

ORDINARY MEN: RESERVE POLICE BATTALION 101 AND THE FINAL SOLUTION IN POLAND

(CHRISTOPHER R. BROWNING)

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It seems to me that we in the West are like men in a cavern, out of which lead many paths, none signposted. Some paths lead to bright futures, but other paths lead to terrible ones, among them those where, once again as we did not so very long ago, we slaughter each other over ideology. And the way back is closed, so we must choose one path forward. The service of this book is that it illustrates Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's dictum, that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. Thus, reflecting upon this book may help us choose the correct exit from the cavern, and to that end, it is worth bearing the unease that comes over us when we read books like this.

This book, a staple of Holocaust studies for twenty-five years, has recently risen to fresh prominence due to repeated mentions of it by Canadian psychologist, and superstar, Jordan Peterson. His focus on the book arises from his own decades-long study of evil regimes, and his thought on how we, you and I, would really react if we lived under an actual such regime. Peterson's basic point is that we are deluding ourselves if we think we would be heroes; the vast majority of us would fall somewhere on the scale of cooperation with evil. *Ordinary Men* shows that principle in application, in the history of a group of German men who saw militarized police service in Poland during World War II.

Christopher Browning's focus is on a "reserve police" (*Ordnungspolizei*) battalion, Number 101. This battalion consisted of roughly five hundred men and was composed mostly of working class men from Hamburg. Very few had any National Socialist political background; most, to the extent they had political views, were probably Social Democrats. They were not soldiers; they were nationalized paramilitary police, of a type not found in America, but common in Europe, then and now. Basically, they were a combination of police force and National Guardsmen; not eligible, for the most part, for regular military service, due to age or some other reason, but frequently used to support operations in areas where the German military had conquered.

What was special about this battalion was not its composition, or its actions, which were roughly the same as several similar battalions. Rather, it's that we can know a lot of what these men actually did, which is not the case for most such units, lost among the fog of war and the desire to conceal the past. In the 1960s the German authorities conducted and transcribed, as part of a criminal investigation, extensive interviews with all the surviving Battalion 101 members they could find. Apparently this was one of the few battalions whose membership list was extant at that time, hence the focus on this battalion. It was these court records to which Browning, in the late 1980s, was able to gain access (though he was forbidden from revealing actual names except for those few men actually convicted of crimes, so he uses pseudonyms throughout), and which he used to construct what is part history and part psychological analysis. In more recent years additional such data has been mined and published, but Browning was the first to conduct a study of this type. He is very cautious in his approach, noting that no individual's testimony can be taken at face value, but claiming, I think accurately, that by judicious and open-minded examination of the mass of testimony, triangulating claims against each other and against known history, a great deal can be determined with a high degree of certainty.

The relevant area here is Poland in 1941 and 1942. Reserve Battalion 101 did not operate in Russia, but other similar battalions did, participating after Hitler's invasion in 1941 in the rounding up, and increasingly frequent organized murder, of Jews in locations like Minsk. Many such battalions ended up pressed into frontline fighting, though, and the Germans fairly quickly transferred killing duties to locally recruited elements, who were for the most part only too happy to help out, unlike, as we will see, some of the reserve battalion's policemen. Battalion 101, however, continued its behind-the-lines focus throughout the war, never serving as a fighting military unit.

Beginning in 1940, Battalion 101 was used to resettle Poles (mostly not Jews) in Western Poland, around Łódź. This was deportation, but not killing or transport to death camps (which did not exist in 1940). At the end of 1940, the battalion took up guard duties at the Łódź ghetto, into which the 160,000 Jews of Łódź had been crammed. Again, this did not involve killing, though it involved mistreatment and dehumanization of Jews, if not by the battalion's own men, then by other Nazis involved in

guard duties. In mid-1941, the battalion returned to Hamburg and was functionally dissolved and re-formed; it these mostly newly-enrolled men on whom Browning's book focuses.

Battalion 101's direct involvement in massacres began in July 1942, as the Final Solution got into full swing. The first massacre was in the Polish village of Józefów, where the battalion was ordered to collect the roughly 1,800 Jews living there; to shoot women, children and old people on the spot, and ship out male Jews suitable for slave labor to Lublin. The battalion's commandant, Major Wilhelm Trapp, gave a speech to the men in which he expressed some distress and said that men would not be punished for asking for guard or transport duty. A handful took advantage of the offer; the rest, in a highly disorganized, ad hoc, fashion, trucked Jews from the town, marched them into the nearby woods, and chaotically shot them in batches at point-blank range. (Here, and throughout the book, the fate of children is somewhat opaque—they must have been killed, but nobody, even Browning, seems to really want to talk about the details.) During the killing, some more, maybe ten percent to twenty percent, of the battalion's men made themselves scarce, either by hiding or simply moving about with apparent purpose, but taking advantage of the confusion to not participate directly in the killing. Most of the men, however, participated to the end; when they returned to barracks, many were shaken, and alcohol was provided, but there was no collective pushback against what they had done.

In August, Battalion 101 assisted in collecting Jews from various villages, for transportation to Treblinka, collecting them and packing them into the infamous cattle cars. Many Jews were shot during these operations, but killing Jews wasn't the immediate goal, and local auxiliary forces (so-called *Hiwis*) did most of the actual killing. Then, in the fall, the battalion was directly involved in several more mass shootings ordered from above. (Who did the ordering is lost to history, as with so many things in war, and the Germans who organized the Final Solution were keen to avoid records, not so much for fear of punishment in this life, but because they thought the masses of Germans should not know what had been done.) These later shootings were more organized, since techniques had been learned and practiced, and, more importantly, men within the battalion had risen to positions of authority who either did not mind directing such work, or positively enjoyed it.

The mass of men in the battalion had gotten used to carrying out their orders. Those who objected, of whom Browning profiles several, and who may have been as many as ten percent of the total, were the target of strong social pressure but were not punished, and the most vociferous objectors were ultimately transferred back to units based in Germany. More shootings and deportation followed, along with “Jew hunts” for those who had gone into hiding or become, or joined, partisans. The final killing in which the battalion participated was the massive killing in the fall of 1943, the “Harvest Festival” massacres, in which Heinrich Himmler ordered the coordinated extermination of the Jews in Lublin work camps. (While Browning does not mention it, the man in charge of “Harvest Festival,” Christian Wirth, was instrumental in the Aktion T4 program, the Nazi killing of the handicapped that preceded and smoothed the path for the Holocaust.) “For a battalion of less than 500 men, the ultimate body count was at least 83,000 Jews.”

Reading all this is exhausting, even in a fairly short book. The usual disturbing details, hard to understand, crop up, such as that Jews went to their deaths with “quiet composure.” Browning humanizes, or at least reifies, the men of the battalion, drawing incisive sketches of them, as known through the interviews to which he had access. Generally, those few who did not participate, or limited their participation, were usually of a slightly higher social class than the other men. Several were tradesmen who had their own businesses and were not interested in a postwar police career, and so were more independent. Roman Catholics seemed to be the most likely to refuse—but there were few in Hamburg, so this was not a large group, either. But, as one would expect, no one factor dictated a man’s behavior. Or rather, one single factor hard to define did—his character.

So why did “ordinary men” men become killers of innocents? Browning goes through each possibility. The first is conformity, “the basic identification of the men in uniform with their comrades and the strong urge not to separate themselves from the group by stepping out.” In essence, this is peer pressure. The second is a desire and compulsion to obey authority from above, reinforced by the “legitimizing capacities of government,” a strong element in the German mindset. The third is the men’s belief that they had no choice, that punishment for themselves or their families would follow a refusal to obey orders.

As Browning notes, though, there is no example known in all the war of a single incident of a soldier being punished for refusal to murder civilians, much less any repercussions for his family, although that's not to say threats were not made. Punishment of uninvolved family members for political offenses was, and is, a Left/Communist specialty, not used to any relevant degree by the National Socialists. The fourth is anti-Semitism, conditioned by years of Nazi propaganda (or, perhaps, as discussed below, by the German social culture and psyche itself, not merely by Nazism). The fifth, beyond mere anti-Semitism, is aggressive indoctrination, creating the active principle of eliminationism of which intellectual anti-Semitism was the passive precursor. But, as Browning notes, these men were not political Nazis, for the most part, and relative to, for example, the SS, they received cursory indoctrination, in which at most a dislike for Jews was inculcated, not a desire to kill Jews.

Browning seems to think that of these five, conformity was the key element, but that any individual man's behavior cannot be isolated to one simple explanation. He points to the Stanford prison experiment as evidence that average men can quickly become cruel and treat others in dehumanizing ways, which is certainly true, as shown by this book, although it turns out that the actual Stanford experiment was pretty much a fraud, and not replicable to boot. Browning also adduces Stanley Milgram's famous experiment with test subjects giving electric shocks to people at the command of an authority figure, noting the effect both of authority and peer pressure/conformity (although that experiment has also been criticized as far removed from the real world). My opinion is that pointing to these experiments isn't particularly helpful to the reader; the mere recitation of the facts, combined with the (presumably far less traumatic) experiences of each of us, should be enough to show that conformity, by itself or combined with other factors, is itself enough to create murderers, for all men are fallen, and Order Police Battalion 101 is just another example in an endless litany. Each of us can be Cain.

The only explanation that Browning rejects outright is that the actions of Battalion 101, and of all those who killed Jews in the Holocaust, were the result of some uniquely evil strain in the German psyche, springing from centuries of anti-Semitism as the core defining element of German culture. And there lies the post-publication history of this book. Browning's core point is that these were ordinary men,

not ordinary German men, and that to focus on their being German makes us feel that the Holocaust is unique, and therefore can be ignored as not having real lessons for the future, since the Germans appear to have left anti-Semitism behind. When this book came out, in 1992, it was widely acclaimed. In 1996, though, Daniel Goldhagen (known for his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, a 1998 expansion on his arguments with Browning) attacked *Ordinary Men*, claiming that Browning had this analysis exactly wrong, and the problem was the Germans themselves, each and every one.

I am hardly a Holocaust studies expert, but my understanding is that a basic divide is between “functionalists,” like Browning, and “intentionalists.” As the names suggest, the functionalists see the Holocaust as not being specifically planned and not being the necessary consequence of German sociology or even National Socialist ideology, but something that organically developed as an intersection of ideology and events. In another universe, the Germans won the war quickly, and most Jews were not killed, but perhaps deported to Madagascar or Africa. Hitler probably never directly ordered the Holocaust and did not plan it; he stated the need for the Final Solution (which Browning believes was, until 1941, conceived of purely as a geographic relocation solution), and the well-known principle of “moving toward the Führer,” combined with the anarchy and internal competition of the Nazi state, along with circumstance, did the rest. The intentionalists, in opposition, see the Holocaust as the precise and deliberate culmination of a twenty-year plan. Lacking documentary evidence for this, they tend to focus, like Goldhagen, on the idea that the Germans uniformly lusted to kill Jews, as a result of German social psychology. Hitler just gave them permission to do what they all wanted to do all along.

I knew none of this until I read this book, and came upon the Afterword, published in 1998 by Browning to respond to Goldhagen's attack on him. Browning scathingly dismisses Goldhagen, in terms quite aggressive for an academic dispute. He distinguishes between German “xenophobic” anti-Semitism, common enough but not supremely important in the culture, and the much rarer “chimeric” or “redemptive” anti-Semitism found in true ideologues, such as Himmler, and a “fringe phenomenon” until 1933. He points out that if Goldhagen's thesis is true, and the Germans were not indoctrinated into anti-Semitism by

the Nazis, how were they so easily indoctrinated out of anti-Semitism after the war? He notes many other mass killings of equal viciousness, from Yugoslavia in the war, to Mao, to Stalin, to Cambodia, to Rwanda. He accuses Goldhagen of bad history on many fronts, including the idea that anti-Semitism was more important to most Germans as a threat than Social Democracy or the Triple Entente. He notes that the Nazis were more than happy to kill many others besides Jews, especially Russians and Poles. He rips Goldhagen for bias, cherry picking his data, and terrible social science methodology. The cumulative effect, though I have not read Goldhagen myself, is pretty devastating.

In any case, Browning is correct that the behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101 is not unique. It is, as Peterson says, what all of us could become—perhaps some of us might be the non-conformist, retroactively, in the right circumstances, baptized as heroes. But probably not. And that implies that if ideological mass, mechanized killing returns to the West, it will find little difficulty implementing the desires of ideologues.

We on the Right tend to see this as a threat always over the horizon when the Left dominates, and that is true enough as a historical matter—the vast majority of such twentieth-century ideological killing was conducted by the Left, in an attempt to reach the Utopia that justified sacrifice, or at least the sacrifice of others. And yes, most significant killing by the Right in the twentieth century (leaving aside the Nazis, who had a great deal of leftist ancestry), was measured and usually proportionate, the result of civil war and the need to eliminate direct and existential threats, as in Chile, for example. But the Right should not be complacent—the same demonic, chthonic drives that spur on the Left recur, in their own fashion, in the Right, if less often. We easily forget the Ustasha in Croatia, for example, and, again, the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.

The Right must reckon with the truth that, in any future ideological hot conflict with the Left in America, towards which the Left is pushing hard, it would be easy for ordinary men to once again descend into eliminationism—particularly if the Right becomes informed by its own utopian ideology, rather than by the simple desire to break the current power of the Left and return society to basic virtue and the opportunity for human flourishing. Ideology, especially utopian ideology, is not

only seductive and gives apparent meaning and simplicity; it is also an effective way to organize people and power. Merely offering a better life not crushed by the Left does not move men's souls in the same way. Very few will die on the barricades for Russell Kirk. We see stirrings of a Right ideological movement, attractive as always to aimless young men, in groups like Gavin McInnes's Proud Boys. It's amusing to see the evil and terroristic Antifa get beat up, as they deserve, but it's not a good sign for the future. Writ large, ultimately such movements, or rather their successors, can lead to the same type of behavior that Browning expertly narrates. Thus, reading this book, and listening to people like Jordan Peterson, may serve as a form of inoculation against such a dystopian future. All young men should be required to read it. For some, like Antifa, it will be taken as a how-to guide, but for others, it may dampen the wars to come.