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History of the Holocaust

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Desensitization, Fear, and the Promise of Courage in Ordinary Men

Reserve Police Battalion 101 was a unit of police officers tasked with the extermination and deportations of certain populations of Jews and Poles in Nazi controlled areas, beginning with the massacre at Józefów. These men had no prior experience in warfare or killing, and could have been described as incompetent for regular military service. In Christopher Browning's accounts of what happened, two salient explanations of their behaviour surface: desensitization, and the promise of commendation for courage in the killing process. This paper will examine these in detail, and draw on other sources to emphasize that these acts of terror were instigated and carried out through fear. In addition some basic information on the events that transpired and the men responsible will be offered.

Initial Discomfort of Battalion 101

The battalion was made up of policemen and deployed early in the occupation of Poland. There was little to no fore-knowledge of the nature of the activities they would be responsible for. Their duties primarily consisted of escort and evacuation of Polish political prisoners at the beginning, and Gypsies and Jewish prisoners as well. Eventually, the orders came to liquidate certain groups, and they became the instruments of mass killing. At the time of their actions in the massacres, many were haunted, but few dropped out. The trinkets that were confiscated from

victims before execution-style killings did little to quell the images of being face to face with them before shooting .

Only twelve of the five hundred assigned to the atrocious acts opted out in the first shooting of over 1000 Jews. Eventually, less than 20% are estimated to have found a way to evade their duty. In interviews with surviving perpetrators, one describes his determination to shoot with the others as a fear of appearing “cowardly”¹ while commanding officers humiliated those unable to perform the actions. It is clear that these group dynamics were a contributing factor to the successful elimination of the Jews. Some of those who did not drop out had internalized the fascist ideology of the Nazi party, and admitted later that it was a long time before they realized there had been anything wrong with what they had done.

This retrospective lack of guilt shows that the willingness to kill did not occur without protest or as the result of long-term cumulative radicalization, but caused psychological damage to the German soldiers. “It was a tenacious, remorseless, ongoing campaign in which the “hunters” tracked down and killed their “prey” in direct and personal confrontation.”² The campaign also developed as the extermination continued, soldiers became more and more efficient and indifferent to their task. Germans had been told that these people were not human, but policemen still found themselves physically sickened. There is an eyewitness account of the Major Trapp, the leader of the battalion who was both responsible for the atrocities as well as one who sympathized with soldiers who could not carry out killings, weeping like a child and he

¹ Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*. Vol. 1998. New York: HarperCollins, 1992, 72.

² Browning, *Ordinary men*, 132.

later confides to a driver that if the actions are ever revenged, “then have mercy on us Germans.”

³ He was later executed in war trials, a grim realization of his early prophetic remorse.

The apprehensiveness was not shared by others in command; Captain Hoffman reproached his unit that they had not, “proceeded energetically enough”⁴ and company doctors were on hand to instruct the manner of inducing death immediately. This was not quite enough to spare the soldiers the psychological harm, and they emerged from the woods “spattered in blood and brains.”⁵ Trapp would later release Jews rounded up after execution squads did not arrive in a timely fashion, which showed a commitment to his lack of comfort in following the abhorrent orders. Later massacres would be carried out after guard duty in work camps, allowing Germans to become more accustomed to the concept of killing Jews, and they became increasingly efficient⁶.

Source of Courage, the Promise of Commendation and the *Selbschutz*

Some of the courage from soldiers was in the nationalism they felt for Germany, whether they saw the Jews as people or not, most did accept the view that these people were enemies of the state. This was reiterated at the massacre at Serokomla in May 1940 where acts were perpetrated by “vigilante-style units known as *Selbschutz* (“self-defense”),”⁷ and the events of resistance, such as when Poles ambushed Jobst, a German, or armed free camps of Jews and Polish political prisoners often were met with shocking brutality and retaliatory killings. For

³ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 58.

⁴ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 59.

⁵ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 65

⁶ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 77.

⁷ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 97.

helping Jews, a village could be massacred or random killings perpetrated such as occurred when “strangers and temporary residents of Talcyn on the one hand, and those without sufficient means of existence on the other,”⁸ were randomly selected for retaliation, and 180 Jews were also slaughtered.

The concept of Jews as enemies of the state was harder to justify with the execution of small children. The least effective strategy was early mass-murder. As the soldiers gained experience, they gained efficiency, for “distancing, not frenzy and brutalization is one of the keys to the behaviour of Reserve Police Battalion 101.”⁹ This was a cold, calculated attempt to dull the human conscience to mass murder. One soldier tried to justify his actions by casting himself as the liberator or redeemer of their souls. Most disturbing, however, is the role of career ambitions.

The perpetrators in the Battalion were not prosecuted until long after the war, and it was not until the 1960s that attention was given to the massacre of Jews. Many soldiers retained positions in police forces after the war, according to Browning, and “career ambitions must have played an important role.”¹⁰ While on one hand they were faced with the prospect of deployment to a battlefield many in the battalion were totally unprepared for, on the other hand the carrot of promise of recognition and career advancement was dangled temptingly in front of the policemen.

In the event that soldiers or officers evaded duty, they could be given career threatening dismissal or other reprimands. For the romantic Hoffman, who suffered stomach cramps from

⁸ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 101.

⁹ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 162.

¹⁰ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 170.

psychological pain, but exhibited enthusiasm for the process, even bringing his bride to deportations, his career was ended after failing to appear at important events. The promise of courageous commendation tempered and amplified by fear, what some might describe as a cowardly obedience, helps to explain why these actions took place, but to understand how cigarette salesmen, tailors, and working-class middle-aged men could become some of the most brutal murderers in history, it is necessary to look to the desensitization process in the policemen.

Fear and Desensitization of German Policemen

The policemen had internalized some of the Nazi propaganda by this time, but “by virtue of their age, of course, all went through their formative period in the pre-Nazi era”¹¹ and they saw their victims as contemporaries; it must have been difficult to follow orders and look them in the eyes before shooting them. Later instructions were given to shoot them in the backs of their necks, as they toppled into graves, or even have them lie down next to dead bodies as they were shot. Wounded were often buried alive, according to an eyewitness. This can be seen in another example of mass killing as well.

In Indonesia, political squads were responsible for killing around 2.6 million people, and a film, The Act of Killing, recounts many similar problems and psychological issues presented.¹² Political action squads moved from shootings to strangulation as a primary method of murder, and some men were responsible for the murder of thousands of innocents as well. Use of intoxicating substances played a role, in battalion 101, “alcohol was made available to the

¹¹ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 48.

¹² Oppenheimer, Joshua, Signe Byrge Sørensen, Joram Ten Brink, Errol Morris, Werner Herzog, André Singer, Torstein Grude, et al. 2014. *The Act of Killing*.

policemen”¹³ so many soldiers’ memories are vague and their actions were marked by extreme intoxication. In Indonesia as well, the squads drank and used black market drugs to keep their mind away from the atrocities. This is relevant because it shows some of the necessary and persistent ingredients to reaching the critical mass of compliance in order to secretly carry out authoritative tasks such as those assigned to these groups.

As killings moved towards extermination with the final order to exterminate in 1942, the German police battalion was not responsible for direct killing as much as deportation to death camps. The actions became less barbarous, but the ultimate end was far more sinister. To soldiers, “after Józefów, the roundup and guarding of Jews to be killed by someone else seemed relatively innocuous.”¹⁴ This meant incidents of soldiers going mad in the woods or shooting their ceiling in barracks during nightmares began to lessen or cease. Yet still, “one action followed another in unremitting succession”¹⁵; soldiers must have found their own part unbearable to live with. As in Indonesia, it would be a long time before the government or perpetrators themselves would inform them they had done something explicitly wrong.

At the end of the book there is discussion given to the various methods of radicalization. The radicalization was not something that could have happened in a single hour long indoctrination session, but must have been the result of cumulative societal prejudice. In experiments, when ordered by a doctor, 30 or 40% of participants would electrocute their subjects, depending on whether or not they were watched. It is a testament to how proliferation of the racial ideology of the Nazis were in Germany that these numbers in policemen asked to

¹³ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 68.

¹⁴ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 85.

¹⁵ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 105.

carry out even greater acts of terror and mass murder were raised to 80%, and under some commanders 100%. It also speaks to the role that authority plays in assigning the role of enemy to an innocent.

What Made Monsters of Men

While one would think it takes more than simple carrots and sticks, the use of promise of a career advancement and threat of dismissal to make monsters of men. The harrowing story recounted here shows that this is not the case. Using simple propaganda, desensitizing actions and substances, along with an effective demonstration of necessity, the nadir of human morality was exposed. Neither fresh recruits (few had prior experience in German occupied territory), nor seasoned veterans could carry out this sort of task easily, but given the instruction, humans most unanimously will, a chilling concept.

The holocaust gives a sense of the gravity and importance of government. Subsequent studies argue that every human has the capability to display all of the symptoms of totalitarianism, and that democracy is a precious thing which must be guarded jealously. Failure to take liberty seriously and export of democratic ideology does not just preclude a reversion to fascism, but a radicalization of authoritarianism. In these rank and file policemen, only around 25% were party members in 1942¹⁶, yet they became part of the most terrifying tool of destruction known to man.

¹⁶ Browning, *Ordinary men*, 1.