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Topic: How could 'ordinary men' become genocidal killers in the Holocaust?

The death of one man is a tragedy; the death of a million is a statistic.¹ Can this popular insightful quote on the empathy and apathy of the human condition give us insight into how it was possible for ordinary men to become genocidal killers in the Holocaust? The quote implies our ability to emotionally attach and detach ourselves to the notions of death in either a very personal or antiseptic way. How such reactions to death come about are ambiguous, circumstantial and not those that can be explained in a single formula or reason. I endeavor to investigate these reactions, motivations and intentions regarding murder by the 'ordinary men' in the Holocaust with the aid of the scholarly work of Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen² along with supplementary research.

At first, with the innate human tendency to polarise phenomena,³ to view the world in opposites of good and evil, it would seem that an ordinary man could never approach or commit himself to the atrocities of a genocidal killer. However before we can assume such a concept, it is necessary to define what an ordinary man is, the context he is in and thus the particular circumstances that would lead or allow him to overcome his moral boundaries and act in such a way. A perpetrator, as horrific as he is, is still a human being, and to understand him we need to bear this in mind. The transformation of an ordinary man into a genocidal

¹ Commonly attributed to Joseph Stalin, this quote most likely originated from *The Black Obelisk* by Erich Maria Remarque, first published as *Der Schwarz Obelisk* in Germany 1956.

² Christopher R. Browning (1993), *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, HarperPerennial: New York, and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (1996), *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Little, Brown and Company: London.

³ This can be directly linked to Primo Levi's Manichean theory of human interaction, "The Gray Zone" (1988) featured in *The Drowned and The Saved*, translated from Italian to English by Raymond Rosenthal, Summit Books: New York. He explores how the Other is perceived as the ultimate opposite to one viewing it, and how it is a human tendency to create a clear distinction between 'Us' and 'Them', just as the 'Volk' community in Nazi Germany did about the 'parasitic' Jews. This theory leads into the primary concepts of racism and how by dehumanising the Other, or subjecting it to the periphery of the collective, it enables one group to hate another without feeling any moral discord. Browning to express this uses the words of John Dower when he states, "The dehumanisation of the Other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitated killing [in the Holocaust]." Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p.162

killer involves a process of conditioning and choice under a variety of constraints. I will be exploring these three aspects throughout this essay in an attempt to understand how such a transformation comes about.

Before I discuss the context or the motives of the perpetrators and whether or not they killed with an embedded ideological purpose or not, I will open a discussion that will remain throughout this essay about what constitutes an ordinary man. To be ordinary implies the ability to assess the differences between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and to have an ‘ordinary’ reaction to events. In the case of killing, either the killer or the victim would feel repelled and conflicted. Killing goes against our basic instincts as human beings to survive, and without the threat to our own life, the reaction to killing would be to fundamentally oppose it. To commit such an act is such a heinous choice that involves stepping over moral, physical and psychological borders.⁴ Goldhagen stresses how such an act, the extreme decision to kill someone, is not justified or rightfully understood unless the entirety of what the perpetrator is physically experiencing is taken into account:

Blood, bone, and brains were flying about, often landing on the killers, smirching their faces and staining their clothes. Cries and wails of people awaiting their imminent slaughter or consumed in death throes reverberated in German ears.⁵

If these men were ordinary, how were they then able to cope in such gruesome situations?

To delve into any explanation of the perpetrators’ actions we must first question what they thought of their victims, what they thought about the slaughter and how

⁴ I would like to add here that this is a generalised statement based on what Browning has discussed throughout *Ordinary Men* alongside my own observations. I am in no way attempting to make an absolute claim on what constitutes an ‘ordinary man’, but for the sake and limitations of this essay I will delve only this far into it. When I make the above statement I am under the guide of Browning’s wise words: “The behaviour of the human being is, of course, a very complex phenomena, and the historian who “attempts” to explain it is indulging in a certain arrogance.” Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p.188

⁵ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p. 22

their beliefs informed their actions.⁶ Each perpetrator was subject to the ruling Nazi Party system, and was expected to obey and have trust in its authority. The Nazis wanted to revolutionise humanity and establish a hierarchy of races with themselves as superior. They promoted a utopian ideology that was radicalised with racial purity and anti-Semitic content, with the Jews at the core of everything that was and could go wrong with Germany, and further the world: “The Jews are our misfortune”.⁷ The Jews were hated because they had been transmuted into a symbol of evil, identified as outsiders who must be removed.⁸ Antisemitism conquered the German culture and became a public philosophy, something Goldhagen calls the “Nazi common sense”.⁹ For the German people the Nazis established a strong bond of unity and identity throughout the nation. Those who fitted into the Nazi ideal were accepted and felt a sense of belonging and kinship to the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the national community.¹⁰

With the extensive amount of propaganda and indoctrination, Goldhagen thus questions with good reasoning: how were the ordinary Germans supposed to have

⁶ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1996), “*The Willing Executioners*”/ “*Ordinary Men*” *Debate: Selections from the Symposium*, featuring Daniel J. Goldhagen, Christopher R. Browning, Leon Wieseltier and Michael Berenbaum. Article found at: <http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/publications/occasional/1996-01/paper.pdf>, p. 10

⁷ Ibid. p. 4

⁸ Yehuda Bauer (2000), “Overall Explanations, German Society and the Jews, or: Some Thoughts About Context” featured in *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism: German Society and the Persecution of the Jews 1933-1941*, edited by David Bankier, Yad Vashem and the Leo Baeck Institute: Jerusalem, pp. 7, 9, 13, 16. In understanding the perpetrator’s mindset in direct relation to his context, Goldhagen paints a clear picture: “a) From the beginning of the nineteenth century, antisemitism was ubiquitous in Germany. It was its “common sense.” b) The preoccupation with Jews had an obsessive quality. c) Jews came to be identified with and symbolic of anything and everything that was deemed awry in German society. d) The central image of the Jews held them to be malevolent and powerful—a principal, if not *the* principal source of the ills that beset Germany, and therefore dangerous to the welfare of Germans... Modern German anti-Semites, unlike their medieval forebears—for whom the devil was the principal source of evil—could say that there would be no peace on earth until the Jews were destroyed.” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “*The Willing Executioners*”/ “*Ordinary Men*” *Debate*, p.2

⁹ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “*The Willing Executioners*”/ “*Ordinary Men*” *Debate*, p. 32

¹⁰ Konrad Kwiet, “*Hitler’s Willing Executioners*” and “*Ordinary Germans*”: *Some Comments on Goldhagen’s Ideas* retrieved from: http://web.ceu.hu/jewishstudies/pdf/01_kwiet.pdf [revised version of “Goldhagen, The Germans and the Holocaust”, pp. 7-39, featured in *Gesher: Journal of Jewish Affairs*, 133 (1996/1997)] p. 7

developed any other view of the Jews? What he supports is the idea of an ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ where ordinary Germans participated in the genocide because they were driven by an all-consuming hatred of the Jews that was deeply rooted in their national history. Upon Hitler’s arrival into power, cruelty had become a norm in their society, which thus allowed the embedded anti-Semitism an open space to destroy the Jews with supposed satisfaction and desire.¹¹ Goldhagen believes that anti-Semitism and the population’s indifference towards cruelty were the only possible reasons for how ordinary men converted into genocidal killers: they were merely awaiting the opportunity- they *wanted* to kill.¹²

Undoubtedly anti-Semitism contributed to the ease in which the Third Reich was able to establish the hateful regime of the Final Solution, though David Bankier, a historian of German public opinion (who in no way downplays the scope of the German antisemitism), states:

If such a group of “indifferent” Germans not only provided the autonomy for the regime to implement genocidal policies but also many of the killers, then the focus of explanation would shift from Goldhagen’s single cognitive model¹³ producing a uniform group of willing killers, to the combination of

¹¹ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, pp. 388, 231, 241; Nikolaus Wachsmann (1999), “After Goldhagen: Recent Work on the Genesis of Nazi Genocide” featured in the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 477-487. <http://jch.sagepub.com>, p. 478

¹² One of Goldhagen’s main arguments involves the observation of the photographs taken by the Germans in Reserve Police Battalion 101: the shooters “took pride in their accomplishments, in their genocidal vocation, to which they were dedicated... If they had indeed in principle disapproved of the genocide, then why would they have taken obviously approving photographs of their killing operations and their lives while executioners—and then circulate them and permit copies to be made for others? ... It is difficult to see in the photographs men who viewed the killing to be a crime” Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, pp. 247, 405. This is a justifiable question and supports his argument for ‘eliminationist antisemitism’ well. In relation to Browning’s analysis of the motives and reactions of the men in 101 [which I will be discussing momentarily], this greatly challenges his arguments. Both Browning and Goldhagen asserts that some men did enjoy the killing, which here can be linked to the embedded hate influenced by the Manichean ideology of ridding the world from evil. For a further exploration of the photography by soldiers and policemen capturing genocide in the Holocaust, read Wayne Morrison (2004), “Reflections with Memories: Everyday photography capturing genocide” featured in *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 8, No.3, pp. 341-358. <http://tcr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/8/3/341>

¹³ Bankier refers to Goldhagen’s idea of the embedded ideological hate towards the Jews within the German people as the explanation for the killings:

ideological and situational factors that allowed a popular, ideologically driven, dictatorial regime and its hardcore followers to mobilize and harness the rest of society to its purposes. In such an approach, antisemitism would certainly not be absent but it would also not be sufficient.¹⁴

In contrast to Goldhagen's view of the Germans as having an innate desire to kill the Jews, I now look at how Browning represents the reactions that the Reserve Police Battalion 101 experienced towards killing. Here I will focus on the motivations stemming from peer pressure, conformity, career advancement, the power of authority, orders and routine to understand how the transformation occurred. It is a common misconception that those killing under the Nazi regime were forced to kill by the risk of losing their own life. This was in no way the case:

The perpetrators were not coerced to kill. Never in the history of the Holocaust was a German ever killed, sent to concentration camp, jailed, or punished in any serious way for refusing to kill Jews. It never happened. Moreover, in many units officers announced to their men that they did not have to kill, and in at least nine police battalions the men had been informed that they did not have to kill. There is similar evidence for the some of the *Einsatzkommandos*. There is also evidence that Himmler himself issue[d] orders allowing those who were not up to the killing to be excused from it.¹⁵

"Because eliminationist antisemitism was a German cultural cognitive model that predated Nazi political power, a committed anti-Nazi could be a committed, passionate racial anti-Semite. Killing the Jews was for many a deed done not for Nazism, but for Germany." The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *"The Willing Executioners"/ "Ordinary Men" Debate* p. 9

¹⁴ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *"The Willing Executioners"/ "Ordinary Men" Debate* p. 18

¹⁵ Heinrich Himmler stated in his speech to the SS Leadership on October 4th 1943: "One whose nerves are finished, one who is weak. The one can say: Good, go take your pension." Ibid. p. 74. Above quote from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *"The Willing Executioners"/ "Ordinary Men" Debate* p. 7. With this in mind it is important to note that even though there was a free choice of participation in the killing, there was a great constrain in society to conform. Browning here completes Goldhagen's historical account by informing us that "Members of the killing units could individually abstain from shooting, but those who encouraged others not to shoot were court-martialed for defeatism and subversion of morale. The Third Reich was not a benign dictatorship, and there were lines that could not be crossed" Browning. p. 23. The German people had the choice to not kill, but when attempting to influence others to do the same, they were prosecuted. In essence they only had the choices of murderer or bystander. An example of individuals who attempted to stand against the Third Reich, the students of the White Rose, were arrested, tortured and beheaded for passing out leaflets that condemned the mass-murders of the regime. Ibid. p. 23. There was a choice to not kill, but the context allowed room for very little else.

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If the men in the Reserve Police Battalion 101 demonstrated an ordinary repulsion to the killing then what motivated those to kill for the first time and sustained those who didn't stop? A look at Major Wilhelm Trapp and his men, will reveal why they chose to kill and how most of them coped poorly.¹⁶ Firstly Trapp, upon ordering the killing of the men, women and children in the Polish village Jozefow, explicitly showed his moral guilt in several ways. He informed the Battalion, "pale and nervous, with a choking voice and tears in his eyes", that it had been ordered "to perform a frightfully unpleasant task". Using the language of the myth of Jewish power, he reminded them of the Jewish conspiracy that had caused the War, and even now "bombs were falling on women and children in German towns".¹⁷ To him this eye-for-an-eye mentality seemed to convince him into feeling justified. On a handful of occasions he was seen crying in his office, stating opinions such as, "If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans".¹⁸ He also refused to attend the mass-murders in person, as he could not bear it. These reactions indicate clearly the remorseful understanding of the moral discord he was facing. From the men who

¹⁶ It is important to note that these men were not of military background and had no war experience, "Browning showed that the members of Police Battalion 101, responsible for the deaths of 83,000 Jews, were men of all ages and from all walks of German life and not representative of the traditional model of genocide-inclined Nazis." Matt Fuller, (2009) "Perpetrator Motivations: Revisiting the Browning-Goldhagen Debate" retrieved from: <http://historicalaptitude.wordpress.com/2009/03/22/perpetrator-motivations-revisiting-the-browning-goldhagen-debate/>

They were told of their killing duties of the Jozefow civilians only hours before it began and had very little reflection time before deciding to pull out or not. Browning discusses this as a potential motivation linked with conformity, a point I will explore below. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp. 71, 161.

¹⁷ Morrison, "Reflections with Memories", p. 345; Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 2

¹⁸ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 58; this contradicts the embedded ideology of killing the Jews; Trapp is showing that he sees such acts as morally wrong. By suggesting that there is a possibility for a Jewish revenge implies his faith in the Nazi Party, as all-powerful and superior, is not very strong. Similarly stated by another perpetrator, Hannah Arendt refers to words by Joseph Paul Goebbels, "We will go down in history as the greatest statesmen of all times or as their greatest criminals", (2006) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, London [originally published in 1963 by The Viking Press: USA]. Does this not imply an understanding of a moral discord in their agenda? This contradicts the 'eliminationist antisemitism' that Goldhagen vehemently stands for.

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didn't pull out before the shooting began (which was a mere twelve)¹⁹ many began to do so in the following hours:

Because I was already very upset from the cruel treatment of the Jews during the clearing of the town and was completely in turmoil, I shot too high... I had become so sick that I simply couldn't [kill] anymore.²⁰

This implies a variety of reasons and motivations behind the killing. Peer pressure was a major motivation for the men to not pull out. 80-90% of the men who shot, even though they were at first disgusted, hadn't the courage to discontinue, as doing so was beyond most of them: "Who would have dared to lose face before the assembled troops [?]" one perpetrator rhetorically asked in his testimony.²¹ Some men also stated how those who stopped killing were bullied and labelled as weak.²² This fear of non-conformity and peer pressure for some men was enough of a reason to kill for it lead directly into their fear of losing their military career:

I was afraid that I would be considered a coward... that it would harm me somehow in the future, if I would show myself as being too weak. I did not want L. (my superior) and others to have the impression that I was not as hard as an SS man was supposed to be."²³

Otto Ohlendorf who similarly volunteered for mass-murder out of concern that doing otherwise might jeopardise his career, felt in the end (stated in a letter to his wife) "... what else could we have done?"²⁴ Some men chose to discontinue the killing because

¹⁹Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 57

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 66-67. Take note the way he spoke of the treatment of the Jews as cruel. If he was heavily indoctrinated with the Nazi ideology it seems unlikely he would speak of them in such a way. In relation to Goldhagen's characterisation of the perpetrators, this testimony does not fit into his mould which suggests that there was more to the killing than just the 'eliminationist anti-Semitism' framework.

²¹ Ibid. 72. See also Irena Steinfeldt (2002), *How Was It Humanly Possible? A Study of Perpetrators and Bystanders During the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem: Jerusalem, p. 71

²² Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp. 71-72

²³ Steinfeldt, *How Was It Humanly Possible?*, p. 65

²⁴ Rainer C. Braum (1988), "Holocaust: Moral Indifference as the Form of Modern Evil" featured in *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time* edited by Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers. Temple University Press: Philadelphia, p. 71; The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "*The Willing Executioners*" / "*Ordinary Men*" *Debate* p. 10; Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang (eds.) (2005), "Affidavit of SS Gruppenfuhrer Otto Ohlendorf" featured in *The Holocaust: A Reader*, Blackwell Publishing: Australia, pp.

they had no interest in remaining policemen while others wanted to gain the recognition of being good and obedient workers.²⁵ These types of actions were justified as ‘law-abiding’. Adolf Eichmann, in his trial, used this to defend himself against the prosecution of being a ‘desk-killer’ (by organising the masses of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps)²⁶ and stated he was never a “Jew-hater”, but only acted in the obedience to the law: “I am not the monster I am made out to be... I am the victim of a fallacy.”²⁷ It seems Eichmann, like many other men, truly believed that their superiors were liable for their actions and thus they felt exempt. In Eichmann’s eyes only the leaders who promised they would take responsibility should have been punished.²⁸

This brings me to question: when is someone accountable for their own actions? Did any of these excuses by Eichmann, Ohlendorf or of any of the other SS men result from remorse or regret as an ‘ordinary person’ would feel? I arrive now at the final motivation of routine. After the genocide in Jozefow, according to Browning, the men suffered from a psychological demoralisation, so when the time came for them to kill again they did not react with revulsion as the first killing, but became increasingly efficient.²⁹ In the evenings after the killings the superiors organised social get-togethers with an abundance of alcohol for the men to erase the brutalities of the day. Eventually the men became accustomed to the routine and killed without questioning it; this gradual process is what Kwiet calls ‘rehearsing for murder’.³⁰ Documents like the “Commissar Decree” of June 6, 1941 and the “Minutes from the Wannsee

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²⁵ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp.75-76

²⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 24, 22, 27

²⁷ Ibid. p. 248

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 247- 248, see also ‘The Judiciary: The Verdict of The German Court of Law’ pp. 51-52 and “Leadership would have to bear the responsibility” in Steinfeldt, *How Was It Humanly Possible?*, pp. 65-66 for a further examination on the diversion of responsibility with the obedience to the law under the Third Reich.

²⁹ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 77

³⁰ Kwiet, “Hitler’s Willing Executioners” and “Ordinary Germans”, p. 5

Conference” in January 20, 1942,³¹ which clinically list the killings of the Jewish people, are prime examples of the antiseptic approach to death mentioned earlier.

These documents closely juxtapose the way Goldhagen describes the horrific physical experience of killing someone, and perhaps it is through the conditioning and ‘rehearsals’ how ordinary men became genocidal killers; they began to view each and every human being they killed as a statistic.

In conclusion I find myself with many more questions about the nature and responsibility of humanity. Goldhagen characterises the German people and perpetrators in an aggressive and dehumanised way, with a deeply rooted anti-Semitic culture and a “readiness” to kill. This perspective could possibly be true but what can we learn from a single viewpoint? If the perpetrators cannot be understood in any other light than as monsters, if they were so rigid and seen as inhuman, then how do we condemn them? If we can’t see these men as human beings, then what lessons do we learn from them and thus humanity? What further understandings can we ever gather from the events of the Holocaust without starting from the enigma of human action? Browning argues that the perpetrators were ordinary men under extreme circumstances, and although anti-Semitism was present, there were many other factors based on conditioning and choice that cannot be ignored. Browning invites us to question how we would have behaved under the same conditions in the hope of reaching an understanding of how these men were able to transform. In the attempt to find the answers for how ordinary men were able to become genocidal killers there seems to be no sole reason or explanation, nothing absolute apart from the essential acknowledgment of the vulnerability and capability of the human mind.

³¹ Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang, “The ‘Commissar Decree,’ June 6, 1941” pp. 177-180 and “Minutes of the Wannsee Conference, January 20, 1942”, pp. 243-251.

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