this book. And I know there's a lot more work to do, but you're undertaking has been massive and you've delivered it so beautifully.

**Dan Gretton** [00:27:15] Thank you.

**Ross** [00:27:16] Thank you very much for coming by.

**Dan Gretton** [00:27:17] Thanks so much.

**Ross** [00:27:18] That's it from Renegade Inc this week. You can drop the team a mail, [studio@renegadeinc.com](mailto:studio@renegadeinc.com), or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people are thinking definitely. But until then, stay curious.

**Dan Gretton** [00:27:42] I want this book to speak to everybody in our society who's concerned about human rights, environment, corporate power today, activism, climate change. You can find that compartmentalization in in everything in our world.

