

And material specifically designed to harden the policemen for the personal task of killing Jews is conspicuously absent from the surviving documentation. One would have to be quite convinced of the manipulative powers of indoctrination to believe that any of this material could have deprived the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 of the capacity for independent thought. Influenced and conditioned in a general way, imbued in particular with a sense of their own superiority and racial kinship as well as Jewish inferiority and otherness, many of them undoubtedly were; explicitly prepared for the task of killing Jews they most certainly were not.

Along with ideological indoctrination, a vital factor touched upon but not fully explored in Milgram's experiments was conformity to the group. The battalion had orders to kill Jews, but each individual did not. Yet 80 to 90 percent of the men proceeded to kill, though almost all of them — at least initially — were horrified and disgusted by what they were doing. To break ranks and step out, to adopt overtly nonconformist behavior, was simply beyond most of the men. It was easier for them to shoot.

Why? First of all, by breaking ranks, nonshooters were leaving the "dirty work" to their comrades. Since the battalion had to shoot even if individuals did not, refusing to shoot constituted refusing one's share of an unpleasant collective obligation. It was in effect an *social act vis-à-vis* one's comrades. Those who did not shoot risked isolation, rejection, and ostracism — a very uncomfortable prospect within the framework of a tight-knit unit stationed abroad among a hostile population, so that the individual had virtually nowhere else to turn for support and social contact.

This threat of isolation was intensified by the fact that stepping out could also have been seen as a form of moral reproach of one's comrades: the nonshooter was potentially indicating that he was "too good" to do such things. Most, though not all, nonshooters intuitively tried to diffuse the criticism of their comrades that was inherent in their actions. They pleaded not that they were "too good" but rather that they were "too weak" to kill.

Such a stance presented no challenge to the esteem of one's comrades; on the contrary, it legitimized and upheld "toughness" as a superior quality. For the anxious individual, it had the added advantage of posing no moral challenge to the murderous policies of the regime, though it did pose another problem, since the difference

between being "weak" and being a "coward" was not great. Hence the distinction made by one policeman who did not dare to step out at Józefów for fear of being considered a coward, but who subsequently dropped out of his firing squad. It was one thing to be too cowardly even to try to kill; it was another, after resolutely trying to do one's share, to be too weak to continue.

Insidiously, therefore, most of those who did not shoot only reaffirmed the "macho" values of the majority — according to which it was a positive quality to be "fough" enough to kill unarmed, non-combatant men, women, and children — and tried not to rupture the bonds of comradeship that constituted their social world. Coping with the contradictions imposed by the demands of conscience on the one hand and the norms of the battalion on the other led to many tortured attempts at compromise: not shooting infants on the spot but taking them to the assembly point; not shooting on patrol if no "go-getter" was along who might report such squeamishness; bringing Jews to the shooting site and firing but intentionally missing. Only the very exceptional remained indifferent to taunts of "weaking" from their comrades and could live with the fact that they were considered to be "no man."

Here we come full circle to the mutually intensifying effects of war and racism noted by John Dower, in conjunction with the insidious effects of constant propaganda and indoctrination. Pervasive racism and the resulting exclusion of the Jewish victims from any common ground with the perpetrators made it all the easier for the majority of the policemen to conform to the norms of their immediate community (the battalion) and their society at large (Nazi Germany). Here the years of anti-Semitic propaganda (and prior to the Nazi dictatorship, decades of shrill German nationalism) dovetailed with the polarizing effects of war. The dichotomy of racially superior Germans and racially inferior Jews, central to Nazi ideology, could easily merge with the image of a beleaguered Germany surrounded by warring enemies. If it is doubtful that most of the policemen understood or embraced the theoretical aspects of Nazi ideology as contained in SS indoctrination pamphlets, it is also doubtful that they were immune to "the influence of the times" (to use Lieutenant Drucker's phrase once again), to the incessant proclamation of German superiority and incitement of contempt and hatred for the Jewish enemy. Nothing helped the Nazis to wage a race war so

much as the war itself. In wartime, when it was all too usual to exclude the enemy from the community of human obligation, it was also all too easy to subsume the Jews into the "image of the enemy," or *Feindbild*.

In his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi included an essay entitled "The Gray Zone," perhaps his most profound and deeply disturbing reflection on the Holocaust. He maintained that in spite of our natural desire for clear-cut distinctions, the history of the camps "could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors." He argued passionately, "It is naive, absurd, and historically false to believe that an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims; on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself." The time had come to examine the inhabitants of the "gray zone" between the simplified Manichean images of perpetrator and victim. Levi concentrated on the "gray zone of *protekcyja* [corruption] and collaboration" that flourished in the camps among a spectrum of victims: from the "picturesque fauna" of low-ranking functionaries husbanding their minuscule advantages over other prisoners; through the truly privileged network of Kapos, who were free "to commit the worst atrocities" at whim; to the terrible fate of the Sonderkommandos, who prolonged their lives by manning the gas chambers and crematoria. (Conceiving and organizing the Sonderkommandos was in Levi's opinion National Socialism's "most demonic crime.")

While Levi focused on the spectrum of victim behavior within the gray zone, he dared to suggest that this zone encompassed perpetrators as well. Even the SS man Muhsfeld of the Birkenau crematoria — whose "daily ration of slaughter was studded with arbitrary and capricious acts, marked by his inventions of cruelty" — was not a "monolith." Faced with the miraculous survival of a sixteen-year-old girl discovered while the gas chambers were being cleared, the disconcerted Muhsfeld briefly hesitated. In the end he ordered the girl's death but quickly left before his orders were carried out. One "instant of pity" was not enough to "absolve" Muhsfeld, who was deservedly hanged in 1947. Yet it did "place him too, although at its extreme boundary, within the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness."

Levi's notion of the gray zone encompassing both perpetrators

and victims must be approached with a cautious qualification. The perpetrators and victims in the gray zone were not mirror images of one another. Perpetrators did not become fellow victims (as many of them later claimed to be) in the way some victims became accomplices of the perpetrators. The relationship between perpetrator and victim was not symmetrical. The range of choice each faced was totally different.

Nonetheless, the spectrum of Levi's gray zone seems quite applicable to Reserve Police Battalion 101. The battalion certainly had its quota of men who neared the "extreme boundary" of the gray zone. Lieutenant Gnade, who initially rushed his men back from Minsk to avoid being involved in killing but who later learned to enjoy it, leaps to mind. So do the many reserve policemen who were horrified in the woods outside Józefów but subsequently became casual volunteers for numerous firing squads and "Jew hunts." They, like Muhsfeld, seem to have experienced the brief "instant of pity" but cannot be absolved by it. At the other boundary of the gray zone, even Lieutenant Buchmann, the most conspicuous and outspoken critic of the battalion's murderous actions, faltered at least once. Absent his protector, Major Trapp, and facing orders from the local Security Police in Luków, he too led his men to the killing fields shortly before his transfer back to Hamburg. And at the very center of the perpetrators' gray zone stood the pathetic figure of Trapp himself, who sent his men to slaughter Jews "weeping like a child," and the bedridden Captain Hoffmann, whose body rebelled against the terrible deeds his mind willed.

The behavior of any human being is, of course, a very complex phenomenon, and the historian who attempts to "explain" it is indulging in a certain arrogance. When nearly 500 men are involved, to undertake any general explanation of their collective behavior is even more hazardous. What, then, is one to conclude? Most of all, one comes away from the story of Reserve Police Battalion 101 with great unease. This story of ordinary men is not the story of all men. The reserve policemen faced choices, and most of them committed terrible deeds. But those who killed cannot be absolved by the notion that anyone in the same situation would have done as they did. For even among them, some refused to kill and others stopped killing. Human responsibility is ultimately an individual matter.

At the same time, however, the collective behavior of Reserve

Police Battalion 101 has deeply disturbing implications. There are many societies afflicted by traditions of racism and caught in the siege mentality of war or threat of war. Everywhere society conditions people to respect and defer to authority, and indeed could scarcely function otherwise. Everywhere people seek career advancement. In every modern society, the complexity of life and the resulting bureaucratization and specialization attenuate the sense of personal responsibility of those implementing official policy. Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen

## Hitler's Willing Executioners

Germans' anti-Semitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust. They were the central causal agent not only of Hitler's decision to annihilate European Jewry (which is accepted by many) but also of the perpetrators' willingness to kill and to brutalize Jews. The conclusion of this book is that antisemitism moved many thousands of "ordinary" Germans — and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned — to slaughter Jews. Not economic hardship, not the coercive means of a totalitarian state, not social psychological pressure, not invariable psychological propensities, but ideas about Jews that were pervasive in Germany, and had been for decades, induced ordinary Germans to kill unarmed, defenseless Jewish men, women, and children by the thousands, systematically and without pity.

The conventional explanations *assume* a neutral or condemnatory attitude on the part of the perpetrators towards their actions.

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They therefore premise their interpretations on the assumption that it must be shown how people can be brought to commit acts to which they would not inwardly assent, acts which they would not agree are necessary or just. They either ignore, deny, or radically minimize the importance of Nazi and perhaps the perpetrators' ideology, moral values, and conception of the victims, for engendering the perpetrators' willingness to kill. Some of these conventional explanations also caricature the perpetrators, and Germans in general. The explanations treat them as if they had been people lacking a moral sense, lacking the ability to make decisions and take stances. They do not conceive of the actors as human agents, as people with wills, but as beings moved solely by external forces or by transhistorical and invariant psychological propensities, such as the slavish following of narrow "self-interest." The conventional explanations suffer from two other major conceptual failings. They do not sufficiently recognize the extraordinary nature of the deed: the mass killing of people. They *assume* and imply that inducing people to kill human beings is fundamentally no different from getting people to kill any other unwanted or distasteful task. Also, none of the conventional explanations deems the *identity* of the victims to have mattered. The conventional explanations imply that the perpetrators would have treated any other group of intended victims in exactly the same way. That the victims were Jews — according to the logic of these explanations — is irrelevant.

I maintain that any explanation that fails to acknowledge the actors' capacity to know and to judge, namely to understand and to have views about the significance and the morality of their actions, that fails to hold the actors' beliefs and values as central, that fails to emphasize the autonomous motivating force of Nazi ideology, particularly its central component of antisemitism, cannot possibly succeed in telling us much about why the perpetrators acted as they did. Any explanation that ignores either the particular nature of the perpetrators' actions — the systematic, large-scale killing and brutalizing of people — or the identity of the victims is inadequate for a host of reasons. All explanations that adopt these positions, as do the conventional explanations, suffer a mirrored, double failure of recognition of the human aspect of the Holocaust: the humanity of the perpetrators, namely their capacity to judge and to choose to act inhumanely, and the humanity of the victims, that what the perpe-

trators did, they did to these people with their specific identities, and not to animals or things.

My explanation — which is new to the scholarly literature on the perpetrators — is that the perpetrators, “ordinary Germans,” were animated by antisemitism, by a particular *type* of antisemitism that led them to conclude that the Jews *ought to die*. The perpetrators’ beliefs, their particular brand of antisemitism, though obviously not the sole source, was, I maintain, a most significant and indispensable source of the perpetrators’ actions and must be at the center of any explanation of them. Simply put, the perpetrators, having consulted their own convictions and morality and having judged the mass annihilation of Jews to be right, did not *want* to say “no.” . . .

One of the first slaughters of the genocidal campaign unleashed against Soviet Jewry was perpetrated by . . . Police Battalion 309. A few days after Operation Barbarossa began, the Germans of Police Battalion 309 ignited a portentous, symbolic fiery inferno in the city of Bialystok.

The officers and the men of at least one company of Police Battalion 309 knew from the moment of their entry into territory taken from the Soviet Union that they were to play a role in the planned destruction of Jewry. After entering Bialystok on the twenty-seventh of June, a city which the Germans had captured, like many others, without a fight, the battalion commander, Major Ernst Weis, ordered his men to round up male Jews by combing through Jewish residential areas. Although the purpose of congregating the Jews was to kill them, instructions about the manner in which the Germans would extinguish their lives were not given at that time. The entire battalion participated in the ensuing roundup, which itself proceeded with great brutality and wanton murderousness. These Germans could finally unleash themselves without restraint upon the Jews. One Jew recalls that “the unit had barely driven into the city when the soldiers swarmed out and, without any sensible cause, shot up the entire city, apparently also in order to frighten the people. The incessant shooting was utterly horrible. They shot blindly, in fact, into houses and windows, without regard for whether they hit anyone. The shooting (*Schiesserei*) lasted the entire day.” The Germans of this battalion broke into people’s homes who had not lifted a finger in hostility, dragged them out, kicked them, beat them with their

rifle butts, and shot them. The streets were strewn with corpses. These individually, autonomously initiated brutalities and killings were by any standard of utility, unnecessary. Why did they occur? The Germans themselves, in their postwar testimony, are mute on this point. Yet some episodes are suggestive. During the roundup, one nameless Jew opened his door a crack in order to assess the unfolding, perilous scene. A lieutenant in the battalion, having noticed the slit, seized the opportunity and shot him through the small opening. In order to fulfill his orders, the German only had to bring the Jew to the assembly point. Yet he chose to shoot him. It is hard to imagine that this German felt moral qualms when the target fell to his splendid shot.

Another scene saw some of the Germans in this battalion compel old Jewish men to dance before them. In addition to the amusement that they evidently derived from their choreography, the Germans were mocking, denigrating and asserting their mastery over these Jews, particularly since the selected Jews were their elders, people of an age to whom normally regard and respect are due. Apparently, and to their great misfortune, the Jews failed to dance to a sufficiently brisk and pleasing tempo, so the Germans set the Jews’

Elsewhere, near the Jewish district, two desperate Jews fell to their knees begging a German general for protection. One member of Police Battalion 309, who observed these entreaties, decided to intervene with what he must have thought to be a fitting comment: He unzipped his pants and urinated upon them. The anti-semitic atmosphere and practice among the Germans was such that this man brazenly exposed himself in front of a general in order to perform a rare public act of virtually unsurpassable disdain. Indeed, the man had nothing to fear for his breach of military discipline and decorum. Neither the general nor anyone else sought to stop him. . . .

The men were bringing more Jews to the assembly points in the marketplace and the area in front of the city’s main synagogue faster than they could kill them. The number of Jews was swelling. So another “solution” was improvised on the spot. . . .

The men of Police Battalion 309’s First and Third Companies drove their victims into the synagogue, the less compliant Jews receiving from the Germans liberal blows of encouragement. The

Germans packed the large synagogue full. The fearful Jews began to chant and pray loudly. After spreading gasoline around the building, the Germans set it ablaze; one of the men tossed an explosive through a window, to ignite the holocaust. The Jews' prayers turned into screams. A battalion member later described the scene that he witnessed: "I saw . . . smoke, that came out of the synagogue and heard there how the incarcerated people cried loudly for help. I was about 70 meters' distance from the synagogue. I could see the building and observed that people tried to escape through windows. One shot at them. Circling the synagogue stood the police members who were apparently supposed to cordon it off, in order to ensure that no one emerged." Between 100 and 150 men of the battalion surrounded the burning synagogue. They collectively ensured that none of the appointed Jews escaped the inferno. They watched as over seven hundred people died this hideous and painful death, listening to the screams of agony. Most of the victims were men, though some women and children were among them. Not surprisingly, some of the Jews within spared themselves the fiery death by hanging themselves or severing their arteries. At least six Jews came running out of the synagogue, their clothes and bodies aflame. The Germans shot each one down, only to watch these human torches burn themselves out.

With what emotions did the men of Police Battalion 309 gaze upon this sacrificial pyre to the exterminationist creed? One exclaimed: "Let it burn, it's a nice little fire [*schönes Feuerlein*], it's great fun." Another exulted: "Splendid, the entire city should burn down."

The men of this police battalion, many of whom were not even professional policemen having opted for service with the police as a means of avoiding army service when they were called up to duty, became instantaneous *Weltanschauungskrieger*, or ideological warriors, killing that day between 2,000 and 2,200 Jewish men, women, and children. The manner in which they rounded up Jews, the wanton beatings and killings, the turning of the streets of Bialystok into corpse- and blood-bestrewn pathways, and their own improvised solution of a cleansing conflagration, are indeed acts of *Weltanschauungskrieger* — more specifically, of antisemitic warriors. They carried out an order, embellished upon it, acted not with disgust and hesitation but with apparent relish and excess. . . .

[Later Goldhagen turned to the record of Police Battalion 101.]

These Germans expended no effort to spare the victims any unnecessary suffering. Moreover, the evidence does not suggest that they gave any thought to the matter. The entire course of the destruction of a Jewish community — from the brutality of the roundups, to the suffering inflicted upon the Jews at the assembly points (by forcing them to sit, crouch, or lie motionless for hours on end in the midsummer heat without water), to the manner of execution in Lomazy, for example — bespeaks a tolerance, if not a willful administration of suffering upon the victims. The roundups did not have to be such licentious affairs. The Germans did not have to instill terror in the victims and leave scores, sometimes hundreds of dead in the streets. When the Jews were waiting for the Germans to march them to the city's outskirts or to load them onto freight cars, it would have been easy for the Germans to distribute some water to them, and to let them move around a bit, rather than to shoot any who stood up. As a number of the battalion members have testified, it was evident to the Germans that the Jews suffered greatly and needlessly as they waited. Finally, the cruelty of the Germans' manner of shooting Jews or of using clubs and whips to drive them from their houses or into the freight cars speaks for itself. Because such brutality and cruelty became integral to the practice of ghetto clearings and annihilations, and also because the goal itself of mass extermination is so horrific and tends to overwhelm the consideration of "lesser" crimes, when compiling the ledger of German brutality and cruelty — in the endeavor to assess the actions and attitudes of the killers — it is easy to overlook these practices, as cruel as they were. Why did they not have "orderly" killing operations, without the public killing of children, the beatings, without the symbolic degradation?

In addition to the willfully and unnecessarily brutal manner in which the Germans and their helpers conducted the various stages of a ghetto annihilation — namely the routinized roundup and execution procedures — they also gratuitously brutalized and tortured the Jews. Sometimes the agents inflicting suffering on the Jews were the Germans' eastern European *Hiwis*,<sup>1</sup> such as during one of the

<sup>1</sup>"Hiwis," short for "Hilfswillige," refers to East European volunteers who assisted the Germans with various tasks, including actions against the Jews. — Ed.

Międzyrzec deportations, when the Hiwis, obviously influenced by the Germans' own brutality, lashed Jews with whips. Any brutality that the Hiwis publicly perpetrated upon the Jews was permitted, if not promoted, by the Germans, who had absolute control over them, and such brutality should be taken into account when evaluating the Germans' treatment of the Jews. The scene at the marketplace during the last large deportation from Międzyrzec is such an instance. The Germans forced the Jews to sit or squat huddled together. . . .

The Jews were praying and crying, and therefore making much noise. This disturbed their German masters: "Intermittently, Hiwis beat the people with their rifle-butts, in order to enforce silence. The SD men had knotted whips, similar to horse whips. They walked along the rows of the squatting people, sometimes beating them vehemently." The men of Police Battalion 101 themselves were not to be outdone by their eastern European minions. Although they also degraded and tortured Jews at Międzyrzec in the most gratuitous, willful manner, their deeds are entirely absent from their testimony. The accounts of survivors tell a different, more accurate, and revealing story. Survivors are adamant that the Germans were indeed incredibly brutal, that their cruelty that day was wanton, at times turning into sadistic sport. At the marketplace, the Jews, who had been forced to squat for hours, were "mocked" (*khoyzek gemacht*) and "kicked," and some of the Germans organized "a game" (*shpil*) of "tossing apples and whoever was struck by the apple was then killed." This sport was continued at the railway station, this time with empty liquor bottles. "Bottles were tossed over Jewish heads and whoever was struck by a bottle was dragged out of the crowd and beaten murderously amid roaring laughter. Then some of those who were thus mangled [*tseharjet*] were shot." Afterwards, they loaded the dead together with the living onto freight cars bound for Treblinka. . . .

Small wonder that to the eyes of the victims — but not in the self-serving testimony of the perpetrators — these ordinary Germans appeared not as mere murderers, certainly not as reluctant killers dragged to their task against their inner opposition to the genocide, but as "two-legged beasts" filled with "bloodthirstiness."

The Germans report but rarely on their torturing of victims, on every unnecessary rifle-butt blow to a Jewish head, yet the evidence suggests that the tortures which they inflicted in Międzyrzec and

Lomazy (where they beat the bearded Jewish men, whom they compelled to crawl to their execution) were not rare exceptions. Although the men of Police Battalion 101 do not tell of their cruelties in the mass deportation of Jews that they conducted from Luków, one of the *Gendarmerie* stationed in Luków recounts what he saw as he gazed out of his office window: "[The Jews] were driven on by the German policemen [*Polizeibeamter*]. It was for me a shattering sight. People who could not rise to their feet by themselves were pulled up by the policemen. The beating was constant and the driving [of the Jews] was accompanied by yelling. . . ."

Members of Police Battalion 101 mocked these Jews in Luków before dispatching them and seven thousand others to the gas chambers of Treblinka. They forced them to wear prayer shawls, to kneel as if in prayer, and, perhaps, to chant prayers. The sight of Jewish religious objects and rituals evoked in the German "solvers of the Jewish Problem" derisive laughter and incited them to cruelty. In their eyes, these were undoubtedly the bizarre accoutrements, the grotesque ceremonies, and the mysterious implements of a demonic brood. The Holocaust was one of the rare mass slaughters in which perpetrators, like these and other men of Police Battalion 101, routinely mocked their victims and forced them to perform antics before sending them to their deaths. These proud, joyous poses of German masters degrading men who were for them archetypal Jews wearing prayer shawls are undoubtedly representative of many such scenes of degradation and others of cruelty about which the men of Police Battalion 101 remain silent, and about which the Jews did not survive to give witness. If we relied upon the specific and precise accounts of the battalion's members themselves, then we would have a skewed portrait of their actions, grossly underestimating the gratuitous suffering that they inflicted on the Jews, not to mention the evident gusto with which they at times visited cruelties upon their defenseless victims. . . .

The conventional explanations cannot account for the findings of this study, for the evidence from the cases presented here. They are belied by the actions of the perpetrators, glaringly and irrefutably. The notions that the perpetrators contributed to genocide because they were coerced, because they were unthinking, obedient executors of state orders, because of social psychological pressure, because

of the prospects of personal advancement, or because they did not comprehend or feel responsible for what they were doing, owing to the putative fragmentation of tasks, can each be demonstrated in quick order to be untenable. . . .

Regarding Germany during the Nazi period and its crimes, the argument is made, often reflexively as though it were an axiomatic truth, that Germans are particularly obedient to state authority. This argument cannot be sustained. The very people, Germans, who supposedly were slavishly devoted to the cult of the state and to obedience for obedience's sake, were the same people, Germans, who battled in the streets of Weimar in defiance of existing state authority and often in order to overthrow it. . . .

Germans should not be caricatured; like other peoples, they have regard for authority if they hold it to be legitimate, and for orders that they deem to be legitimate. They too weigh an order's source and its meaning when deciding if and how to carry it out. Orders deemed in violation of moral norms — especially of fundamental moral norms — in fact, can do much to undermine the legitimacy of the regime from which they emanate — as the order to massacre community after community, tens of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, would have in the eyes of anyone who believed the victims' deaths to be unjust.

Indeed, Germans of all ranks, even the most Nazified, disobeyed orders that they opposed, that they deemed illegitimate. Generals who willingly contributed to the extermination of Soviet Jews conspired against Hitler. Army soldiers, on their own, participated in the killing of Jews without orders to do so, or in disobedience of orders to keep their distance from the massacres. Sometimes Germans were insubordinate in order to satisfy their lust to kill Jews. The men of Police Battalion 101 violated their commander's, indeed their beloved commander's, injunction not to be cruel. . . .

Arguments holding that Germans inflexibly obey authority — namely that they reflexively obey any order, regardless of its content — are untenable. By extension, so are the claims by Stanley Milgram and many others that humans in general are blindly obedient to authority. All "obedience," all "crimes of obedience" (and this refers only to situations in which coercion is not applied or threatened), depend upon the existence of a propitious social and political con-

text, in which the actors deem the authority to issue commands themselves not to be a gross transgression of sacred values and the overarching moral order. Otherwise, people seek ways, granted with differential success, not to violate their deepest moral beliefs and not to undertake such grievous acts. . . .

The notion that peer pressure, namely the desire either not to let down one's comrades or not to incur their censure, could move individuals to undertake actions that they oppose, even abhor, is plausible even for the German perpetrators, but only as an account of the participation of some *individuals* in the perpetration of the Holocaust. It cannot be operative for more than a few individuals in a group, especially over a long period of time. If a large segment of a group, not to mention the vast majority of its members, opposes or abhors an act, then the social psychological pressure would work to *prevent*, not to encourage, individuals to undertake the act. If indeed Germans had disapproved of the mass slaughter, then peer pressure would not have induced people to kill against their will, but would have sustained their individual and collective resolve to avoid killing. At best, and in all probability rightly, the actions of only some small minority of the perpetrators can be accounted for by positing the existence of social psychological pressure to conform. The explanation is self-contradictory when applied to the actions of *entire groups* of Germans. Its explanatory capacity, therefore, is greatly limited. The kindred psychological argumentation of these [two] conventional lines of reasoning — that Germans in particular and humans in general are prone to obey orders, and that social psychological pressure was sufficient to induce them to kill — are untenable. As is shown, in part, by the choice of some to opt out of the genocidal killing, Germans were indeed *capable* of saying "no."

The beliefs about Jews that underlay the German people's participation and approval of the eliminationist policies of the 1930s, and that led ordinary Germans in Losice and Warsaw prior to the initiation of a formal program of genocide to act so barbarously, were the beliefs that prepared ordinary Germans — as it did the men of Police Battalion 3 — to concur with what an officer of the battalion said while addressing his men in Minsk, before the first enormous massacre that they were to perpetrate, namely that "no suffering should accrue to noble German blood in the process of destroying

this subhumanity." These ordinary Germans saw the world in such a manner that the slaughter of thousands of Jews was seen as an obvious necessity that produced concern only for the well-being of "noble German blood." Their beliefs about Jews prepared these representative Germans to hear the officer's accompanying offer to be excused if they were not up to the task, yet to choose to slaughter Jewish men, women, and children willingly.

These were the beliefs that engendered in ordinary Germans the lethal racial fantasies which led them to write to loved ones and friends of the genocidal exploits of their nation and its representative men. A member of Police Battalion 105 wrote to his wife on August 7, 1941, from the Soviet Union, in explicit and approving terms, of the total annihilation of the Jews, and then added: "Dear H., don't lose sleep over it, it has to be." Having borne witness to continual, ongoing genocidal killings, and writing openly and with the obvious expectation of his wife's general understanding (whatever misgivings she might have had notwithstanding), this man could write to her again one month later that he was "proud" to be a German soldier, because "I can take part up here and have many adventures."

These were the beliefs that prepared officers of Police Regiment 25 to boast, like so many other Germans engaged in the slaughter, and to believe themselves "to have accomplished feats of heroism by these killings." These were the beliefs that led so many ordinary Germans to kill for pleasure and to do so not while trying to hide their deeds but in full view of others, even of women, girlfriends and wives, some of whom, like those in Stanisławów, used to laugh as their men picked off Jews from their balconies, like so many ducks in a shooting gallery. These same beliefs moved the men of Police Battalion 61's First Company, who guarded the Warsaw ghetto and eagerly shot Jews attempting to sneak in or out of the ghetto during 1941-1942, to create a recreational shrine to their slaughter of Jews. These German reservists turned a room in their quarters into a bar, adorned its walls with antisemitic caricatures and sayings, and hung over the bar itself a large, internally illuminated Star of David. Lest some of their heroics go unnoticed, by the door to the bar was a running tabulation of the number of Jews whom the company's men shot. After successful kills, these Germans were in the habit of rewarding themselves by holding special "victory celebrations" (*Siegesfeiern*).

These beliefs about Jews that governed the German people's

assent and contributions to the eliminationist program of the 1930s were the beliefs that prepared the men of Police Battalion 101 and so many other Germans to be eager killers who volunteered again and again for their "Jew-hunts," and to call Międzyrzec, a city in which they conducted repeated roundups, killings, and deportations — playing on its name with obvious reference to its many thousands of Jews — "*Menschenschreck*," or "human horror." These were the beliefs that led Germans, in the words of Herbert Hummel, the Bureau Chief of the Warsaw District, to have "welcomed thankfully" the 1941 "shoot-to-kill order," which authorized them to kill any Jews found outside ghettos. These same beliefs moved the men of another police unit, ordinary Germans, to shoot Jews whom they found even "without express orders, completely voluntarily." One of the men explains: "I must admit that we felt a certain joy when we would seize a Jew whom one could kill. I cannot remember an instance when a policeman had to be ordered to an execution. The shootings were, to my knowledge, always carried out on a voluntary basis; one could have gained the impression that various policemen got a big kick out of it." Why the "joy," why the eager voluntarism? Obviously, because of these ordinary Germans' beliefs about the Jews, which this man summarizes definitively: "The Jew was not acknowledged by us to be a human being." With this simple observation and admission, this former executioner uncovers from below the shrouds of obtusation the mainspring of the Holocaust.

These were the beliefs that led so many ordinary Germans who degraded, brutalized, and tortured Jews in camps and elsewhere — do so. They did not choose (like the tiny minority who showed restraint was possible) not to hit, or, if under supervision, to hit in a manner that would do the least damage, but instead regularly chose to terrorize, to inflict pain, and to maim. These were the beliefs that prepared the men of Police Battalion 309, ordinary Germans, not to hate, but to esteem the captain who had led them in their orgy of killing and synagogue-burning in Białystok in a manner similar to the glowing evaluations of "Papa" Trapp given by the men of Police Battalion 101, esteem which echoed the sentiments of men in many other killing institutions towards their commanders. This captain, according to his men, "was entirely humane [sic] and as a superior beyond reproach." After all, in the transvaluated world of Germany



during the Nazi period, ordinary Germans deemed the killing of Jews to be a beneficent act for humanity. These were the beliefs that led Germans often to mark and celebrate Jewish holidays, such as Yom Kippur, with killing operations, and for a member of Police Battalion 9, who was attached to *Einsatzkommando IIa*, to compose two poems, one for Christmas 1941 and the other for a social evening, ten days later, that celebrated their deeds in the Soviet Union. He managed to work into his verse, for the enjoyment of all, a reference to the “skull-cracking blows” (*Nüssknacken*) that they had undoubtedly delivered with relish to their Jewish victims.

These were the beliefs that led Germans to take joy, make merry, and celebrate their genocide of the Jews, such as with the party (*Abschlussfeier*) thrown upon the closing down of the Chelmno extermination camp in April 1943 to reward its German staff for a job well done. By then, the Germans had killed over 145,000 Jews in Chelmno. The German perpetrators’ rejoicing proudly in their mass annihilation of the Jews occurred also at the conclusion of the more concentrated slaughter of twelve thousand Jews on the “Bloody Sunday” of October 12, 1941, in Stanisławów, where the Germans there threw a victory celebration. Yet another such celebration was organized in August 1941, during the heady days in the midst of the Germans’ campaign of extermination of Latvian Jewry. On the occasion of their slaughter of the Jews of Cēsis, the local German security police and members of the German military assembled to eat and drink at what they dubbed a “death banquet [*Totenmahl*] for the Jews.” During their festivities, the celebrants drank repeated toasts to the extermination of the Jews.

While the perpetrators’ routine symbolic degradation of their Jewish victims, their celebrations of their killings, and their photographic mementos of their genocidal achievements and milestones all attest to this transvaluation of values, perhaps nothing demonstrates this more sharply than the farewell given by a man who should have been a moral conscience for Germany. Like the leaders of a good portion of the Protestant Evangelical Church of Germany, who in a proclamation declared the Jews to be “born enemies of the world and the Reich,” incapable of being saved by baptism, and responsible for the war, and who, having accepted the logic of their racial, demonological antisemitism, gave their explicit ecclesiastical authorization for the implementation of the “severest measures”

against the Jews while the genocidal program was well under way, Cardinal Adolf Bertram of Breslau once appears to have explicitly expressed his own understanding of the extermination of Jews, except for those who had converted to Christianity. The beliefs that led the German people to support the eliminationist program and the perpetrators to carry it out were the beliefs that moved Bertram — who, like the entire Catholic and Protestant ecclesiastical leadership, was fully cognizant of the extermination of the Jews and of the antisemitic attitudes of his parishioners — to pay final homage to the man who was the mass murderer of the Jewish people and who had for twelve years served as the beacon of the German nation. Upon learning of Hitler’s death, Cardinal Bertram in the first days of May 1945 ordered that in all the churches of his archdiocese a special requiem, namely “a solemn requiem mass be held in commemoration of the Führer . . .” so that his and Hitler’s flock could pray to the Almighty, in accord with the requiem’s liturgy, that the Almighty’s son, Hitler, be admitted to paradise.

The beliefs that were already the common property of the German people upon Hitler’s assumption of power and which led the German people to assent and contribute to the eliminationist measures of the 1930s were the beliefs that prepared not just the Germans who by circumstances, chance, or choice ended up as perpetrators but also the vast majority of the German people to understand, assent to, and, when possible, do their part to further the extermination, root and branch, of the Jewish people. The inescapable truth is that, regarding Jews, German political culture had evolved to the point where an enormous number of ordinary, representative Germans became — and most of the rest of their fellow Germans were fit to be — Hitler’s willing executioners.