

READING

Reserve Police Battalion 101

What kind of person kills civilians, including old people and even babies, all day long? To find answers to such questions, historian Christopher Browning studied courtroom testimony made in the 1960s and 1970s by 210 men who served in the German Reserve Police Battalion 101 and were later charged with war crimes.

In the mid-1930s, the Nazis began to provide military-style training to uniformed police, and after 1939 they sent dozens of police battalions east to support the war against “Jewish Bolshevism” being waged by the German army and the Einsatzgruppen. Reserve Police Battalion 101 was made up of the German equivalent of city policemen and county sheriffs. It was assigned to the district of Lublin in Poland.

Like the National Guard in the United States, these German battalions were organized regionally. Most of the men in Battalion 101 came from working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Hamburg, Germany. Major Wilhelm Trapp, a 53-year-old career police officer who had come up through the ranks, headed the battalion. He had joined the Nazi Party in 1932 but was not a member of the SS, the Nazi elite guard assigned to solve the so-called “Jewish Problem.” The battalion’s first killing mission took place on July 13, 1942. Browning reports:

Just as daylight was breaking, the men arrived at the village [of Jozefow] and assembled in a half-circle around Major Trapp, who proceeded to give a short speech. With choking voice and tears in his eyes, he visibly fought to control himself as he informed his men that they had received orders to perform a very unpleasant task. These orders were not to his liking either, but they came from above. It might perhaps make their task easier, he told the men, if they remembered that in Germany bombs were falling on the women and children. Two witnesses claimed that Trapp also mentioned that the Jews of this village had supported the partisans. Another witness recalled Trapp’s mentioning that the Jews had instigated the boycott against Germany. Trapp then explained to the men that the Jews in Jozefow would have to be rounded up, whereupon the young males were to be selected out for labor and the others shot.

Trapp then made an extraordinary offer to his battalion: if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out. Trapp paused, and after some moments, one man stepped forward. The captain of 3rd company . . . began to berate the man. The major told the captain to hold his tongue. Then ten or twelve

other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major.

Trapp then summoned the company commanders and gave them their respective assignments. Two platoons of 3rd company were to surround the village; the men were explicitly ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were to round up the Jews and take them to the market place. Those too sick or frail to walk to the market place, as well as infants and anyone offering resistance or attempting to hide, were to be shot on the spot. Thereafter, a few men of 1st company were to accompany . . . Jews selected at the market place, while the rest were to proceed to the forest to form the firing squads. The Jews were to be loaded onto battalion trucks by 2nd company and shuttled from the market place to the forest.

Having given the company commanders their respective assignments, Trapp spent the rest of the day in town, mostly in a schoolroom converted into his headquarters but also at the homes of the Polish mayor and the local priest. Witnesses who saw him at various times during the day described him as bitterly complaining about the orders he had been given and “weeping like a child.” He nevertheless affirmed that “orders were orders” and had to be carried out. Not a single witness recalled seeing him at the shooting site, a fact that was not lost on the men, who felt some anger about it. Trapp’s driver remembers him saying later, “If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans.”¹

Browning notes, “While the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were apparently willing to shoot those Jews too weak or sick to move, they still shied for the most part from shooting infants, despite their orders. No officer intervened, though subsequently one officer warned his men that in the future they would have to be more energetic.”²

As the killing continued, some officers reassigned anyone who asked, while others pressed their men to continue despite reservations. By midday, the men were being offered bottles of vodka to “refresh” them. Nevertheless, a number of soldiers broke down. Yet the majority continued to the end. After the massacre ended, the battalion was transferred to the northern part of the

¹ Christopher R. Browning, “One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 174–75. Reproduced by permission from Cambridge University Press.

² Christopher R. Browning, “One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 179. Reproduced by permission from Cambridge University Press.

district and platoons were divided up, each stationed in a different town. All of the platoons took part in at least one more shooting action. Most found that these subsequent murders were easier to perform.

In drawing conclusions from the testimonies, Browning focused on the choices open to the men he studied.

Most simply denied that they had any choice. Faced with the testimony of others, they did not contest that Trapp had made the offer but repeatedly claimed that they had not heard that part of his speech or could not remember it. A few who admitted that they had been given the choice and yet failed to opt out were quite blunt. One said that he had not wanted to be considered a coward by his comrades. Another—more aware of what truly required courage—said quite simply: “I was cowardly.” A few others also made the attempt to confront the question of choice but failed to find the words. It was a different time and place, as if they had been on another political planet, and the political vocabulary and values of the 1960s were helpless to explain the situation in which they found themselves in 1942. As one man admitted, it was not until years later that he began to consider that what he had done had not been right. He had not given it a thought at the time.³

Browning also points out:

⁴ [It is] doubtful that they were immune to “the influence of the times,” . . . 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.”⁵

³ Christopher R. Browning, “One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 181–82. Reproduced by permission from Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Christopher R. Browning, “One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 183. Reproduced by permission from Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Christopher R. Browning, “One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 186. Reproduced by permission from Cambridge University Press.

The men who did not take part were more specific about their motives. Some attributed their refusal to their age or to the fact that they were not “career men.” Only one referred to personal connections to Jews to explain his refusal. Browning writes:

What remained virtually unexamined by the interrogators and unmentioned by the policemen was the role of antisemitism. Did they not speak of it because antisemitism had not been a motivating factor? Or were they unwilling and unable to confront this issue even after twenty-five years, because it had been all too important, all too pervasive? One is tempted to wonder if the silence speaks louder than the words, but in the end—the silence is still silence, and the question remains unanswered.

Some historians point out that members of the battalion could have exposed themselves to more severe criminal charges in the German legal system at the time of the trials by mentioning antisemitism as part of their motivation in the killings. Browning continues:

Was the incident at Jozefow typical? Certainly not. I know of no other case in which a commander so openly invited and sanctioned the nonparticipation of his men in a killing action. But in the end the most important fact is not that the experience of Reserve Police Battalion 101 was untypical, but rather that Trapp’s extraordinary offer did not matter. Like any other unit, Reserve Police Battalion 101 killed the Jews they had been told to kill.⁶

⁶ Christopher R. Browning, “One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder,” in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 183. Reproduced by permission from Cambridge University Press.

Connection Questions

1. What details in the text help you understand how Major Wilhelm Trapp felt about the killings? What choices did Trapp make? How do you explain his choices?
2. What role did “following orders” play in the choices made by Trapp’s men? To what degree might conformity (the desire to fit in with a group’s attitudes, beliefs, or behavior) have played a role? What other factors may have influenced their participation?
3. Scholar Daniel Goldhagen examined this same story and reached a conclusion different from Browning’s. Goldhagen believes that antisemitism, rather than conformity, is a more convincing explanation for why so many men participated in the massacre at Jozefow. He argues that the men decided to kill when they could have opted out because they truly believed that killing Jews was the right thing to do; to Goldhagen, any explanation other than what he calls “eliminationist antisemitism” is inadequate. Do you agree? Is the desire to conform enough to explain why people would participate in such violence? Or must they also feel hatred for their victims?
4. In what ways, according to Browning, were the experiences of Police Battalion 101 “untypical”? Despite the unusual nature of these events, how can they help us understand the larger history of the Holocaust? How can the experiences and choices of these men help us understand human behavior?
5. Browning writes of the men who took part in the murders, “A few who admitted that they had been given the choice and yet failed to opt out were quite blunt. One said that he had not wanted to be considered a coward by his comrades. Another—more aware of what truly required courage—said quite simply: ‘I was cowardly.’” Why might some men have felt that their decision to participate was cowardly? What is needed to make someone take an action that is different from the actions of the rest of a group?
6. Is it important to know the motives of perpetrators such as the members of Police Battalion 101? Is it possible to fully understand their motives? To what extent can we trust their own explanations years after the murders?