JvG, Detailed dissection/ Reader report on ‘Du und die Masse’, p. 1

KB, RATIONAL MAN AND THE CROWD
German ‘Du und die Masse’/ Dutch ‘Denkend mens en menigte’
(1st ed. 1938/1940-45, 2nd ed. 1951)


1. DETAILED SUMMARY of chapters and sections

Central idea. The entire book can be seen as a polemic against a view that was widely held just before, and just after, the Second World War. Namely that it were the ‘unstoppable dark forces’ embodied in the popular masses and crowds that had brought about a crisis of civilization, the rise of the totalitarian regimes of the Left and Right, in Russia, Italy, Germany and elsewhere. It was also a plea to well-meaning, reasonable, decent people. Democracy, law and order, it said, could well be protected if legitimate authorities and citizens took a decided stand.

[Translations. Note that the connotations of the words group, mass, crowd etc. differ between Italian and French, German and English. So translations are often problematic, and may easily lead to a dislocation of meaning within semantic networks. This can well be seen in the various translations of the titles of the main books on these subjects by pioneers like Sighele, Le Bon, Freud and others].

Paraphrases. Where this abstract sticks to a literal translation of Baschwitz’ words, expressions and sentences have been put between quotation marks. But often it paraphrases the argument for brevity’s sake (and in view of the much wider related literature on mass psychology and collective behaviour sociology, before and after).

(The first number of every paragraph always refers to the relevant section number, the second to the page in the Dutch edition)

0-5. The book is devoted to ‘The memory of my father Joseph Baschwitz’.

0-7. Preface, 2nd ed. The first edition was completed just before the Second World War broke out. The major changes in this second edition completed after the war concern the insertion of an elaborate discussion of new publications by American social scientists, in the central sections 7 and 8 (see below). Some outdated examples have been skipped, some of the terminology has been adapted (‘The Great War’ becoming ‘The First World War’, etc.). But the main argument and the final conclusions remain unchanged.

0-9. Contents. The structure and numbering have been simplified. From five chapters with twenty-one sections, to two-and-a-half parts with twenty-two sections. An index/ register was added. (But it has been very much further refined for this reading report, and split into three much more elaborate separate ones: for sources, events and notions (theoretical concepts).

0-11. INTRODUCTION. Discussion of the various meanings attributed to the word ‘mass’ (crowd). Introduction of half a dozen key notions elaborated in this book.

PART ONE: THE ATTITUDE OF MASS PSYCHOLOGISTS

1-17. Opening section: Psychiatrists send a warning to statesmen. (350 eminent professors and mental health professionals from a dozen western countries warned against renewed ‘mass neurosis’ and ‘war psychosis’, against delusions and paranoia in 1935 – at the moment the author embarked on this project.)
2-21. *The shadow side of mass psychology.* Sighele, Tarde, Le Bon and others [Italo-French authors since subsumed under the label ‘Roman school’] painted a rather bleak picture of the dark leanings of masses. ¹ [The events after the First World War – particularly in Russia, Italy, Germany and Austria with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* were widely taken to confirm their hypotheses, and announce an impending implosion of civilization].

3-30. *Defence against a paralysing pessimism.* It is true that the very same people may react rather differently within heterogeneous volatile masses and within fixed articulated masses. But MacDougall and Geiger have elaborated the benefits of organized groups with stable leaders.

4-35. *Confusing findings.* A closer look at the Lenin, Mussolini and most of all the Hitler movement shows that mass psychologists have so far ignored the effects of intimidation, violence and force on the mass. As well as the ‘differential affect’ reserved for in-group and out-group – for instance in anti-Semitism.

5-39. *Fear of the power of stupidity.* Hitler copied many of the claims of the ‘Roman school’ of mass psychology, in particular of Le Bon, in *Mein Kampf.* ² Such as the claim that within masses/crowds, mental capacities decline and/or the lowest common denominator takes over. Ortega’s famous 1930 book about the ‘rebellion of the masses’ reinforces suggestions about a decline. But it is based on false premises.

6-49. *Fear of the half-educated.* Similarly, there has been a recurring discussion on the effects of mass education and mass media within mass society. Some have announced a general crisis of civilisation. But rather than lowering the general and average intellectual level, they have heightened it. Furthermore, there is no direct link with mass psychology as such.

7-58. *Europe and America.* Europe (and most of all continental Europe) has tended to a more pessimistic view of men and masses. Psychoanalysts such as Jung are examples. The Anglosaxon world (and most of all the United States) tends toward a more optimistic view, of spontaneous change and adaptation.

Ross’ *Social psychology* has prolonged some of Tarde’s work, in distinguishing between crowds and mobs on the one hand, publics and audiences on the other. Baschwitz distinguishes between physical/visible masses, and purely psychological/invisible ones. [I tend to add a third intermediary category, of emerging early social movements].

In this section, Baschwitz discusses newer contributions to social science by Floyd Allport, Bird, Ellwood, Gallup, Giddings, Lasswell, Lippmann, Young. They lead the way to a more empirical approach of groups/masses, their opinions/acts. And also to the flip side of the actions of the crowd discussed throughout this book: the inaction of authorities and silent majorities in the face of the excesses of vocal minorities. It is not only the actions of the former, but also the inaction of the latter, which pose a threat to law and order, and to democracy.

8-73. *Useful measures.* At this point Baschwitz inserts a further section, discussing various new notions deriving from this more recent literature. [But one should add that the whole new social technology concerning the ‘measurement’ of

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¹ Baschwitz’ successor Brouwer incited me to take a very close look at the ideas of this school and its sources of inspiration, by doing archival research in Italy and France. This resulted in my belated doctoral dissertation *Crowds, psychology and politics 1871-1899,* later published by Cambridge University Press.

² See the section on the influence of Le Bon on subsequent statesmen such as Hitler, pp. 180-187.
opinions and attitudes, of communication and persuasion effects, which developed in America around the Second World War, only ‘landed’ and took root in continental Europe well thereafter. 3

8a-73. The relative scale. Rather than talking about the mental characteristics of the mass/ crowd in absolute terms (good/ bad, rational/ irrational, intelligent/ stupid), we should use a relative or sliding scale. The mass may elevate individuals (for instance to heroism and/ or self-sacrifice), or lower them (to selfishness and/ or cruelty). This also holds for the contrast between ‘true reality’ and ‘mere delusions’.

8b-77. Abuse of the intelligence quotient. Recurring claims that the less intelligent risk overtaking the more intelligent, or that there is a notable downward movement in the general population, are not supported by the evidence.

8c-83. Optical illusions with regard to the directions of development. It is true that only a very small proportion of the public reads broadsheet papers like The Times, and many more prefer the tabloids. But the total circulation of The Times has risen considerably, whereas a generation ago most people never read a newspaper at all and now many do. (Baschwitz refers to his other book The newspaper through the ages, and a more recent piece on the intelligence of newspaper readers).

8d-86. The highly and poorly gifted as objects of research. The Roman school claimed that in a typical mass situation, the mental differences between highly gifted and poorly gifted subjects disappear. This is not necessarily true; both may be affected. But the big question is under what circumstances this occurs.

8e-88. The spiritual situation of the mass psychologist. So scientists and mass psychologists may also be mistaken. But there is a difference between mere errors and biases/ fallacies shared with many colleagues. Therefore widely accepted ideas about the mass/ crowd must be tested. One way to do this is through experiments, for instance on competition and conformity. Another way to do this is by systematic comparison of historical events. Delbrück has done so with wars, and Brinton with revolutions. Mass psychologists such as Le Bon always repeat the same legends about the French Revolution and Napoleon. They always revert to unpredictable and dark forces at work, to the hypothesis of ‘mass daemonia’.

So Baschwitz announces that throughout the rest of the book, he will focus on sudden and seemingly unusual changes in the behaviour of people who participate in common overwhelming experiences of the sort meant here, either by acting or by refraining from action. As they are subject to mutual affective influences denoted as those of the mass/ crowd. But this is not always the case, and we need to investigate the precise circumstances.

PART TWO: THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE MASS

9-99. The effects of the wild riot. The most classical examples are the taking of the Bastille in Paris on 14 July 1789, or the Tuileries on 10 August 1792. Similar examples concern the events of 1848, or those in Germany in 1918/19. But in each case, precise circumstances play a key role during each successive stage: tentative steps, impunity, the most radical taking the lead. It is the belief in ‘mass daemonia’ itself that contributes to a paralysis of the authorities. [As well as the feeling that some demands may be justified after all].

10-116. **Popular mass and troop mass.** Mass volatility may affect the troops as well. Because the rebels take over their command intact, because the troops begin to fraternize with them, or because they begin to disintegrate, and desertions mount. This played a role in several of the various French revolutions. One famous example concerns Napoleon, particularly after he had escaped from Elba, landed on the Côte d’Azur with a small contingent, took the mountainous interior route to Grenoble, faced royal troops halfway, but succeeded in making them change sides.

Another famous example is that of Catherine II of Russia who mounted the tsarist troops against her husband Peter III. But during events in Italy in 1922, or later in Germany, many authorities did in fact make the troops stand back, while fascist and nazi thugs imposed their will. Tentative and unorganized crowds, so Baschwitz, can hardly ever overwhelm decided organized troops.

11-130. **Mass enthusiasm and force.** Both invisible and visible masses may seem to adhere to some new idea or demand. But even massive crowds do only mobilize a small percentage of a city population. A large part consists of onlookers and bystanders, furthermore. The many may drift along, but only a few take the lead, and an even smaller minute group commits violent acts. This was the case with successive republican revolutions in England, America and France, and more recently also in the Germany of 1918/19. As well as with earlier ‘liberation wars’, for instance of the Spanish, or some Germanic states, against Napoleon. The draft made armies swell alright, but also made them less professional and reliable.

12-144. **The passively acquiescing majority.** French Blanquists in the Paris Commune, Russian bolshevists, Italian fascists and early Nazis claimed to represent widespread popular uprisings, but in fact they were very small minorities imposing their will on the people. They were reluctant to call a ‘general strike’, for instance, and on some occasions their designs were even frustrated by one called by their opponents. For instance in 1922 Italy (see Malaparte’s classic work on the technique of the coup d’état). This also translated into the ‘revisionism’ polemic of Lenin, Trotsky and representatives of the Third (communist) International, against Kautsky and representatives of the Second (social-democrat) International.

13-155. **Violent minorities.** Unorganized masses, crowds and mass meetings are helpless against persistent troublemakers or organized heavies sent by competitors. This leads them to organize their own ‘stewards’. Mounting hostilities may easily escalate into recurring brawls, street fights and near civil war – as it did in Italy and Germany in the early twenties. But it was the change economic tide in the late twenties that brought the Nazis their election victory. The president and the army command failed to uphold democracy, law and order, however, handing dictatorial powers to a small group that could not be voted out again. Intermediary summary: So it were not the unstoppable forces of popular masses yearning for a ‘strong leader’, that were decisive in the end, but the use of force by small groups.

14-168. **Limits to the power of the police.** But it is a misunderstanding that the mere use of force is sufficient to suppress a mass movement – witness Bismarck’s failed *Kulturkampf* against the Catholics, or his *Sozialistengesetze* against the Socialists. Such measures often provoke tenacious resistance instead. Even the use of police goons against the opposition is often ineffective or counterproductive – witness the Tsar’s silent support for the ‘Black Hundred’ and similar ultra-nationalist groups. A police state as such cannot impose permanent acquiescence on a population.

15-176. **Breaches of law and order.** It is only the paralysis of the will to act on the side of the legal authorities, which provides violent active minorities with the necessary room to impose their designs, and provokes the acquiescence of peaceful
passive majorities. But this acquiescence is only partial and temporary. It is caused by a distortion of ordinary judgment, and a suppression of contrary feelings.

16-179. *How 'mass crimes' occur.* Italian criminologist Sighele’s pioneering book on ‘the criminal crowd’, the first monograph on mass psychology as such, claims that even ordinary people undergo a mental transformation in the crowd, bringing out the lowest in them. Baschwitz says that this may happen on occasion, but cannot be maintained in a general sense. Even Sighele himself admits that it is primarily the ‘bad people’ in a crowd who seize their chance. And that if courageous individuals stand up to them, this is often enough to stop the violence there and then. Heine reported an example from 1832 Paris, where crowds chased and killed half a dozen suspected ‘cholera poisoners’, but information in the press was able to stop this outbreak.

17-187. *The terror of the worst.* Another argument is, that violent minorities commit such crimes ‘under the protection’ of peaceful majorities. Baschwitz says the opposite is true: violent minorities commit such crimes by terrorizing peaceful majorities. People standing up to them do indeed take a risk of attracting their attention and malevolence. But they later tend to exaggerate these risks by invoking the myth of ‘mass daemonia’: the dark unstoppable force of the crowd. Examples are the Terror during the French revolution, the killing of innocent hostages – for instance in Munich in 1919. Often ‘mass crimes’ are not committed by masses at all, but by active minorities hiding among passive majorities.

18-193. *Mass crimes committed against outlawed groups.* This even holds true for most hate crimes against minorities: religious, racial, national, etcetera. During the Middle Ages, Jews were blamed for the Black Death, heresies, usury and much more. The Turk Muslim authorities considered the minority of Armenian orthodox Christians along the border a dangerous Fifth column during the First World war with the Russians. Poor whites in the U.S. South played a large role in the Ku Klux Klan and the lynchings of blacks. Curiously, this hate is often legitimated with erotic fantasies about the ‘danger to our girls and women’ – even in Streicher’s notorious nazi rag *Der Stürmer.*

19-207. *Silent panic.* Authors of the ‘Roman school’ such as Taine, Sighele and Le Bon said even trial juries, mass meetings, national parliaments showed characteristics of the crowd. Although this was exaggerated, it is true that a ‘silent panic’ often gets passive majorities in its grip, when confronted by vocal minorities. When they remain inactive in the face of persecution, they strive to maintain their self-respect by implicitly assuming some kind of guilt on the part of the victims. In his earlier book on *Mass delusion,* Baschwitz had identified this tendency as a ‘need for evening out’. (He means the same mechanism that Festinger later identified as ‘reduction of cognitive dissonance’).

CONCLUSION

20-213. *The rules of mass psychology.* The facts provided in this book contradict the claims of the pessimist and Roman school, about the mental level of the individual dramatically sinking in a crowd. Of course there are lighter forms of credulity, for instance concerning faith healers or ‘get rich quick’ schemes. But we have found no proof that ordinary people are brought to violence – under normal circumstances.

It is the intimidation by violent minorities, by contrast, the paralysis of the authorities and the ‘silent panic’ among peaceful majorities that are responsible. It is not on a physical, but on a spiritual level, that these forces manifest themselves.
21-217. The power of a paralysing idea. A system of government collapses, when its leading representatives get the feeling that they fail at the tasks that the times have imposed upon them, or get depressed over the consequences of their errors. Conversely, its subjects give up their consent and acquiescence, and demand justice.

22-220. Democracy. Some people end up feeling that a forceful dictatorship is more effective than an indecisive democratic government, but this is a fallacy. Although majority decisions may take time to reach, they are also more effective in the end. Even Macchiavelli himself proved aware of that, in his famous Discorsi. This leads us to the necessity of developing a psychology of politics, dealing with questions of power, justice and freedom, within the framework of the law.

Mass psychology must give up its belief in fairy tales and magic formulas concerning mass daemonia and leader prestige [charisma]. We need to rediscover the power of ‘the overwhelmingly great majority of decent people’.

PS.
The manuscript was developed from the mid-thirties onwards. The German original was first published in The Netherlands in 1938. The Dutch translation was ready for printing in May 1940 when the Germans invaded, and only published in that form immediately after Liberation in 1945. Both versions were then republished in The Netherlands in 1951, with mostly minor changes.

At the time Baschwitz first wrote the book, he was an exile in Amsterdam, and had found work at the newly-founded ‘International Institute of Social History’, which was smuggling key political archives out of Hitler’s Germany and Austria. Mostly materials from the labour movement (anarchist, communist and social democratic) including the most important papers of Bakunin, Marx and Engels. During the occupation, some of this was temporarily sent to London for safekeeping.

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3. SOCIO-HISTORIC EVENTS, first per country, then chronological

LOW COUNTRIES
1830 Amsterdam Dam/ Exchange, Chasing of Van den Biesen: 16-183
1935 Queen Wilhelmina (supporting psychiatrists): 1-17
GREAT BRITAIN
1641-52 Oliver Cromwell and Ironsides, English civil war: 11-139
1808 General Wellesley (later Lord Wellington) leading British forces against Napoleon in Spain: 11-137
1848 dissolution Chartist movement, rise of trade unions: 12-151
Clarity of one party (as opposed to coalition) governments: 13-164
*The Times* newspaper: 8c-84/5

FRANCE
Ineffective censorship, propaganda (from Louis to Napoleon): 19-211

French Revolution
1789, 14/5 July (Invalides+) Bastille, Louis XVI/ Nat. Assembly: 9-101/3; 9-109
1792 Allied invasion by Prussia and Austria, introduction of the draft: 11-140/1
1792, 10 Aug., storming of the Louvre/ Tuileries: 9-110
1792 September massacres Paris: 17-189
Incursion/murder at the National Parliament meeting, search of Fbg. St Antoine: 9-113
Journées révolutionnaires, radicals: 9-109/10
1794 Spring, Convention, Commune, Danton, Robespierre, Terror: 2-23; 9-111/4; 17-190/1; 19-207
‘Jeunesse dorée’ militia sections, Muscadins, Le Peletier: 9-112/4
1795 Spring/ Summer, General Pichegru putting down revolts: 9-111, 113
1795, 5 Oct., Napoleon/ Église de St. Roch: 9-110/1, 114

Napoleon
1792, 1795, Putting down revolts during Revolution: 9-110/1
1799, 9 Nov. Coup d’état (with Lucien): 9-114/5
Elections: 13-162
No counterweight: 22-220

1808 invasion of Spain, with help of foreign troops, desertions; guerrilla by militias, atrocities, British fleet on the coasts: 11-133/7

1813 Prussian campaign: 11-141/2
1814 Departure for Elba, Fear of unruly crowd: 9-115/6
1815 March Return from Elba, bluff on the road to Grenoble, return to Paris: 10-116/7, 120/1, 124
1815, 7 July Waterloo, Second fall of Napoleon, welcoming of Louis XVIII of Bourbon in Paris: 10-121, 123/4

1830-1848
1830 July, flight of Charles X of Bourbon, pushing of Louis Philippe of Orleans by Thiers and Lafayette: 10-126; 10-129, 11-131
1832 Paris Rumour about cholera and poisonings (Heine): 16-184/6

1848 February, flight of Louis Philippe of Orleans: 10-126, 129, 11-131
1848 June, ‘popular strongman’ gen. Cavaignac puts down workers revolt: 10-126/7, 130; 13-163
1851 Election of Louis Napoleon: 13-162

1870 Supposed pressure of public opinion in ‘war mood’, leads to Franco-Prussian war: 14-172
1870 Napoleon III made prisoner at Sedan, early days of the IIIrd Republic: 11-131
1870/1 Gambetta’s revolutionary levée en masse: 11-142/3
1871 Auguste Blanqui/ Blanquism, Commune revolt: 11-151/2
1871 general Mac Mahon puts down Commune: 13-163

SWITZERLAND
1500, appr.: Downfall of the formidable Hans Waldmann, mayor of Zürich: 21-219

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY
(1419-34 Hussite revolts in Bohemia: 11-138)
1809 Andreas Hofer revolt in Tyrol against Napoleon: 11-137
1848 March, Vienna, strongman Windischgrätz: 10-126; 13-163
Anarchism: 12:152

GERMANY
1348 Pogroms after ‘Black Death’ a.o., spreading by flagellants, interventions by authorities: 18-193/5
1519 Regensburg Anti-Semitic campaign by Balthasar Hubmaier a.o.: 18-196/7
1525, 1533/4  Baptists, Waldshut/ Hubmaier, Münster/ Jan van Leiden:18-197; 22-224

1813 Prussian campaign by Blücher against Napoleon, desertions: 11-141/2
1848 Frankfurt lynching of two deputies, over Schleswig-H. question: 16-183/4
March 1848 Berlin, strongman ‘Papa Wrangel’: 10-126; 13-162
1849 Republican uprisings in Baden and Palts (Fr. Engels): 11-137

Empire
1848 March, deputy Bismarck and others’ reactions: 10-127
1870/1 Franco-Prussian war: 11-131, 142/3
Antisemitic preacher Stöcker against Bismarck: 18-197/8
1878 Bismarck anti-socialist and later anti-catholic laws (Kulturkampf): 14-168/70
Strength of social democrats and 2nd International: 12-150; 13-161
1888? Demoralization after Bismarck’s abdication as chancellor: 2-27

After First World War
Demoralisation: 2-30
Hamburg, inflation troubles: 2-25
Sect around healer Häuser: 2-25/6

Revolution attempts
Red revisionism debates: 12-150
1918 Nov., mutiny, Destitution of monarchs: 9-104; 10-118
1919, 30 April Munich Luitpold-gymnasium hostage killing, repression of Bavarian revolutionary government by Prussian & Würtemberg troops: 17-187
1919, 25 June, Hamburg Town Hall taken and evacuated: 9-105/8
Karl Liebknecht & Rosa Luxemburg: 3-34
Weimar Republic
1920, March Kapp putsch against the dissolution of army units, stopped by general strike: 12-147
1920/1 Civil war in Rhine region and central Germany, social democrat police against communist insurgents: 12-154/5
1923 Hitler putsch, Feldherrnhalle Munich: 13-163
Psychologist Willy Hellpach presidential candidate: 2-27
Scandals (Devaheim, Lohman, Osthilfe): 3-32
Inflation and unemployment, change of economic climate: 13-160, 162
PM. Opacity of coalition (as opposed to One party) governments: 13-164

Nazi movement
Hitler, *Mein Kampf*: 2-28; 4-35/7; 5-39/44; 7-62
Stahlhelm veterans, S.A./S.S. against leftist heavies: 13-159/60, 166
1930 Elections, Nazis largest party: 13-159, 166
Anti-Semitism, Streicher/ Stürmer: 4-38; 5-43; 6-50; 13-161; 18-204/5
PM. Sexual obsessions vs. enlightenment: 18-205

ITALY
Macchiavelli: 22-221/3
Anti-Napoleonic guerrilla in Southern Italy: 11-137
Maffia, Camorra: 19-207
1861 Garibaldi redshirts: 13-158
Anarchism: 12-152

WWI and after
D’Annunzio: 13-158
1919/20 strikes, occupation of factories: 13-157
Mussolini/ Duce: 2-29; 4-35
1920/1 Veterans, blackshirts, heavies of minority fascists tolerated by Giolitti government, civil war: 13-156/8
1922 August, general strike fails to stop Mussolini: 12-146
1922 Oct., blackshirt/ Fascist offensive, March on Rome: 10-117/9; 12-146/7

RUSSIA
Tsarist times 2-25
Catherina II, coup against her husband Peter III: 10-120
Nicholas II, inspection tours: 14-174
Secret police, spy system, conspirators: 14-174/5
Nicholas II, favouring nationalist ‘Black Hundred’ gangs and ‘Real Russians’: 14-172/3, 176
PM. Anti-Semitism (Protocol, pogroms): 6-51; 14-173; 18-195

Revolutions
1904/5 Russo-Japanese war, lost: 14-174
1905 (1906) First Revolutionary government: 12-153
1909 relative calm: 14-174
1911 murder of prime minister Stolypin in Kiew: 14-174
Lenin: 4-36
1917 St. Petersburg Trotsky, Red Army, partisans: 12-144/6
Civil war, White guards, pogroms: 18-195
Revisionism debates, 3rd International: 12-150, 152, 154
Stalin repression and purges, exile of Trotsky: 12-147/8; 14-171/2

TURKEY, OTTOMAN EMPIRE, ISLAM
Conquests by Mohammed/ Islamic armies: 11-138
Armenian genocide: 18-195

UNITED STATES
1776 George Washington, War of Independence (help by Lafayette and the French): 11-139/40
1934 a.o. Lynchings, poor whites, ‘defending women’, KKK, Hollander: 18-199/204
Etnocentrism & Hatemongering: 18-201/2
Immigrants and intelligence scores: 8b-81
(Pinkerton) anti-strike squads: 18-201

4. VARIOUS NOTIONS & ANALYTICAL CONCEPTS

Age of the crowd (Le Bon): 2-30
Anarchy: 13-163
Anti-Semitism: 5-43; 6-50; 18-193/206. Also see: Persecution
Archetypes, collective unconscious (Jung): 7-59
Assassinations: 14-174
Atrocities, cruel: 11-136
Audiences. See Publics

Behaviourism: 7-63/4
Bohémien, social outsiders: 3-34
Bystanders, curious: 9-106/8; 10-123

Charisma (leader prestige): 22-223
Circulation figures (newspapers): 5-46
Coalitions, vs. one-party governments: 13-164/5
Collective mental disturbances, illnesses: 2-22; 5-39; 8e-88/91. Also see: Mass neuroses, psychoses, Relative scale
Common sense: 3-30; 8e-89/90; 20-215
Comparative method in history: 8e-95
Conspiracy theories (heretics, witches, Jesuits, Freemasons, Jews): 1-18; 6-51
Crisis, of civilization, culture, intellect (Ortega, Spengler a.o.): 1-19; 5-40; 6-51; 8b-82. Also see: Half-educated, Intelligence, Perceptual errors
Crowd vs. Group (McDougall): 30

Defencelessness of unorganized crowds: 12-154/5; 15-176/7. Also see: Law and order
Democracy, science of politics (Lasswell): 7-65; 22-220/5. Also see: Law and order
Desertions: 10-123; 11-142
Deviation from the norm: Intr.-12
Devil and hell, belief in: 8e-91
Dictatorship: 13-167; 22-220
Differential affect (in- vs. out-group, Von Wiese): 4-38
Disinhibition: See Impunity

Elite: 8d-86. Also see: Gifted, Intelligence, Mass
Experiments: 8e-94
Eyewitness accounts: 2-23/4

Fear (of unruly crowds): 1-18; 5-39; 6-49; 9-114/5; 10-127/8; 19-208
Fear to help: 9-106
Fehlleistungen: 8e-94
Force (resp. intimidation, terror) use of: 12-145, 149; 13-161
Foreign domination: 11-132/8
Fraternization (attackers and crowds): 9-103/4, 10-116/7, 119; 12-153
Freedom of thought (Ellwood): 7-61

Gifted, highly vs. poorly: 8d-86. Also see: Intelligence, Mental level, Perceptual errors, Relative scale
Groping (tentative reconnoitering): 9-105
Group vs. Crowd (McDougall): 3-30
Group mind discussion: 3-30; 7-63, 69
Guerrilla, irregular vs. regular army units: 11-133/43, 145

Half-educated (Ortega a.o.), the: 6-49, 52/4
Hatemongering, etnocentrism, xenophobia, conspiracy theorists: 18-197/8, 201/2
Heavies (gangs of intimidating): 12-146/7; 13-159/60
Heredity and environment: 8b-80/1. Also see: Intelligence
Heroes: 8e-95
Heterogeneity of crowds: 11-131/2
Hierarchical principle: Intr.-15; 8d-86
Hierarchy of authority (Giddings, Ross): 7-61, 67
Hoax (Protocols a.o.): 6-51
Hysteria: 2-27/8

Identification: 7-60; 12-148/9
Immigrants: 8b-81
Impunity, intoxication with (riots): 9-102, 106; 16-180/1; 17-188
Indifference to truth (Huizinga): 6-52
Individual (thinking, rational): Intr.-12/3
Inertia of people, natural (acceptance of the status quo): 12-149
Involuntary behaviour: 8e-94
Insurrectionary gangs: 2-23. Also see: Crimes in crowds
Intelligence, abuse of test results and IQ, with regard to masses and publics: 8b-77/85.
   Also see: Crisis, Half-educated, Perceptual errors
Intimidation, terrorization: 4-36/7

Judgmentalism, angry: 6-52
Juries, mass meetings, parliaments (Sighele): 19-207/8
Language, spoken and written, mass and elite (Gu Hongming): 6-54/6
Latent/abstract vs.manifest/concrete mass/crowd: 11-131
Law and order, countering breaches of: 15-176/9; 16-186; 20-216, 221. Also see:
Democracy
Leader, rhetorical skills, willpower: 2-26/7; 8e-97
Leader, myth of the provisional strong leader: 13-162/3, 165
Leaders, mental illnesses: 2-25/6
Lynching: 16-181; 18-199/204

Macchiavellianism: 22-221/3
Manifesto (of psychiatrists): 1-17
Mass (multitude), various meanings given to: Intr.-11/2, 14; 2-24; 8e-96; 15-177
Mass delusion: Intr.-15, 18; 8d-87; 9-210
Mass demonia and irresistible power, legends of: Intr.-15, 8e-97/8; 10-119, 126/8; 11-132, 138; 14-168; 16-186/93. Also see: Collective mental disturbances/illnesses, Relative scale
Mass demonstrations: 12-148
Mass demoralization (Bismarck abdication): 2-27
Mass enthusiasm: 10-130/43
Mass man (Ortega): 5-44/9
Mass meetings: 12-148; 13-155
Mass neurosis, psychosis: 1-19/20; 8a-73/4; 20-213. Also see: Collective mental disturbances/illnesses, Relative scale
Mass (group), opinions vs. acts: Intr.-15; 7-72
Mass, physical vs. psychological (visible vs. invisible): 2-23; 7-70
Mass psychology: Intr.-12, 14; 20-213/7; 22-223
Mass psychology, light and shadowy sides: 2-21; 8e-88
Meeting(s): Intr.-12/3
Mental level, of crowds and masses (Hitler): 5-40/4
Mental level, of crowds and masses (Ortega): 5-44/9
Mercenaries: 11-140. Also see: Desertions, foreign domination
Military service, general draft: 10-120; 11-141
Militias (armed civilians): 9-112/4; 11-135
Mob, mob mind: 7-60, 70/1
Mood states: 2-24
Moral defeat (in repression of demands for reform): 10-130; 21-218
Mutual affects: Intr.-12, 14
Mythos & Logos: 6-52

National orientation: 6-30
Nationalist gangs, government abuse of: 14-172/3
National uprising (against foreign domination): 11-133/8
Need for evening out (Vereffeningsbehoefte), tendency: Intr.-15; 19-211
Newspaper readers: 2-23
Numbers, role of: 8e-96
Organized parties/unions vs. heterogeneous volatile masses (McDougall, Geiger): 3-31/5; 7-67/8; 12-148

Parallel affects: Intr.-14
Paranoia, see Persecution delusion
Partisans: See guerrilla
Persecution delusion: 1-18/9; 18-193/206. Also see: Conspiracy
Perceptual errors, with regard to the behaviour of masses: 5-46, 48; 8e-88, 96; 10-120, 122
Perceptual errors, with regard to the development of masses: 8c-83/5. Also see: Crisis, Intelligence
Personal predisposition, to crime: 16-181
Pessimism: 3-30. Also see: Crisis, Roman school
Political psychology: 22-222
Pressure and enthusiasm: 11-143/4
Propaganda: 5-43/4; 13-164; 19-211/2
Provocation, in riots: 16-180. Also see: Groping, Impunity
Psychiatry, psychiatrists: 1-17
Public opinion (Lippmann, Gallup): 7-64/8
Publics vs. crowds (Ross): 7-70/1. Also see: Mass, Mob
Putsch: 12-147
Racial myths: 6-30, 52; 18-193/206. Also see: Anti-Semitism, Persecution
Radicalism: 3-34; 12-151
Regression: 16-180
Relative scale, of mental disturbance: 8a-73/4
Resistance to repression: 14-170/1
Revolutionary councils: 9-105/10
Riots: 9-99/115. Also see: Fraternization, Impunity
‘Roman’ school of mass psychology: Intr.-14; 3-30; 8d-87; 16-180/1, 20-213
Rumours: 10-118
Sacrifice, readiness for: 11-135
Secret police and police spies: 14-173/4
Scientific enquiry, fallacies: 8e-91
Self-defence units: 13-156
Sexual obsessions 18-204/5
Silent panic, of ordinary citizens: Intr.-15; 19-207/12; 20-216, 219. Also see: Paralysis
Silent sympathy (with demands for reform): 10-128
Sound judgment, loosing the capacity for: 5-39
Stereotypes, clichés (Lippmann): 7-66
Stewards keeping order (during a meeting, or on behalf of an organization): 13-156.
Also see: Heavies, Self-defence
Strike, general strike: 12-145/7
Stupidity, fear of: 5-39
Suggestion, autosuggestion (Stokvis): 8a-76
Symbol, magic: 7-67

Threats of harsh punishment: 11-135; 14-171
Troops (uniformed police, army) and riots, their power and its limits: 9-102/3, 107/14; 10-116/30, 14-168/76. Also see: Fraternization, Impunity
Troops (power of organized troops), against rebellious crowds: 10-125/6; 20-216

Undigested knowledge (Huizinga): 6-53. Also see: Half-educated

Violent minorities: Intr.-15

War propaganda: 4-36
‘We’ feeling (identification with group): 2-28/9
Witches and witch hunts: 6-56; 8e-91/3; 8e-92/3
Woman, mass as (Le Bon, Hitler): 2-28; 5-42