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### The Holocaust: Remembrance, Respect, and Resilience

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# Protected: Nazis: German Perpetrators and their Motivations

EDWARD WESTERMANN

Over the course of the Third Reich (1933-1945), mass murder became the distinguishing feature of Nazism, whether in concentration camps within Germany, the extermination centers in occupied Poland, or in the killing fields of eastern Europe. Tens of millions of men, women, and children, including six million Jews, were killed as Adolf Hitler sought to gain control of Europe in his quest for a “Thousand Year Reich.” The perpetrators of genocide included both men and women who served in a diverse range of organizations designed to police German society and to control the territories conquered by the . In addition, the Nazis enlisted hundreds of thousands of foreign auxiliaries from conquered territories into the ranks of the SS or *Schutzstaffel*, the police, and the army who also participated in acts of atrocity and mass killing, especially in the occupied East.

While the most prolific and most well-known of the perpetrators came from among the ranks of Heinrich Himmler’s and police empire, genocide was a societal endeavor that required the active and tacit consent of millions. It was a process that involved soldiers, medical professionals, and bureaucratic functionaries. Genocide transcended gender lines and ultimately benefited millions of ordinary Germans who profited from the plundered wealth of Jewish neighbors and conquered peoples. The murderers and their accomplices also included a broad range of foreign nationals including Eastern European auxiliaries, Ukrainian concentration camp guards, Belarusian, Hungarian, and French policemen, Romanian soldiers, and volunteers from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Wallonia, and Spain (Böhler & Gerwarth, 2017).

Primary targets were European Jews, antisemitically described by Hitler (1925/1939) in *Mein Kampf* as “culture-destroyers” (p. 398) and “parasites in the body of other peoples” (p. 419) were the primary victims of Hitler’s lethal racial fantasy. However, other groups including over 200,000 Sinti and Roma men, women, and children perished at the hands of the Germany perpetrators (Lewy, 2000). Additionally, over three million Soviet prisoners of war died in German military captivity after 1941 and millions of civilians in the occupied territories perished because of a premeditated strategy of direct and indirect murder that embraced starvation, slave labor, and mass population resettlement (Streit, 1991; Kay, 2006). Within Germany, the Nazi regime also targeted its own citizens, including people who were considered LGBT, Jehovah’s Witnesses, so-called ‘asocials,’ and those classified as medically or physically disabled (Burleigh, 2000).

While knowledge of the vast scale and scope of the murders committed under National Socialism is widely known, scholars have presented a broad number of explanations related to why these men and some women became murderers themselves, or direct accomplices in the implementation of systematic mass murder. Immediately after World War II, public opinion remained shaped in large part by perceptions of Nazi fanatics. This popular perception reflected Allied and German wartime propaganda including the reports and newsreel footage of delirious and euphoric Germans cheering Hitler as seen in the director Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*. In a similar manner, the footage taken by US and British military film crews upon the liberation of the concentration camps in Germany in 1945 highlighted the inhumanity of Nazi racial policies and created the impression of an SS dominated by sadists who enjoyed abusing, torturing, and killing their victims. The 1961 trial of SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann, one of the key organizers of the “final solution,” who was abducted by the Israeli secret service in Argentina, initiated a new discourse on what motivated the perpetrators. In her reports on the trial, the German Jewish émigré and philosopher Hannah Arendt (1963) described Eichmann as a man characterized by a “lack of imagination” who pursued genocide with “no motives at all” except for his personal ambition for advancement (p. 134). Although controversial, Arendt’s view proved powerful in reshaping popular perceptions of the killers especially those in senior leadership who directed mass murder at their desks. For example,

Stanley Milgram (1974), a scholar at Yale, embraced Arendt's theory on the "banality of evil" and devised a series of experiments with "ordinary" Americans between 1960 and 1963 that in his view demonstrated "the extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority [figure]," (p. 5) as otherwise "normal" people chose to abandon their personal ethical and moral beliefs when directed by a person of authority.

The publication of the historian Christopher Browning's (1992) widely acclaimed and highly influential book *Ordinary Men* reinvigorated scholarly interest and discussions on the subject of motivations within the field of Holocaust Studies. Based on the postwar criminal investigation of the wartime activities of a group of Hamburg-based policemen, Browning examined the actions and motivations of a group of middle-aged police reservists in the mass murder of Jews in Poland. Applying the findings of the social psychologists Stanley Milgram (1974), Philip Zimbardo (1973), and Ervin Staub (1989) to these policemen, Browning (1992) found the transformation of ordinary Germans into killers resulted from their concern for acceptance and conformity within the group, respect and deference for authority, and desire for career advancement behavior with racism and Nazi propaganda playing a secondary role.

In 1996, the political scientist Daniel J. Goldhagen published *Hitler's Willing Executioners* that challenged Browning's conclusions and reinterpreted the evidence related to Reserve Police Battalion 101. Goldhagen (1996) not only rejected Browning's findings, but he also redefined the nature of ordinary men in German society by arguing, "Being ordinary in the Germany that gave itself to Nazism was to have been a member of an extraordinary, lethal political culture" (p. 454). For Goldhagen, the motive force and the principal cause for genocide was to be found in the "eliminationist anti-Semitism" (p. 49) embedded within German culture that was shared by all Germans whether assigned to the concentration camps, the police battalions, or supervising the death marches at the end of the war. This predisposition explained the participation of "ordinary Germans in the persecution and extermination of the Jews, and therefore was the Holocaust's principal cause" (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 454).

While many in the scholarly community rejected Goldhagen's findings as

monocausal and deterministic, his book provided renewed interest concerning the question of how “ordinary men” could commit extraordinary evil, especially within the field of social psychology. For example, James Waller (2002) employed a comparative analysis of mass murder in the Holocaust, Cambodia, Guatemala, and the Balkans and developed a model consisting of three parts: the actor, the context of the action, and the definition of the target. Using this framework, he examined dispositional (internal influences such as ideological beliefs), situational (external influences such as desire for promotion or personal gain), and social factors to explain the willingness of individuals to become instruments of mass atrocity.

In contrast to social psychological analyses that tend to deemphasize emotional feelings or ideological causes for genocide, the historian Saul Friedländer (1997) highlighted the importance of anti-Semitism and antisemitic tropes among Germans in the 1920s and 1930s as a key facilitator of genocide. For Friedländer, it was not the widespread acceptance by the German population of a culture of “eliminationist anti-Semitism” that led to genocide, but rather a case in which Adolf Hitler and the hard core of the Nazi Party took advantage of existing antisemitic beliefs to create quasi-religious theology of “redemptive anti-Semitism” that laid the foundation for annihilation. In this view, Hitler targeted the Jews for annihilation based on his messianic belief in the need for “a redemptive final battle for the salvation of Aryan humanity” (p. 314).

The German historian Götz Aly (2005/2006) offered another explanation for the willingness of ordinary Germans to participate in the exclusion, persecution, and eventual extermination of their Jewish neighbors. He argued that Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party provided material incentives to Germans by creating a “type of racist-totalitarian welfare state” (p. 2). These incentives included the apartments and houses of their former Jewish owners, household furnishings ranging from furniture to bedsheets as well as plundered goods taken from both Jews and non-Jews throughout occupied Europe. Aly contends, “While was a necessary precondition for the Nazi attack on European Jews, it was not a sufficient one. The material interests of millions of individuals first had to be brought together with anti-Semitic ideology before the great crime we now know as the Holocaust could take on its genocidal momentum” (p. 6).

In contrast to attempts aimed at explaining the actions of German society as a whole, there have been numerous studies focused on the activities and motives of specific organizations. For example, the role of the German military in the Nazi campaign of conquest and genocide has been an important focus of research. This effort has shattered the myth of the “clean” or “apolitical” *Wehrmacht* propagated soon after World War II and has demonstrated widespread knowledge among soldiers about the crimes committed against Jews, Sinti and Roma, and others as well as frequent participation by military units and soldiers in atrocities and mass murder, especially in Eastern Europe. The percentage of *Wehrmacht* members who directly participated in atrocity and genocide may never be known, but the secretly recorded conversations of German prisoners of war reveal that “practically all German soldiers knew or suspected that Jews were being murdered en masse” (Neitzel & Welzer, 2011/2012, p. 101).

Omer Bartov (1992) led the way toward a fundamental reexamination of the actions and motivations of German infantrymen on the Eastern Front. Bartov’s pathbreaking study demonstrated how numerous soldiers became “brutalized instruments of a barbarous policy, and devoted believers in a murderous ideology” (p. viii). He argued that their transformation into perpetrators resulted from the “demodernization” of the war in the East caused by the destruction of primary groups, a “perversion of discipline” enforced through harsh punishments, and the politicization of an army that embraced Hitler and his racial ideology. Another study highlighted the importance of comradeship and training in shaping the actions of common soldiers, but also noted the brutalizing effect of Nazi ideology as it “seeped into the consciousness of the rank and file” (Fritz, 1995, p. 242). In contrast to studies focusing on the actions of the German army in World War II, the historian Isabell Hull (2005) identified the genocidal military campaigns of the German Imperial Army in Southwest Africa against the Herero and Nama peoples prior to World War I as critical to shaping the military culture for future generations. Hull asserts that these colonial campaigns created a “cult of violence” and “bequeathed practices, habits of action, and ways of behaving . . . [that] were easily harnessed for the ideological ends of even greater mass destruction and death” (p. 333).

While military historians have stressed the importance of comradeship or the

concept of “brothers in arms” for explaining why soldiers fight, the historian Thomas Kühne (2017) focuses on the role of masculinity in promoting camaraderie and conformity at the unit level. Comradeship in this view was the “cement of male community” (p. 295) and a powerful bond between soldiers who risked the threat of “social death” and exclusion from their cohort for opposing or failing to participate in acts of atrocity and mass murder. In this view, ordinary soldiers participated in atrocity and genocide not due to fear of punishment or ideological indoctrination, but rather as a means for proving one’s masculinity as a “man among men,” a bond strengthened by the shared experiences of danger and deprivation in the East (Kühne, 2017).

In contrast to studies of the German army as a whole, a focus on the activities of smaller units has provided new insights on the role and motivations of soldiers at the local level. Waitman Beorn’s (2014) examination of regimental and company level units reveals the wide latitude of action available to individual units and the key role of command climate and leadership in dictating the actions of these units and the ways in which this led to involvement or the refusal to participate in genocide. Highlighting the impact of organizational culture on attitudes and behaviors, Beorn concludes, “institutional and unit cultures were decisive for the participation of German soldiers [in acts of atrocity]” (p. 243). In another study, Jeff Rutherford (2014) examined three frontline infantry divisions and their actions during the invasion of the Soviet Union in order to determine what led these soldiers to participate in “an accelerating violent spiral in which Germans responded with increased brutality and ruthlessness against Soviet civilians” (p. 4). While acknowledging the influence of Nazi racial ideology, he argues that “military necessity” or a philosophy of the ends justifying the means became the standard used by military leaders to justify these acts in order to achieve their objectives on the battlefield.

If the *Wehrmacht* participated in genocide, the SS and police were the primary organizations responsible for the destruction of the European Jews. In this regard, Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police Heinrich Himmler emerged as the “master architect of the Final Solution;” a man who shared Hitler’s “ideological obsessions” and who created and oversaw the process of annihilation (Breitman, 1991, p. 241, 246). If Himmler was the master architect of genocide, then

he needed subordinates who could turn these plans into reality. In this case, the senior ranks of the SS consisted of men of action who were guided by ambition and ideology. These perpetrators of genocide were not social misfits or simple-minded, but rather young, ambitious, well-educated men who embraced National Socialist views of racial superiority and the belief in a Germanic empire (Wildt, 2003/2010).

These men who participated in the *Einsatzgruppen* or Special Mission Units, the Waffen-SS, and the Order Police battalions became the key instruments of mass murder in the occupied eastern territories and the “Holocaust by bullets” (Desbois, 2009). In the case of the first, the men of the “mobile killing units” were neither natural born killers nor inherent anti-Semites, but rather men “who believed in the principles of National Socialism so much that they made its ideology the very basis of their behavior . . . [and who] convinced themselves that the road to German rehabilitation was through racial, cultural, and ideological purity” (Earl, 2009, p. 297).

As Browning’s study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 demonstrated, it was not only the SS but also German policemen who played a key role in genocide. In Poland and the Soviet Union, the police battalions, units of some 500 men, became an indispensable instrument in the mass murder of the Nazi regime’s racial enemies including Jews, Slavs, Sinti and Roma, and others. Several studies have followed Browning’s path by examining the participation of the police in the “final solution.” For example, Edward B. Westermann (2005) highlighted the critical role of the SS and police leadership in creating an organizational culture that glorified the ideals of a military identity and emphasized racial ideology. He argued, “the impetus for genocide came from within an organization that established and promoted its own values, beliefs, and standards for behavior, that created an environment in which persecution, exploitation, and murder became both acceptable and desirable attributes” (p. 239). In another study, Philip Blood (2006) argued that SS and police units in World War II borrowed on a colonial and imperial tradition of “security warfare” that encompassed the brutal and ruthless suppression of actual and perceived opposition among conquered peoples, including extermination. In a recent study, Ian Rich (2018) shifted the focus for explaining the participation of policemen in mass murder by examining the important role played by the mid-



level officers at the company and platoon level. He asserted that these junior officers served as role models providing “ideologically grounded justifications” for the rank and file and proved “pivotal to the police battalions’ capacity to perpetrate mass murder” (p. 3).

In addition to SS and policemen, foreign auxiliaries, whether serving in German Security or Order Police units, in the labor and death camps in Poland, or with armed formations of the Waffen SS and the German army, augmented overstretched German forces and were critical instruments for mass murder in the East (Böhler & Gerwarth, 2017). The auxiliary units organized into companies and battalions along with small detachments for duty in the countryside and in towns drew their members primarily from former members of the police and the military. At the end of 1941, the total number of auxiliaries serving under German command was 45,000, but a year later the number had ballooned to almost 300,000, including 100,000 Ukrainians alone, an increase that not coincidentally corresponded with a massive wave of killing of Jews as well as the growing partisan threat faced by German forces in the East (Browning & Matthäus, 2004).

While these men may not have been ‘natural born killers,’ they did come from social backgrounds in which antisemitism was not an uncommon belief, an attribute that German forces attempted to leverage to their advantage through ideological instruction and the promise of material benefits. A study of Ukrainian auxiliaries found three socio-psychological types among these men (Radchenko, 2013). The first group consisted of “political activists” whose “ideological anti-semitism provided the motivation for participation in anti-Jewish actions” (p. 455). The second group was “enterprising conformists” (p. 456) who lacked any moral convictions and simply adapted to the political realities of German rule. Finally, “ordinary task performers” were men from lower class and rural backgrounds who saw service as “a means for upward social movement” (p. 457). Whatever their ultimate motivation, Peter Black (2011) correctly noted, “The Nazis could not have implemented their “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” without assistance from ethnic German and non-German auxiliaries” (p. 1).

From the discussion above, it is clear that scholars from a number of academic disciplines have devoted considerable research in trying to explain what

motivated institutions and individuals to participate in genocide. It is equally apparent that their theories and conclusions on motivation are as diverse as the perpetrator groups themselves. While we may never know with certainty why ordinary, and not so ordinary, men and women chose to participate in mass murder, we do know that genocide required the active participation and complicity of millions. Furthermore, there would have been no “final solution” without war and it was Hitler’s obsession with race and the conquest of space that led to his decision to invade Poland in 1939, a critical decision that “provided a framework within which the Germans [involving cooperation at all levels] initiated and developed systematic killing programs” (Weinberg, 1995, p. 219). Although Hitler may have been the leading prophet of annihilation, genocide was ultimately a societal endeavor regardless of individual motivation.

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