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The Men Who Pulled the Triggers

By Walter Reich
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ORDINARY MEN Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland. By Christopher R. Browning. Illustrated. 231 pp. New York: Aaron Asher Books/HarperCollins Publishers. \$22.

We know a lot about how the Germans carried out the Holocaust. We know much less about how they felt and what they thought as they did it, how they were affected by what they did, and what made it possible for them to do it. In fact, we know remarkably little about the ordinary Germans who made the Holocaust happen -- not the desk murderers in Berlin, not the Eichmanns and Heydrichs, and not Hitler and Himmler, but the tens of thousands of conscripted soldiers and policemen from all walks of life, many of them middle-aged, who rounded up millions of Jews and methodically shot them, one by one, in forests, ravines and ditches, or stuffed them, one by one, into cattle cars and guarded those cars on their way to the gas chambers.

In his finely focused and stunningly powerful book, "Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland," Christopher R. Browning tells us about such Germans and helps us understand, better than we did before, not only what they did to make the Holocaust happen but also how they were transformed psychologically from the ordinary men of his title into active participants in the most monstrous crime in human history. In doing so he aims a penetrating searchlight on the human capacity for utmost evil and leaves us staring at his subject matter with the shock of knowledge and the lurking fear of self-recognition.

Mr. Browning, a professor of history at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash., and the author of two other books on the Holocaust, focuses his study on one killing unit that operated in Poland during the German occupation, Reserve Police Battalion 101 of the German Order Police. This group of 500 policemen, most of them from Hamburg, was made up of truly ordinary men. Most were in their 30's and 40's -- too old for conscription into the army -- and of middle- or lower-class origins. They included men who, before the war, had been professional policemen as well as businessmen, dockworkers, truck drivers, construction workers, machine operators, waiters, druggists and teachers. Only a minority were members of the Nazi Party, and only a few belonged to the SS. During their stay in Poland they participated in the shootings, or the transport to the Treblinka gas chambers, of at least 83,000 Jews.

IN the 1960's Battalion 101 was investigated for its activities by West German prosecutors. In the process, 210 former members were interrogated, and 125 of the testimonies were detailed enough to enable Mr. Browning, examining the records, to piece together not only

how the unit operated but also how its members felt about their participation in the unit's work. It is on the basis of these testimonies -- some of them self-serving and mendacious, Mr. Browning recognizes, but many of them, he believes, remarkably open and revealing -- that "Ordinary Men" was written.

Battalion 101 was sent into Poland to participate in a "special action." Just what that action was to be its members weren't told. In fact, they were fated to play a crucial role in the Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe.

Three months before the Battalion's arrival in Poland during the early summer of 1942, only about a quarter of the Holocaust's eventual victims had been killed, most of them in the Soviet Union. Six months after its arrival, only about a quarter were still alive. Most of the killing during this intense period of mass murder took place in Poland. Battalion 101 of the Order Police -- together with other Order Police battalions -- contributed to the manpower needed to carry out this immense task.

In fact, the Order Police was part of the answer to Heinrich Himmler's Holocaust dream. In the summer of 1941, while the Order Police and special units operating behind the German Army were busy killing the Jews of the Soviet Union, Himmler told Odilo Globocnik, the SS and Police Leader in Lublin, Poland, of Hitler's intention to kill the Jews of the rest of Europe as well. Globocnik's task, he was informed, was the murder of the Jews in the central part of Poland called, by the Germans, the General Government. It was in this area that two million Jews lived, and it was into this area that Jews would be dumped from other parts of Europe, such as Germany, Austria and Slovakia. It was Globocnik's job to kill them all.

But he was not to do it in the way the Germans were doing it in the Soviet Union. There, the Jews were being killed by mobile firing squads. That method was too public, too inefficient and too hard on the killers psychologically. The solution would be killing centers using gas chambers, which would require much less in the way of manpower and relieve Germans of the psychological burden of killing individual people with individual bullets.

But two manpower problems remained. The first resulted from the need to round up the Jews so that they could be consolidated in centralized ghettos and then transported by rail to the killing centers. The other resulted from the need -- when the gas chamber or rail lines were out of order, when there weren't enough trains to transport the Jews, or when the Jews were located in inconvenient places -- to shoot the Jews in the villages in which they lived.

WHERE to obtain this manpower at a time when the war against the Soviet Union was straining German resources to the limit? Globocnik hit upon the solution of using the three manpower pools available in his area: local ethnic Germans; the "Trawniki" (Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians recruited among Soviet prisoners of war who were willing to work for the Germans and who were trained for killing operations at the camp at Trawniki, near

Lublin -- the same camp at which John Demjanjuk, who is currently appealing his conviction in Israel for war crimes, was trained); and three Order Police battalions, one of them Reserve Battalion 101.

A shortage of rolling stock was holding up transports to the killing centers when Reserve Battalion 101 arrived in Globocnik's Lublin region. At first, Globocnik had the battalion consolidate Jews in "transit" ghettos and camps so that they would be available for future transports. But within a few weeks Globocnik apparently decided that the killing itself had to resume, with or without rolling stock, and had the battalion sent to the village of Jozefow for its first "action."

Jozefow provided the men of Battalion 101 with their introduction to mass murder. The village contained 1,800 Jews. The orders were that the male Jews of working age -- those who would serve as "work Jews" before being killed -- were to be sent to camps in Lublin, while the women, children and elderly men were to be shot in Jozefow. The battalion commander, Major Wilhelm Trapp, a 53-year-old career policeman, clearly found these orders distasteful. Already one of his officers, the owner of a lumber business in civilian life, had learned about the impending massacre and asked to be given another assignment; he was. Upon arrival in Jozefow, Trapp informed the battalion's men what their task would be, and invited the older ones to excuse themselves if they felt they were not up to it; a dozen did. Battalion members were then ordered to surround the village, round up its Jews and shoot those trying to escape as well as infants and those too sick or frail to walk to the marketplace.

Trapp then absented himself, spending the rest of the day indoors, away from the action. One policeman remembered seeing Trapp at his headquarters muttering, "Man. . . . such jobs don't suit me. But orders are orders." Another remembered him crying. He later told his driver, "If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans."

Trapp's officers and men, however, went to work. After those Jews who weren't shot in the roundup were assembled, often with the ready help of local Poles who roused Jews from hiding places, the battalion doctor showed the officers how to aim their rifles at the back of the neck so as to kill a Jew with one shot. In the marketplace, the Polish mayor of Jozefow provided the Germans with flasks of schnapps. The Jews, mostly women and children, were then brought to the nearby forest in trucks. Each truckload was met by an equal number of policemen, who marched the Jews down a forest path. The Jews were ordered to lie face down in a row; each policeman then placed his bayonet at the back of his Jew's neck and fired. This procedure was repeated throughout the day.

As the shooting went on, and as the battalion members found themselves covered with blood, brain tissue and bone splinters from the Jews they had shot at point-blank range, a few felt ill. One policeman was paired with an old man who, upon seeing the corpses of other Jews, threw himself on the ground. The policeman shot too high. "The entire back of the skull . . .

was torn off and the brain exposed. Parts of the skull flew into Sergeant Steinmetz's face." The policeman asked to be excused, and was.

Other policemen recalled other reasons for asking to be excused. One, a tailor, discovered that the mother and daughter he had been assigned were German Jews from Kassel, apparently deported to Poland some time before; others encountered Jews from their hometown of Hamburg. Several battalion members slipped away and were cursed as weaklings. In all, as many as 20 percent quit shooting at some point; at least 80 percent kept on shooting until all 1,500 assembled Jews were dead.

Twenty years later, during their interrogations, those battalion veterans who claimed to have stopped shooting at Jozefow cited physical revulsion, in the main, as the reason. Very few -- even two decades later, when it might have helped them legally -- claimed to have had ethical qualms. A few observed that they felt they were freer than others to withdraw from the killing process because they had no intention of remaining policemen after the war; their colleagues, though, had to think about their careers. For many, the pressure to conform to the group, and to not seem like cowards, played a role in their continuing to shoot. One metalworker from Bremerhaven contented himself with the rationale that he would shoot only children, since if his partner shot the mother then the child would be unable to survive alone and killing it would be an act of mercy. For nearly all, the Jews were not in the same human family as they. Their commander, Major Trapp, had told them, in his initial speech, that all Jews were enemies who deserved to be killed, even their women and their children, because Germany's enemies were killing German women and children with bombs.

Though Trapp and many of his men found their participation in the murder of Jozefow Jews difficult, that difficulty diminished as the battalion continued its work. First of all, they got help from the Trawniki -- the Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians -- who were called in to do much of the shooting. In addition, the gas chambers came back on line, and it was less stressful to stuff cattle cars, no matter how brutally this had to be done, than to do "neck shots." And even when they had to shoot, the shootings themselves somehow got easier. In fact, after Jozefow the shootings became, for many, routine -- even, for some, fun. And for a few, the initial horror was replaced by a gory sadism, in which Jews, totally naked, preferably old and with beards, were forced to crawl in front of their intended graves and to sustain beatings with clubs before being shot. One officer even brought his new and pregnant wife from Germany to show off his mastery over the fate of the Jews.

MEANWHILE, the Germans knew that some Jews were escaping the villages and ghettos for the forests. This was unacceptable, and a "Jew hunt" was instituted to solve this problem. The battalion, often on tips from local Poles, would comb the woods for signs of underground hideouts. Sometimes a chimney pipe sticking out of the earth would give away an entire family in hiding. On each occasion the hideout would be cleared and the Jews shot. The

callousness became ever more extreme. Jew hunts became a sport, and one policeman recalled a colleague's joke about eating the brains of slaughtered Jews.

The battalion's final and greatest spasm of killing took place in November 1943. By then, practically the only Jews left alive in the Lublin district were those in a few labor camps. Despite German reversals in the war, and despite the need for the Jews' labor, Himmler was determined to finish them off. Besides, Jewish revolts in the ghettos of Warsaw and Bialystok, as well as in the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor, carried out when the surviving Jews realized that even work would not save them, made Himmler conclude that he could expect further such resistance from the "work Jews" in the remaining camps. He therefore ordered the Erntefest, or "harvest festival," in which SS, police and other German units from all over the General Government, including Battalion 101, were organized to kill, in the space of a few days, the remaining Jews in the region.

At least 16,500 Jews, probably closer to 18,000, were brought to the perimeter of the Majdanek camp, both from the camp itself and from the surrounding area. Against a background of music blaring from loudspeakers, and as Poles watched from nearby rooftops, the Jews were driven, stark naked, into ditches where, according to the testimony of one battalion member, they were "forced to lie down quite precisely on top of those who had been shot before them. The shooter then fired off a burst at these prone victims." Those ditches, now lined with grass, are still visible, and a visitor can, by pushing aside the grass, find in them, as this reviewer has, the scattered bones of some of those Jews. The next day, Battalion 101 participated in a similar massacre of at least 14,000 Jews at the Poniatowa camp. By the end of the "harvest festival," the 500 men of Battalion 101 had taken part, during their stay in Poland, in the shooting of at least 38,000 Jews and the shipment to Treblinka's gas chambers of 45,000 more.

After the war, many members of the battalion returned to their earlier occupations. A large number continued their police careers. Four, including Major Trapp, were extradited to Poland in 1947 because of one incident in which 78 non-Jewish Poles were shot in retaliation for the killing of a German; the Polish trial ignored the 180 Jews who were shot in the same incident, as well as the 83,000 other Jews, the vast majority of them Polish citizens, who had been shot or sent to the gas chambers by Trapp and his men. Trapp and another policeman were executed by the Polish authorities. Between 1962 and 1967, 14 men of Battalion 101 were indicted by West German prosecutors. After appeals, one received a sentence of eight years, one of four and one of three and a half. Of the many thousands of other German policemen involved in the Final Solution, West German prosecutors brought to trial only a few, and still fewer convictions were obtained. On a per capita basis, Battalion 101's three brief sentences represented unusually heavy punishment by West German courts for the Order Police's massive contribution to the Final Solution.

In the end, what disturbs the reader more than the policemen's escape from punishment is their capacity -- as the ordinary men they were, as men not much different from those we know or even from ourselves -- to kill as they did.

Battalion 101's killing wasn't, as Mr. Browning points out, the kind of "battlefield frenzy" occasionally seen in all wars, when soldiers, having faced death, and having seen their friends killed, slaughter enemy prisoners or even civilians. It was, rather, the cold-blooded fulfillment of German national policy, and involved, for the policemen, a process of accommodation to orders that required them to do things they would never have dreamed they would ever do, and to justify their actions, or somehow reinterpret them, so that they would not see themselves as evil people.

Mr. Browning's meticulous account, and his own acute reflections on the actions of the battalion members, demonstrate the important effect that the situation had on those men: the orders to kill, the pressure to conform, and the fear that if they didn't kill they might suffer some kind of punishment or, at least, damage to their careers. In fact, the few who tried to avoid killing got away with it; but most believed, or at least could tell themselves, that they had little choice.

But Mr. Browning's account also illustrates other factors that made it possible for the battalion's ordinary men not only to kill but, ultimately, to kill in a routine, and in some cases sadistic, way. Each of these factors helped the policemen feel that they were not violating, or violating only because it was necessary, their personal moral codes.

One such factor was the justification for killing provided by the anti-Semitic rationales to which the policemen had been exposed since the rise of Nazism, rationales reinforced by the battalion's officers. The Jews were presented not only as evil and dangerous but also, in some way, as responsible for the bombing deaths of German women and children. Another factor was the process of dehumanization: abetted by Nazi racial theories that were embraced by policemen who preferred not to see themselves as killers, Jews were seen as less than people, as creatures who could be killed without the qualms that would be provoked in them were they to kill fellow Germans or even Slavs. It was particularly when the German policemen came across German Jews speaking their own language, especially those from their own city, that they felt a human connection that made it harder to kill them.

The policemen were also helped by the practice of trying not to refer to their activities as killing: they were involved in "actions" and "resettlements." Moreover, the responsibility wasn't theirs; it belonged to the authorities -- Major Trapp as well as, ultimately, the leaders of the German state -- whose orders they were merely carrying out. Indeed, whatever responsibility they did have was diffused by dividing the task into parts and by sharing it with other people and processes. It was shared, first of all, by others in the battalion, some of whom provided cordons so that Jews couldn't escape and some of whom did the shooting. It

was shared by the Trawnikis, who were brought in to do the shooting whenever possible so that the battalion could focus on the roundups. And it was shared, most effectively, by the death camps, which made the men's jobs immensely easier, since stuffing a Jew into a cattle car, though it sealed his fate almost as surely as a neck shot, left the actual killing to a machine-like process that would take place far away, one for which the battalion members didn't need to feel personally responsible.

CLEARLY, ordinary human beings are capable of following orders of the most terrible kinds. What stands between civilization and genocide is the respect for the rights and lives of all human beings that societies must struggle to protect. Nazi Germany provided the context, ideological as well as psychological, that allowed the policemen's actions to happen. Only political systems that recognize the worst possibilities in human nature, but that fashion societies that reward the best, can guard the lives and dignity of all their citizens.

A word, finally, about the quiet characters in the book -- the victims. Little is heard from them but much is evident. They did indeed go to the slaughter but not, as their critics would have it, like sheep. Whenever they could, and even when they couldn't, they tried to escape and even resist. They hid in cellars and behind false walls. They hid in barns and built bunkers under the forest soil. They tried to join partisan units. But they never had a chance. They were rounded up by Germans and often betrayed by their own countrymen, even those who fought against the Germans themselves. Marched into the forests, or driven into ditches, they were defenseless, naked, holding on to their children. Stuffed into cattle cars, they broke holes in the walls and roofs only to be shot as they emerged. Death confers no automatic nobility. Neither should it confer blame. Blame lies with those who kill and those who order them to kill, no matter what the psychological rationales may be that allow the killings to take place.

Walter Reich, a psychiatrist, is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington and the author of "A Stranger in My House: Jews and Arabs in the West Bank."