

Ordinary Men
Christopher Browning

Ordinary Men tells the real life story of German Police Order Battalion 101. It specifically focuses on the role that these policemen played in Hitler's final solution (between July 1942 and November 1943)--the extermination of Poland's Jewish population. Over the course of their deployment in Poland they transformed from regular working class folk into obedient executioners that murdered thousands of Polish Jews while facilitating the deaths of thousands more.

The most important thing to take away from this story is that these men were "ordinary" in a number of ways. They were not specially selected for their mission, and they possessed no known psychological handicaps or illnesses that might compel them to murder. Many of the men that made up this battalion came from working class backgrounds with modest means. Their story is a sober reminder of what regular "stable" humans are capable of when introduced to the right circumstances.

"In mid-March 1942 some 75 to 80 percent of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, while 20 to 25 percent had perished. A mere eleven months later, in mid-February 1943, the percentages were exactly the reverse."

Actions

Massacre at Jozefow, Poland--the battalion executed women, children, and elderly at point blank range. After receiving their initial orders, the men were given a choice to exclude themselves before the executions began. A few did opt-out initially, while others stopped after their first or second kill. Overall, the number of men that opted out or stopped shooting was small (less than 20%)

Clearly, there was a sense of remorse among the men that engaged in the first round of shootings at Jozefow:

"When the men arrived at the barracks in Bilgoraj, they were depressed, angered, embittered, and shaken. They ate little but drank heavily. Generous quantities of alcohol were provided, and many of the policemen got quite drunk. Major Trapp made the rounds, trying to console and reassure them, and again placing the responsibility on higher authorities. But neither the drink nor Trapp's consolation could wash away the sense of shame and horror that pervaded the barracks." [p. 69]

"Rounding-up" the local Jewish population in small towns proximate to Lomazy and loading them onto rail cars to be executed in gas chambers at Treblinka (starting in August 1942)

Multiple rounds of mass shootings in towns like Serokomla (chapter 11)

"Sweep shooting" homes and hospitals in Konskowola (chapter 13)

“Jew hunts” (searching for Jews that had hidden in underground bunkers outside of the ghettos) in October 1942 (chapter 14)

Chapter 18 is Browning’s analysis of why the men behaved as they did

Browning argues that the following DO NOT explain why the men of Battalion 101 engaged in homicidal behavior

- War-induced brutalization (combat exposure isn’t an explanation as many of the men had never served in the armed forces and therefore had no experience on the front lines)
- Special selection/conscription
- Self-selection (those with psychopathic tendencies were likely already fighting in the army and not likely to choose less active policing duties)
- Career advancement (there were some cases mentioned early in the book that this may have been a cause in certain circumstances)
- Obedience out of fear from punishment (no documented cases in post-war trials indicated that disobeying orders resulted in “dire” consequences)

There are several other factors, each of which may have contributed to their behavior

- Context/environment of war incites an “us” versus “them” culture that helps promote the racist tones of Nazi Germany (idea is that this eased the psychological burden)
- Ideology training and indoctrination (reinforces the “us” versus “them” rhetoric)--the men were immersed in an environment of racist and anti-Semitic propaganda that creates distance between them and the Jews
- Obedience to authority in general--deference as a product of socialization and evolution (Milgram experiments--sketchy track record of replication, see bottom of page 171). Blaming authority rather than conformity absolves individuals of their behavior (see Cialdini’s “Influence,” specifically chapter 6 on authority, which also mentions Milgram’s experiment)
- Depersonalizing the killing process and distancing the men from the outcome of their actions (example is loading people onto trains to have them executed at a gas chamber had the psychological advantage of distancing the men from the final action--“out of sight, out of mind”)
- The horrors of the initial killing eventually become routine/habituated (bottom of p. 85), thus desensitizing the men from the actions that they are performing
- Peer pressure/group conformity (see Cialdini’s “Influence,” specifically chapter 4 on social proof)

Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment (see page 167) supports the notion that situational factors (i.e. the context of war) played a key role in developing the behavior of the men. His experiment took psychologically healthy individuals and split them into groups of guards and prisoners. The individuals playing the role of “guard” exhibited increasing levels of brutality and

humiliation to those that were playing the part of prisoners. Zimbardo concluded that the prison setting alone was sufficient to produce this anti-social behavior.

The men of Battalion 101 could be categorized into three types based on their behavior (this is similar to the guards behavior that Zimbardo observed in his experiment)

- a small group of enthusiastic killers that volunteered for firing squads
- a larger group that performed their tasks but didn't go out of their way to kill
- another small group of dissenters and evaders that avoided killing in any way (less than 20%)