

Review of "Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland"

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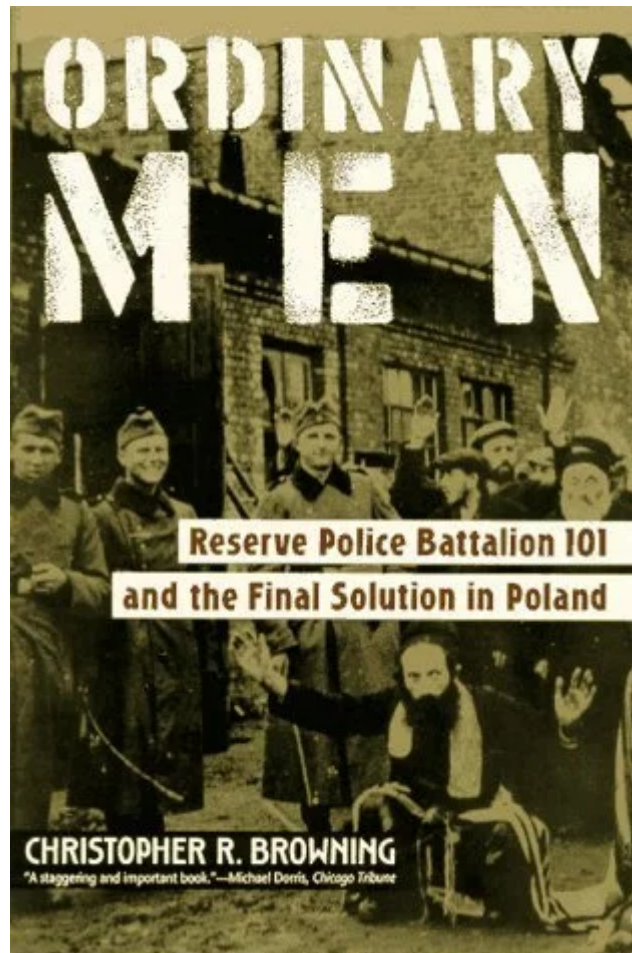
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A Glimpse at the Perpetrators of Genocide

When we think about the various atrocities of history, something in our nature wants us to think of the perpetrators as being different from normal people. We envision brutes and sadists; stereotypical villains with no moral sensibility who indulge in killing like depraved beasts, killing the innocent for pleasure and thrills. We think this because we don't want to think that the perpetrators of genocide are as human as we are, and that under the right circumstances, we might be capable of committing genocide ourselves. Christopher Browning's book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* tells the story of normal people who are commissioned to carry out horrific deeds in the most notorious mass killing in modern history, and offers an important insight into who the perpetrators of genocide really are.

Browning begins his book by giving statistics on the particular importance of Poland to the Nazi Holocaust. "In mid-March of 1942," he writes, "some 75 to 80 percent of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, while 20 to 25 percent had perished. In mid-February 1943, the percentages were exactly the reverse. At the core of the Holocaust was a short, intense wave of mass murder. The center of gravity of this mass murder was Poland" (Browning, XV). Browning makes the case that such a task would require a massive mobilization of soldiers to carry out these acts, and that this mobilization of troops for the sake of carrying out genocide occurred at the same time that large numbers of German soldiers and material were committed to the battle for Stalingrad. For Browning, this begged the following question: how did the Germans organize and carry out this assault on the Jewish community in Poland and where did they find the manpower to carry it out?





This line of inquiry led him to the State Administrations of Justice in Ludwigsburg, Germany, which is the office for coordinating the investigation of Nazi crimes in the FRG. It was here that Browning first encountered the indictment of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Browning then describes the particular effect this indictment had on him. "Though I had been studying archival documents and court records of the Holocaust for nearly twenty years, the impact this indictment was singularly powerful and disturbing. Never before had I encountered the the issue of choice so dramatically framed by the course of events and so openly discussed by at least some of the perpetrators. Never Before had I seen the monstrous deeds of the Holocaust so starkly juxtaposed with the human face of the killers" (Browning, xvi). From there, Browning notes the challenges which presented themselves as he wrote the book (having to use assumed names for most of the membership of Police Battalion 101, for instance, because of Germany's privacy laws) as well as noting those individuals who helped him along the way, before beginning the book in earnest.

The first chapter describes the moment in which the commander of 101, Major Wilhelm Trapp, briefs his men on what they've been ordered to do: round up Jews in the village of Józefów, separate those who were of working age (who were to be sent to concentration camps) from women, children, and the elderly, and shoot the women, children, and the elderly. This, however, isn't the most surprising aspect of this briefing. After describing the grim task that lay before them, and referring to talking points meant to reassure that it was "okay" to kill these innocent men, women, and children, Trapp gives the offer "if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out" (Browning, 2). This short chapter leaves the reader on something of a cliffhanger, in that we are not told if anyone decided to take Trapp up on his offer and abstain from taking part in genocide. After all, who wouldn't? One

would think (or at least hope) that anyone in that position would immediately avoid having to play the role of executioner for thousands of innocent people. But rather than address this issue in the first few pages, Browning begins the next chapter.

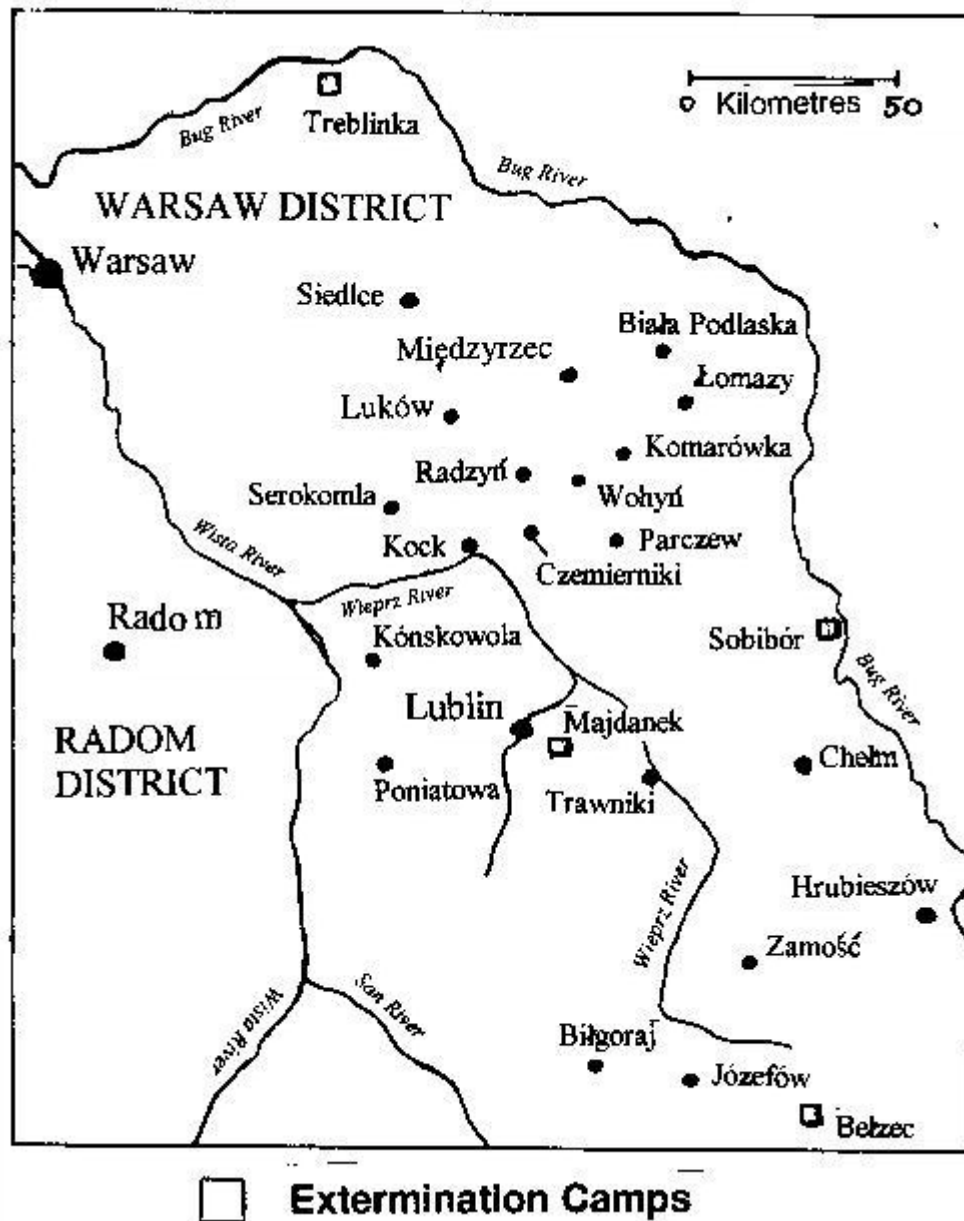
Chapter two describes in detail the origins of the Order Police (of which Reserve Police Battalion 101 is a part) as an attempt for post WWI Germany to create an army of police with military training and equipment. After several attempts to subvert the Treaty of Versailles, the election of the Nazi party into power, and the incorporation of police paramilitary units into the regular army, the Order Police gradually came into being. The Order Police grew in size to 244,500 by mid-1940 (Browning, 8).



In the next chapter, Browning outlines the involvement of the Order Police in the slaughter of Soviet Jews in 1941. He first, of course, makes reference to the orders handed down from the top brass in Hitler's Germany, which authorized the wholesale slaughter of civilians on the Eastern Front. This was the "Commissar Order," which made communist functionaries in the army, as well as those in civil service (and virtually anyone suspected of being "Anti-German," for that matter, an accusation leveled at the Jews) exempt of prisoner of war status and subject to immediate execution" (Browning, 11).

The author goes to describe the beginnings of the genocide in the city of Bialystok and other nearby towns as they escalated from beatings and humiliations (including one disturbing account of an Order Police commander urinating on a Jewish leader who was begging for mercy for him and his people) to dragging large numbers of Jews into the woods and shooting them. The chapter ends with a report from the German Civil Administrator in Slutsk, in which the brutality of the affair is chronicled from the perspective of a conscientious objector to the genocide. In addition to carrying out shootings, the Order Police also played a role in facilitating the deportation of Jews from eastern and western Europe to the concentration camps. Chapter 4

describes this particular endeavor, citing instances in which the Order Police were commissioned with the task of transporting Jews from Vienna to Sobibór chronicled by an Order Police Lieutenant named Paul Salitter.



After having endowed the reader with a level of understanding as to the origin of the Order Police, and their role in genocide up to that point, we finally come to the issue at hand: Reserve Police Battalion 101. Chapter 5 summarizes the activities of Reserve Battalion 101 in the May 1940 "resettlement" effort in Poland, in which Jews were displaced from territories taken by Nazi Germany in an effort to achieve "racial purity" in the region. "In all the battalion evacuated 36,972 people out of a targeted 58,628. About 22,000 people escaped evacuations by fleeing"(Browning, 39). Here, we are given insight into the Battalion's first encounter with the shootings involved in these forced migrations. However, in 1941, all of the pre-war recruits to the battalion below the rank of noncommissioned officer were distributed to other units, and replaced with drafted reservists (Browning 41).

This means that by the time that Battalion 101 was on its second tour of duty in Poland in 1942, very few of them were experienced in the task that would ultimately lay before them. Browning concludes this chapter with an analysis of the makeup of the Battalion, which consisted mostly of working class, middle aged men from Hamburg. The author notes that these men all went through their formative period before the Nazis came into power. "These were men who had known political standards and moral norms other than those of the Nazis," Browning writes, "Most came from Hamburg, by reputation one of the least nazified cities in Germany, and the majority came from a social class that had been anti-Nazi in its political culture. These would not seem to have been a very promising group from which to recruit mass murderers on behalf on the Nazi vision of a racial utopia free of Jews" (Browning, 48).

Battalion 101's experience with mass murder began in Józefów, Poland. At this point in the book, Browning brings us back to the cliffhanger moment he ended the first chapter. When given the option of abstaining from the shooting of the Józefów villagers, only thirteen people took that opportunity. From there, the battalion was put to the task of rounding up the local Jewish population, separate those men of working age from the rest, and shooting the remainder. It is worth noting that among the vast majority who did not take Major Trapp up on his offer, there were those who sought to avoid the killings by taking extra time in the roundup, hiding from their officers, and intentionally missing their victims while participating in the firing squad (Browning, 62). There were also those who, after participating in the first waves of shootings, could not participate in further killings. The first person accounts that Browning presents do nothing to spare the reader of the gore involved. "Through the point-blank shot that was thus required, the bullet struck the head of the victim at such a trajectory that often the entire skull or at least the entire rear skullcap was torn off, and blood, bone splinters, and brains sprayed everywhere and besmirched the shooters" (Browning, 64). After the day's massacre, the men returned to their barracks and drank heavily, in what would seem to be a vain attempt to repress the memories of the killing in which they participated.



After this particularly disturbing chapter on the Józefów massacre, Browning analyzes the circumstances of the minority of Battalion 101 members who refused to participate in the killings. These included those who abstained outright, and those who asked to be relieved during the shootings (which he approximates to be around 10%). He surmises that the very small number of men (13 out of 500) who took Trapp up on his offer can be explained, in part, by the suddenness of the offer. "There was no forewarning or time to think, as the men were totally "surprised" by the Józefów action," Browning writes, "Unless they were able to react to Trapp's offer on the spur of the moment, this first opportunity was lost" (Browning, 71). Aside from this, the pressure to conform also factors into soldiers' unwillingness to abstain from the killings at the start.

In the interviews taken during the investigation into 101's participation in these shootings, some of the Reservists claimed that they didn't want to be thought of as "cowardly" by their comrades. "Most of the interrogated policemen denied that they had any choice," writes Browning, "Faced with the testimony of others, many did not contest that Trapp had made the offer but claimed not to hear that part of the speech or could not remember it" (Browning, 72). Here we are given some insight into the human psyche, as it pertained to these perpetrators of genocide. Not only did they try to deny personal responsibility, being that they did indeed have some level of choice of whether they were going to participate in the shootings or not, but they actively tried to justify their actions. One man claimed that he tried to only shoot children, and thought of himself as an "erlöser" (savior or redeemer in German) because they could not live without their mothers! (Browning, 73). Browning proceeds to analyze the cases of the small number of abstainers. One claimed to be an active Communist Party member, and hence was politically motivated not to

take part in the killings. Others included a Social Democrat, a gardener who lost a lot of his business thanks to anti-semitic practices in Hamburg, and another who claimed to be "a great friend of the Jews" (Browning, 75).



Later chapters of the book involve 101's participation in subsequent actions, which included ghetto clearing, deportations, and other mass shootings in and around the Lublin district of Poland. Reserve Police Battalion 101 was also involved in the "Jew hunts," in which those Jews who had evaded deportation and execution were hunted down in order to "cleanse" the Lublin district, which typically involved small death-squads venturing into the forest in search of Jews in hiding (Browning, 127). These activities are significant not only in how they contributed to the larger picture of the final solution, but also in how the men who butchered Józefów had adapted themselves to the task of murder. "Jew hunts" were entirely more personal, and provided the police with more choice in whether they would actually carry out their bloody task or not. Yet, only a minority chose to evade, with a majority choosing to conform. Also, it is worth noting, that the attitudes of the police after a day's killing had changed starkly. Instead of a somber mood in which no one dared to speak of what they had done, the police were now making jokes about 'eating the brains of slaughtered Jews,' in one example (Browning, 128). These "Jew hunts," and eventually the "harvest festival" massacre in 1943, (the single largest German killing operation against the Jews in the entire war) serve as a bloody climax for Reserve Battalion 101's participation in the Nazi Holocaust.

Browning ends the historical narrative portion of book with a short chapter on the aftermath of 101's actions, including their retreat back to Germany with the fall of the Third Reich, and a short account of the post-war trial proceedings in which the court documents he used for this book was produced. First it must be said that the investigation from 1962-1967 lead to a woefully inadequate outcome, with very short prison sentences for the three who were convicted (four and three-and-a-half year sentences for police captains Hoffmann and Wohlauf), and other

charges were dropped outright (Browning, 145). Nonetheless, Browning considers this outcome to be a success, being that other attempts to bring the battalions under the Order Police did not share this level of success.

In the remainder of the book, Browning attempts to answer the question: "how do ordinary men commit these sort of atrocities?" He first states that there are two kinds of atrocity which take place in war: those associated with a certain "battlefield frenzy," in which brutalized and embittered soldiers seek to have revenge on those they deem their enemy, and those which occur as "standard operating procedure," such as the fire-bombings of German and Japanese cities (Browning, 160-161). Browning also touches on the issues of "dehumanizing the enemy," "routinizing the task," and other psychological functions which facilitated the state of mind needed for the carrying out of genocide. In addition, he makes reference to two very important psychological studies, Milgram's Obedience Study and Zimbardo's Prison Study, which explain how normal human beings can be coaxed into perpetrating violence against others out of a natural tendency towards obedience, as well as how stressful or violent situations can awaken psychological pre-dispositions toward violent behavior in otherwise ordinary people. Browning also addresses the impact of National Socialism on the police's attitudes towards their victims. The book closes with the following statement and question: "Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets the moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" (Browning, 189).

Browning's book has done what few other genocide texts have: given a clear insight into who the actual perpetrators of genocide are. People hardly envision middle-age working class men in this position, and that is why the account of Reserve Police Battalion 101 is particularly unsettling. These men were practically the definition of normal; they aren't thought of as particularly "young" or "old"; their social standing is pretty unremarkable. They epitomize the image of "the every man." If these people are capable of committing mass murder, then we all are. It makes logical sense, of course; wars aren't carried out by the rulers of a nation-state, or the privileged class who's will is ultimately represented by the State, but by people recruited from the lower classes.

So, when the State turns genocidal, the task falls to the working class people the State governs. This is disturbing indeed, because one can imagine that their own friends and neighbors may be capable of participating in acts similar to that of the Reserve Police Battalion. No longer is genocide perpetrated by "those



people," the mysterious "other," who is in no way like us. Genocide becomes a personal sin that we are all capable of, and this is a reality that needs to be accepted before further genocides can be prevented.

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