

The Raul Hilberg Memorial Lecture
The University of Vermont
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*Revisiting the Holocaust
Perpetrators.
Why Did They Kill?*

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The Big Question that hovers over any discussion of Holocaust perpetrators is very basic, namely “Why did they kill?” This formulation in fact contains two questions in one: it asks about the motivations of the individual killers—a question that admits of as many answers as there were perpetrators--and it asks about general explanations of human behavior that would somehow give us a sense of understanding about actions that, based on our own personal experience, are totally alien and seemingly unfathomable to virtually all of us. In this latter sense it may seem to be a simple question but it is one without a simple answer.

One problem that stands in the way of a simple answer is that there were a variety of perpetrators, whose participation came in such different forms that they seem to require different explanations. For convenience, I have often divided the perpetrators and their respective forms of perpetration into four rough categories:

1. The ideologues, “true believers,” or hardcore Nazis: activists who sought leadership roles, shaped policies to realize an ideological vision, and often went into the field to implement these murderous policies. The most exemplary figures of this group are the young SS and SD officers and especially the “brain trust” around Heydrich. Recent research has uncovered a relatively high degree of homogeneity among

the archetypal ideological killers of the Heydrich's Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), as composed of a generation that was too young to have fought in World War I but passed its formative years in the highly unstable period of defeat, revolution, inflation, and depression, and interpreted those experiences through the lens of an ultra-nationalist, völkisch, and anti-Semitic Weltanschauung. After decades of relative neglect, the intellectuals, planners, policemen, and technocrats of the SS (and especially Heydrich's RSHA) have returned to center stage, and both their ideological commitment to National Socialism and their inordinate influence on the shaping and implementing of "policies of destruction" have been recognized.¹ But such a welcome corrective should not eclipse a continuing awareness and investigation of the roles played by other broad categories of Holocaust perpetrators.

2. The allegedly apolitical professionals and experts, such as generals, industrialists,² doctors, and scientists who shared overlapping goals with the Nazi regime. In recent years this category has expanded to include an ever wider array: accountants, engineers, architects,³ demographers, economists,⁴ theologians,⁵ and various academics,

1 For the RSHA: Ulrich Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft* (Dietz, Bonn, 1996); and Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führerkorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburger Edition, Hamburg, 2002). For the WVHA: Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2002); and Jan Schulte, *Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung: Das Wirtschaftsimperium der SS. Oswald Pohl und das SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt 1933-1945* (Schönigh, Paderborn, 2001). For the Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt: Isabel Heinemann, *"Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut". Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Wallstein, Göttingen, 2003). For Eichmann and his team: Hans Safrian, *Die Eichmann Männer* (Europaverlag, Vienna, 1993); Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitlers Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil* (Continuum, New York, 2002); Irmtrud Wojak, *Eichmanns Memoiren. Ein Kritischer Essay* (Campus, Frankfurt a. M., 2002); and David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer"* (William Heinemann, London, 2004). For the Gestapo: Eric Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (Basic Books, New York, 1999); Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, editors, *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg "Heimfront" und besetztes Europa* (Primus, Darmstadt, 2000); Holger Berschel, *Bürokratie und Terror: Das Judenreferat der Gestapo Düsseldorf 1935-1945* (Klartext, Essen, 2001).

2 For example, the work of Peter Hayes: *From Cooperation to Complicity: Degussa in the Third Reich* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004), and *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era*.

3 Paul Jaskot, *The Architecture of Oppression: The SS, Forced Labor, and the Nazi Monumental Building Program*.

4 For the involvement of the social scientists, see: Götz Aly and Susannah Heim, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2002).

5 Robert Ericksen, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985), and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008).

including yes even historians.⁶

3. The bureaucrats and functionaries in the middle and lower echelons of government service. These were the banal bureaucrats, behind whose image Eichmann tried to disguise his own involvement, a tactic that was plausible (and sufficiently successful to fool Hannah Arendt) precisely because there were so many people like what he was pretending to be. There are myriad examples: railway officials who scheduled one-way charter trains,⁷ municipal officials who processed deportations by collecting clearly labeled apartment keys and ration books as well as perishables from the deportees for the local German Red Cross to distribute to needy Germans,⁸ Foreign Office diplomats who widened the net by procuring declarations of disinterest of various countries with Jewish citizens living in the German sphere⁹—all allegedly distanced from the consequence of their actions by a division of labor and focused on how well they performed their given tasks, not the physical and moral consequences thereof.

4. The “Ordinary Men,” the randomly conscripted Wehrmacht, Reserve Order Police, occupation authorities, etc. who represented a cross-section of German society and, when placed in a situation to be the grassroots/face-to-face killers, in overwhelming proportions killed non-combatant civilians, including elderly, women, and children.

These are useful categories, even though increasingly—as research deepens—we are aware how overlapping are the categories, how permeable are the boundaries between them. Experts were not

6 For a summary and bibliography of the controversy surrounding the collaboration and complicity of German historians, see: Konrad Jarusch, “Unasked Questions: The Controversy about Nazi Collaboration among German Historians,” *Lessons and Legacies, VI: New Currents in Holocaust Research*, ed. by Jeffrey M. Dieffendorf (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2004), pp. 190-208. For the involvement of academicians of the humanities in *Judenforschung* and *Ostforschung* more generally, see: Max Weinrich, *Hitler's Professors*; Alan Steinweis, *Studying the Jews*; Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastward: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988). The case of the noted musicologist Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht recently became a center of controversy (as discussed in a panel of the American Musicological Society in Indianapolis, November 2010).

7 Raul Hilberg, *Sonderzüge nach Auschwitz* (Dumjahn Verlag, Mainz, 1981).

8 Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2004), pp. 382-8.

9 Christopher R. Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (Holmes & Meier, New York, 1978).

so apolitical; expertise and ideology were not mutually exclusive. Landscape and urban planners in Poland could envision and seek beautification both through planting trees, clearing slums, and killing Jews. Even lowest echelon bureaucrats did not just carry out their prescribed routines but were innovative problem solvers taking the initiative in order to “work toward the Führer.” For our purposes here, I will concentrate on the last category—the so-called “Ordinary Men” who became face-to-face killers at the local level.

Here again at least four basic explanations have been invoked:

1. Coercion/Duress. The accused perpetrators themselves almost invariably claimed that they had been forced to kill. This defense was convenient, since it made their undeniable acts the moral and legal responsibility of others. Forced to obey orders, their actions were not their own; they were merely the instruments of others. The major problem with this explanation was empirical. Quite simply, over decades defense attorneys could not find a single documented case in which anyone suffered the draconic consequences for refusing to kill unarmed civilians that these defendants claimed as basis of coercion/duress.¹⁰ The backup position, therefore, was “putative duress,” i.e. they sincerely believed they were under duress, even if that might not have been the case, which under the circumstances of a repressive dictatorship they dared not test. Hence the example of Reserve Police Battalion 101 is crucial, since in this case even “putative duress” was clearly not a factor.¹¹ On the day of the unit’s first massacre, the commanding officer, Major Trapp, had openly offered those who did not feel up to the task of killing unarmed Jewish men, women, and children the chance to opt out, and this remained the policy within the battalion thereafter.

2. “Authoritarian personality.” Since the vast majority of perpetrators

¹⁰ Herbert Jäger, *Verbrechen unter totalitärer Herrschaft* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1982), pp. 81-2, 95-122, 158-60.

¹¹ Hence the battalion has been the subject of two contrasting studies: Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (HarperCollins, New York 1992), and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Knopf, New York, 1996).

were not sadists, and even those accused as such subsequently appeared in court as quite normal and harmless, the notion developed of an authoritarian personality, which allegedly derived from an unusual combination of “ sleeper traits ” that were not apparent under normal conditions, but were activated through a process of selection and self-selection that operated under the conditions of a totalitarian regime.¹² This explanation provided comfort in that we could distance ourselves from the killing behavior of the Nazis, which was understood as a result of individual though not readily apparent abnormality. This explanation again faced empirical problems as research on the Holocaust deepened. There were far too many perpetrators who had been randomly selected rather than self-selected, and most perpetrators had come to killing process by virtue of being members of groups or units, and did not follow a path determined by individual characteristics.

3. The Cultural explanation. Again this explanation provided comfort through distancing; if the individual perpetrators were not psychologically abnormal, then an entire culture was abnormal and alien. The first version of German cultural abnormality emphasized the militarism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism first of Prussia and then of the unified German Reich after 1871. In this view Germany had followed a “ special path ” or *Sonderweg*, which explained first the failure of the German experiment of Weimar democracy and the rise of the Hitler dictatorship and then the obedient behavior of German perpetrators during the Holocaust. A second, later version, as articulated by Daniel Goldhagen, emphasized an allegedly unique “ eliminationist ” anti-Semitism culturally imprinted on ordinary Germans over centuries, so that Germany was “ pregnant with genocide,” and “ ordinary Germans ” impatiently awaited a regime that would “ unshackle ” and “ unleash ” them to carry out the extermination of the Jews they had long desired.¹³

12 T.W. Adorno, et al, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, 1950).

13 Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Also emphasizing the centrality of antisemitism in German culture: John Weiss, *The Ideology of Death: Why the Holocaust Happened in Germany* (Ivon R. Dee, Chicago, 1996).

4. There is another approach that shifts focus from the individual to the group, but it emphasizes alleged universal traits of human behavior over particular cultural traits. It focuses on situational, organizational, and institutional factors operating within a group dynamic. Because this approach emphasizes perpetrator behavior in the Holocaust as a product of group dynamic and social interaction rather than individual or cultural aberration, it looks to insights from social psychology more than from psychology or cultural history.

Three experiments have been foundational in this regard. The first is the “conformity” experiment of Salomon Ash. In this experiment the subject is placed in a situation where all around him (unknown to him in fact confederates of the experiment) unanimously affirm an obviously wrong observation (such as which of four lines is the shortest) before he is asked publicly to state his own opinion. Most often the subject affirms the obviously wrong answer rather than confront all those around him with their error. The comfort of conforming and the discomfort of lonely dissent and confrontation, in short, are powerful factors shaping how individuals interact with those around them.

The second experiment is that of Stanley Milgrim, which he himself labeled the “obedience to authority” though I think it might better be called the “deference to authority” experiment.¹⁴ Naïve volunteer subjects were instructed by a “scientific authority” in an alleged learning experiment to inflict an escalating series of fake electric shocks upon an actor/victim, who responded with carefully programmed feedback—an escalating series of complaints, cries of pain, calls for help, unintelligible groans, and finally fateful silence. In the standard experiment, two-thirds of Milgrim’s subjects were “obedient” to the experimenter’s instructions to the point of inflicting extreme pain. Several variations of the experiment were especially instructive. If the subjects were given complete discretion as to the level of electronic shock to administer, all but a few sadists consistently delivered a minimal shock. If not under direct surveillance of the supervising “scientist,” many subjects “cheated” by giving lower

14 Stanley Milgrim, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York, 1974).

shocks than prescribed. In short, what people do when instructed and supervised by what they accept as a “legitimate” authority is quite different than what they will choose to do when allowed to follow their own inclinations. Deference to authority is a powerful factor in shaping social behavior.

The third experiment is the “Stanford prison experiment” of Philip Zimbardo.¹⁵ Screening out everyone who scored beyond the normal in any way on a battery of tests, Zimbardo then randomly divided the volunteer subjects into prisoners and guards and placed them in a simulated prison. Though outright physical violence was barred, the outnumbered guards working in shifts so rapidly developed humiliating and dehumanizing ways of controlling their prisoners that the experiment had to be ended early. The prison situation alone, in which randomly-selected and seemingly-normal subjects rapidly adapted to their role as powerful guards who were responsible for controlling and dominating their prisoners, was sufficient to produce cruel and brutal behavior.

Especially relevant to my own subsequent observations about RPB 101 was the spectrum of behavior that Zimbardo found among his guards. About one-third emerged as enthusiastically cruel and constantly inventive of new forms of torment. A middle group of guards were “tough but fair,” followed regulations, and did not go out of their way to mistreat prisoners. Less than 20% emerged as “good guards” who not only did not torment prisoners but even did small favors when unobserved by their fellow guards.

These three important concepts of conformity, deference to authority, and role adaptation had been developed by social psychologists long before Holocaust Studies in general, much less the subfield that the Germans call *Täterforschung* or perpetrator research, had obtained academic standing. In the 1990s, however, as Holocaust historians embraced or rejected the older insights of social psychology, the social psychologists became re-engaged. There are two additional

15 Craig Haney, Curtis Banks, and Philip Zimbardo, “Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison,” *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, I (1983), pp. 69-97.

contributions that I would like to discuss in particular.

In their book *Crimes of Obedience*,¹⁶ which focused on the behavior of American soldiers in Viet Nam rather than on Holocaust perpetrators, Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton articulated a spectrum of response to criminal orders: the “true believers” who not only obey the orders but also fully embrace the spirit and ideology behind the orders; the role adapters who obey such orders out of a sense of duty and recognition of what is required of them to be considered good soldiers but who would never undertake such behavior of their own volition; and nominal compliers who obey such orders only when under the supervision of others but cease to obey when on their own.

Furthermore, a number of social psychologists developed the notion of “cognitive dissonance” that arises when people behave in ways that violate their own moral standards. Such a conflict between actions and beliefs causes distress, and people seek to relieve that distress by altering their beliefs when they cannot alter their actions. As Leonard Newman has argued, “when people are led to engage in behaviors that violate their normal standards, they will be motivated to change their attitudes and beliefs to reduce the discrepancy between their behavior and their cognitions.”¹⁷

Taken together, the Kelman-Hamilton spectrum and the notion of “cognitive dissonance” help explain the genocidal momentum that can develop among perpetrators. Over time, people who initially complied with criminal orders either nominally or by role adaptation can turn into “true believers” who embrace the ideology behind the criminal orders, make that cause their own, and thereby often become increasingly zealous and cruel as well.

A number of criticisms have been made of using the social-psychological approach in the study of Holocaust perpetrators. First, one can note that the early experiments, with unwitting subjects

16 Herbert C. Hamilton and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989).

17 Leonard Newman, “What is a ‘Social-Psychological’ Account of Perpetrator Behavior: The Person versus the Situation in Goldhagen’s *Willing Executioners*.” *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. by Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002), p. 53.

who were deliberately misled, would not pass the current standards involving human experimentation that require informed consent. While this means that such experiments could not be conducted in the same form today, that does not in my opinion invalidate their conclusions.

Second, many critics consider social psychological explanations per se to be morally dubious (concerning both scholar and perpetrator), since they consider this approach to be apologetic, serving to relieve the perpetrators of individual responsibility.¹⁸ In my opinion to conflate explanations of group behavior with judgments of individual responsibility is to mix categories, to confuse apples and oranges. The fact that for every 1 million automobile miles driven, we can predict a certain number of fatalities due to drunk drivers, does not relieve the individual drunk driver causing a fatality of his responsibility. The fact that in each killing unit there were men who did not kill demonstrates that each individual was capable of a morally responsible decision, even if social psychological insights allow us to predict that the majority will not make the decision we would have preferred.

A third critique, focusing on conformity, suggests that if the majority of perpetrators in a unit were not “true believers” initially, then if conformity were an important factor, the majority of non-true believers should have exerted pressure to prevent compliance with killing orders. Social psychological research into gangs, however, has led to the notion of “pluralistic ignorance.”¹⁹ While most gang members individually did not want to commit various criminal acts, they felt compelled to go along, each operating under a misperception about the attitudes and beliefs of others and accepting the legitimacy of and assuming the broad support of others for upholding gang traditions. The behavior of the gang as a group was not the sum of the views of its individual members, who conformed to a presumed consensus out of “pluralistic ignorance.”

18 Arthur G. Miller, Amy M. Buddie, and Jeffrey Kretschmar, “Explaining the Holocaust: Does Social Psychology Exonerate the Perpetrators?” *Understanding Genocide*, pp. 301-24.

19 Leonard Newman, “What is a ‘Social-Psychological’ Account of Perpetrator Behavior,” *Understanding Genocide*, pp. 60-61.

Fourth, critics claim that the social-psychological approach ignores ideology and culture. This is the case only if situational explanations are juxtaposed against cultural ones as a false dichotomy. One of the most important recent insights has been our growing awareness that there are no “objective” situations, rather we live in a “constructed” world in which the situations we find ourselves in are perceived, interpreted, given meaning, and reacted to according to our differing “normative frames of reference,”²⁰ cultural assumptions, and ideological tenets, as well as our common behavioral tendencies. Henceforth, any study of perpetrators must attempt to find the proper blend and interaction of cultural and situational factors. In hindsight I can now see that one of the mistakes I made in writing *Ordinary Men* was to discuss German attitudes and perceptions about Jews and Poles in the penultimate chapter and then discuss situational factors within a social-psychological framework in the last chapter, as if these were two separate, compartmentalized explanatory approaches.

Finally, some critics claim that the social-psychological approach has posed the wrong question, trying to explain how the perpetrators “overcame” moral inhibitions or qualms to do what they did. Instead, the real question should be to explain how and why perpetrators were able to conceive of themselves as moral actors, who thought they were doing what was right and necessary, killing with a good conscience and without guilt either then or after. Even those, like Harald Welzer, who reject the Goldhagen notion of German society being “pregnant with genocide” and merely waiting to be “unshackled” and “unleashed,” nonetheless argue that after 1933 Germans bought into “Nazi morality,” shifted the “normative frames of reference,” expelled Jews from the community of human obligation, and thus experienced no crisis of conscience and had no need to “overcome” moral inhibitions in killing Jews in 1941, since they had already decoupled mistreatment of Jews from moral consideration.

In my own opinion this is contradicted by empirical evidence

²⁰ This phrase is coined by Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (S. Fischer, Frankfurt, 2005).

that most men did in fact experience conflict, distress, great unease, and even trauma in their initial killing actions. The acceptance of “Nazi morality” did not mean the immediate and total eclipse of other beliefs and values. Most Germans, I would argue, lived through the Third Reich in a state of denial that they had to make the distinct choice between loyalty to the Nazi regime and traditional morality. The vast majority refused to accept or confront the stark choice, as articulated by Dietrich Bonhoefer, between the victory of Germany and triumph of National Socialism or the defeat of Germany and the survival of European Christian civilization. They thought they could have both. Those in killing units like RPB 101, in contrast, did face a stark and inescapable choice. Faced with the strong situational pressures of conformity, deference to authority, and role adaptation, most men became killers when their units were assigned the task, but it did involve “overcoming” residual values, and reducing the stress of cognitive dissonance by opting for those beliefs that confirmed the rightness of what they were doing.

When I wrote *Ordinary Men*, I portrayed the initial killing as quite traumatic and distressing to the men, but also argued that most quickly became brutalized, numbed, and accustomed to what they were doing. Moreover, I argued that over time the battalion divided into three groups (reminiscent of the groups Zimbardo detected): a significant minority that became eager killers, seeking opportunities to shoot Jews; a plurality that performed their killing duties when assigned but without initiative or enthusiasm; and a small minority that sought to evade shooting whenever possible. When I made these arguments based on the post-war testimonies of RPB 101, some critics claimed that I did not take sufficiently into account the problematic nature of the evidence, that in short I was duped into accepting exculpatory testimony that led to distorted conclusions. Let us examine empirically two propositions with different evidence not subject to the same challenge:

1. Did the vast bulk of the Holocaust perpetrators believe in “Nazi morality” concerning the rightness and necessity of the killing, or was there a wide spectrum of attitudes and behavior? Were there a significant percentage of policemen who either killed with unease rather

than conviction and enthusiasm, and a not insignificant percentage who evaded killing?

2. Among those who killed, did they do so without conflict or inhibition from the beginning, or were they significantly changed and brutalized by their experiences?

Let us look at two examples based on quite different sources than the German policemen's problematic postwar testimonies, with their inherent dangers of exculpatory mendaciousness. The first involves the testimony of Oswald Rufeisen concerning the German reserve police in the Belorussian town of Mir. Rufeisen was a Jewish teenager from Silesia, fluent in both German and Polish without a detectable Yiddish accent, who fled first to Vilnius in 1939 and then south into Belorussia from the endangered ghetto of Vilnius in the fall of 1941. There he was intercepted by the captain of the collaborating local police, Symon Serafimovitch, to whom Rufeisen identified himself as a refugee of mixed German-Polish ancestry. Serafimovitch took the young man into his service as a translator and lodged him in his own house. Several weeks later a contingent of German police arrived, and their commander, Sergeant Hein, took the useful, young translator into his own service. Thus for eight months Rufeisen slept in the house of the Belorussian police captain by night and worked as the indispensable translator of the German police commander by day. When Rufeisen learned in the summer of 1942 that the Mir ghetto was about to be liquidated, he warned the Jews but was betrayed by someone who of course did not know his secret Jewish identity and deemed him a provocateur. Rufeisen was placed under arrest by Hein but basically allowed to escape, as the sergeant had become very fond of him.

What do we learn about the makeup and attitude of the German reserve police contingent in Mir through the memory and testimony of a Jewish survivor, who had an unusual internal vantage point, a superb memory (as confirmed by a contemporaneous report of Sergeant Hein that survived in the Brest archives), and no motive to exonerate Germans. According to Rufeisen, there was a clique of four men in the police station, led by Corporal Schultz, whom Rufeisen described

as “a beast in the form of a man” who killed “without remorse of conscience.” There was another group of four men who did not take part in the killing of Jews. “No one seemed to bother them. No one talked about their absences. It was as if they had a right to abstain.” And the remaining five policemen Rufeisen characterized as “passive executioners of orders.” “It was clear that there were differences in their outlooks. I think that the whole business of anti-Jewish moves, the business of Jewish extermination they considered unclean. For them a confrontation with the partisans was a battle, a military move. But a move against the Jews was something they might have experienced as ‘dirty’.”²¹ In short, Rufeisen confirmed the tripartite division of the policemen between eager killers, unenthusiastic compliers, and evaders, and a percentage for the last category (30%) considerably higher than the 10-20% I had estimated for RPB 101. My interpretation, it would seem, was not the product of an alleged gullibility to mendacious postwar German testimony but properly corrected for the sources I was using.

The second example involves a 40 year old reserve policeman and former salesman from Bremen in RPB 105 who served as the company photographer and wrote his wife a rare sequence of letters that has luckily survived intact.²² Previously stationed in Norway, the reservist was clearly both unimpressed and clueless about the “criminal orders” disseminated to the battalion on the eve of Barbarossa. “The major said that every suspect is to be shot immediately. Well, I’m in suspense,” he wrote sarcastically. Referring to the comfort of the officers’ casino during their previous deployment in Oslo, he added: “The gentlemen fancy themselves as very important and martial.” In early July, the tone began to change. He wrote about his two Jewish servants. “The Jews are free game. Anybody can seize one on the streets for himself.”

21 This account of Oswald Rufeisen is based on three sources: his interviews with Nechama Tec, recorded in her book, *In the Lion's Den* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992); his pretrial testimony in the case of *Crown vs. Serefinowicz*; and my own interview with him on June 17, 1998, just six weeks before he died. For Hein's report of Rufeisen's arrest and escape: USHMM, RG 19996.A.169, reel 22 (Brest Archive, M-41/1021, Hein to Gend.-Gebietsführer in Barnaowitsche, August 20, 1942.

22 “...ein bisschen die Wahrheit.’ Briefe eines Bremer Kaufmanns von seinem Einsatz beim Reserve-Polizeibattalion 105 in der Sowjetunion 1941,” ed. by Ludwig Eiber, 1999. *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, 1/91.

Moreover, he added, the Jews had no food. “How they actually live, I don’t know. We give them our bread and more. I cannot be so tough.”

One month later, after reporting on latest packages sent home, he noted explicitly: “Here all Jews are being shot. Everywhere such actions are underway. Yesterday night 150 Jews from this place were shot, men, women, children, all killed. The Jews are being totally exterminated.” He advised his wife not to think about it—“it must be”—and for the moment to “say nothing about it” to their eldest daughter. Significantly, he wrote in the “anonymous passive” voice—omitting any identification of the actors--so pervasive in postwar accounts but here employed even during the war. There is no celebration or boasting here, but on the contrary even a hint of shame.

But the mood and attitude of the letter writer changed rapidly in the ensuing weeks. By end of summer, he was referring to the Russians as “beasts,” “dogs,” and “trash” who had to disappear. Missing one execution, he wrote: “It was said to have been fun.” Complaining of scorched earth policy that left him nothing to loot and send home, he wrote in connection with the sight of starving POWs: “For that their own prisoners must go hungry.” He added, “When one sees a prisoner camp, once can see miserable scenes. The people would be better off dead.” When his unit suffered casualties, he wrote that his comrades became angry and “would like best of all to shoot down all Russians.” And after filming a subsequent execution, the same man who earlier advised his wife not to tell the children now wrote: “In the future my film will be a document and of great interest to our children.” In short, these letters document a breathtakingly rapid brutalization over a short period of time. The Bremen reservist did not begin the campaign as a vicious perpetrator, but he was quickly transformed by his experiences in the “war of annihilation” against the Soviet Union into an “ideological soldier” of the Nazi cause.

Finally, can our understanding of Holocaust perpetrators be aided by the study of other genocidal perpetrators? We know much more about Holocaust perpetrators than we do about those of the Armenian genocide or the mass killings of Stalin, Mao, and the Cambodian

“autogenocide” of Pol Pot. But Rwanda offers a more informed chance of comparison. Here I borrow from the work of a Rwandan psychiatrist, Athanase Hagenimana, who was a fellow visiting scholar with me at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2002-3. He was half-Tutsi/half-Hutu. One of his sisters had been killed as a Hutu, and one arrested as a Tutsi genocidaire. After initially working among the victims of the Rwandan genocide, he eventually entered the prisons to work among and study the killers. He devised two survey instruments for his research. One measured intensity of involvement. Since it was based on self-reporting, it may not have been inclusive, but presumably those who voluntarily incriminated themselves were not lying; thus he presumably had an untainted if not complete pool of real, hardcore perpetrators. His second survey instrument attempted to measure motivation. Among myriad factors he tried to test for, only two showed any significant correlation, and these correlations were dramatic. One salient factor was the dehumanization of the victims, i.e. ability to construct a world in which those whom the perpetrators had killed were not within community of human obligation, but rather totally devalued. The second salient factor was conformity, in that the self-confessed perpetrators measured their own self-esteem in terms of how they were seen in the eyes of others, according to the norms of the group and the genocidal Hutu regime. I would argue that the close parallels between Nazi and Rwandan perpetrators confirm the importance of universal factors of human nature in assessing the capacity of human beings to commit mass murder. In both Rwanda and in the Nazi empire ideological factors devaluing the victims and expelling them from the community of human obligation as well as situational factors determining the status and self-esteem of the perpetrators were truly important, truly essential. Social-psychological insights and situational factors cannot be reduced to a mere subsidiary or facilitating role. They merit our continuing attention as we seek answers to the crucial question “Why did they kill.”





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