

“Why did ‘ordinary Germans’ participate in the ‘Final Solution’?”

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Introduction

L. P. Hartly grasped something of the truth of historiography when he said “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”¹ The same hermeneutical complexity exists in relation to the content of this essay. Moreover, the history of the Holocaust (1939-1945) is often oversimplified with little appreciation for its nuances, contradictions and diverse historiographical interpretations.² Research into the attitude of ‘ordinary Germans’ concerning the Jews during the era of Nazi persecution is relatively recent.³ Consequently, Ian Kershaw adds that, “the contours of popular opinion towards the Jews have inevitably been painted with broad brush strokes, with fewer fine touches that one would have wished.”⁴ That being said, our endeavour here will be to assess, if only in brief, the analysis that informs this debate. While taking cognisance of what has been described as diametrically opposed interpretations, our survey will at least illustrate that creative tensions are possible between such divergent arguments regarding the participation of ‘ordinary Germans’ in the ‘Final Solution’.

The Context and Methodology

Contextualisation is a quintessential ingredient in comprehending the ‘Final Solution’. Given that the Jewish population of Germany was just 0.55% by the beginning of the Third Reich⁵ and factoring in increasing emigration after 1935 and Jewish settlement patterns, the likelihood that the ‘ordinary German’ ever met a Jew was rare. Furthermore, Ian Kershaw concluded from his research of Bavarian police reports from 1933-45 that the ‘Jewish Question’ surprisingly featured very little. The ‘Jewish persecution’ as a popular topic offers, it seems, a rather scant invasion into the consciousness of the majority of the population and this is perhaps explained by the economic pre-occupations of the ‘ordinary German’ from 1933 to 1945. In *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, Kershaw illustrates the concerns of daily life amounted to wages, prices, working conditions and attacks on Christian Churches.⁶

¹ Cited by John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 6.

² On the development of historiography for this period see the excellent overview by I. Kershaw, ‘The Final Solution in Historiography’, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, pp. 237-340.

³ See O. Dov Kulka and A. Rodrigue, ‘The German Population and the Jews in the Third Reich: Recent Publications and Trends in Research on German Society and the “Jewish Question”’, in *Yad Vashem Studies*, 16 (1984), pp. 421-435.

⁴ I. Kershaw, ‘Popular Opinion and Jewish Extermination’, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, p. 211.

⁵ I. Kershaw, ‘Reactions to the Persecutions of the Jews’, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, p. 152.

⁶ Cf. I. Kershaw, *ibid.*, p. 4.

This however is tempered by moments during the Third Reich when the persecution of Jews came to the foreground, for example during the boycott of 1933, Nuremberg Laws in 1935 as well as the pogroms of 1938.⁷

It is not surprising therefore that post war historical interpretations diverged along two lines. On one side, German apologetics suggested that the responsibility for the 'Final Solution' lay solely with Hitler and his top Nazi officials. Contrary to this deduction was the elucidation favoured by Jewish historians who argued that the 'ordinary German', (influenced by centuries of anti-Semitism and a new wave of virulent Nazi propaganda intertwined with the exaltation of the Führer) thirsted for the annihilation of the Jews. Yet, notwithstanding the role of anti-Semitism and Hitler (with the upper echelons of Nazism), both strands are false dichotomies and the historical reality in light of all the evidence is much more nuanced. Primo Levi confirms this depiction in an essay entitled "The Grey Zone". In this he argues convincingly, that despite the human tendency to simplify what is essentially a multifaceted subject, the history of the concentration camps for example, cannot "be reduced to two blocs of victims and persecutors"⁸ He therefore proposed a "grey zone" between the simplified Manichean images of perpetrators and victim.

The fundamental complexity is summarised well by one writer who says:

While it was always frightening to imagine a nation swept away and dominated by the Nazis, it is surely no less frightening to consider that the Nazis were able to accomplish most of what they set out to do without acquiring unquestioning allegiance or imposing complete control. Apparently they did not need to: it was not necessary for Germans to believe, nor necessary for them to approve; compliance, not conviction was required. For the Nazi state to thrive, its citizens had to do no more than go along, maintaining a clear sense of their own interests and a profound indifference to the suffering of others.⁹

⁷ However, on this point, Kershaw argues: "Indifference seems, in fact, to have been the most common response to the Nuremberg Laws." *Ibid.*, p.161. Yet the anti-Semitic laws did provide the legal foundation on which the Final Solution was incrementally built.

⁸ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 36-69.

⁹ J.J Sheehan, 'National Socialism and German Society. Reflections of Recent Research', in *Theory and Society*, 13 (1984), pp. 866-867. Sheehan's point here is a summary and review of Ian Kershaw's work in *Popular Opinion and Jewish Extermination* *op.cit.*

The Context in Microcosm

Daniel Johan Goldhagen's infamous work, entitled *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, depicts the bloodthirsty ascent of most of the 'ordinary Germans' to the 'Final solution'. In contrast, Christopher R. Browning offers a robust criticism of Goldhagen's conclusions. He suggests, especially in his microcosmic study of Reserve Police Battalion 101, that most of the ordinary men involved in clearing the ghettos or mass shootings at Józefów and Łomazy were not the "willing executioners" that Goldhagen portrays.¹⁰ Browning it seems, offers more of an appreciation for this multilayered history.¹¹

The present author is not convinced either by the 'intentionalist' or 'structuralist /functionalist' hermeneutic. Though the '*eliminationist anti-Semitism*'¹² proposed by Goldhagen might be tempered by the '*redemptive anti-Semitism*' rhetorical approach of Saul Friedlander¹³, The '*incremental*' evolution of the Final Solution, offers I think, a more balanced approach. Kershaw and Browning indeed concur on this point and the thesis finds further augmentation in the light of Laurence Rees' research for the BBC on the Nazi era.¹⁴ Additionally, the Nazi success in transforming latent anti-Jewish sentiment into active-dynamic hatred is also worth considering.¹⁵

By way of summary then, both the macro and micro contextual milieu as well as the historical methodology of this question is complex and debated among historians. Ian Kershaw's often-quoted statement is however very apt. He says, "The road to Auschwitz was built by hate but paved with *indifference*."¹⁶

¹⁰ See especially the afterword of *Ordinary Men*, pp.191-223, in which Browning addresses Goldhagen's criticism directly.

¹¹ C. R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy 1939-1942*.

¹² J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, esp., pp 375 -415. There is of course evidence to support Goldhagen's view. For example, In December 1941, an article devoted to the Jewish question appeared in a German education circular addressed at the Order Police. The article stated that "The definitive solution of the Jewish problem, that is, not only of depriving them of power, but actually removing this parasitical race from the family of European peoples." Bundesarchiv, Koblentz, RD 18/15-1, Gruppe A, Folge 27, December 1, 1941. What is interesting here is that this anti-Semitic sentiment is relatively sparse in this particular literature.

¹³ S. Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution. Nazi Germany and the Jews 1933-1939*. See part two of the Volume, S. Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination, Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945*.

¹⁴ L. Rees, *Auschwitz. The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*. Rees points to an incremental evolution in the method of killing employed by the Nazis. Cf. I. Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, p.12.

¹⁵ See Kershaw, *ibid.*, pp. 156 ,182. (The terms 'static' and 'dynamic' hatred are from Muller-Claudius).

¹⁶ (*Italics mine*) I. Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, p.5 & 18. The original idea was presented by I. Kershaw in *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, p. 227. Kershaw again put the same point differently by suggesting that "Economic self-interest prevailed over ideological correctness." *Ibid.*, p.162.

Though Kulka and Rodrigue prefer the term '*passive complicity*' to describe the general German population's attitude towards the Jews,¹⁷ for the vast majority of ordinary Germans the 'Jewish Question' only came into prominence intermittently, otherwise it was peripheral. But what of those who did actually participate directly in the Final Solution, what can be said of those 'ordinary Germans'?¹⁸ Let us attempt therefore to bring this aspect into sharper focus.

The Myriad of Reasons¹⁹

Christopher R. Browning phrases the question succinctly.

“Why did most men in Police Battalion 101 become killers, while only a minority of perhaps 10 percent – and certainly no more than 20 percent – did not? A number of explanations have been invoked in the past to explain such behaviour: wartime brutalisation, racism, segmentation and routinization of the task, special selection of the perpetrators, careerism, obedience to orders, deference to authority, ideological indoctrination, and conformity.” [*sic*]²⁰

In addition to these explanatory causes one could add the dehumanisation of the Victim, learning by participation,²¹ and the legitimising capacities of government.²²

The one behavioural explanation, that perhaps offers an overall coherence to the others is the *dehumanisation of the victim*. Though Goldhagen's thesis that Nazi Propaganda was all-pervasive, has been criticised,²³ it is fair to suggest that “the depersonalisation of the Jew had been the real area of success of Nazi policy and propaganda on the Jewish Question.”²⁴ Especially as the war years rolled on and people ‘retreated to the private sphere’ of their daily lives, the Jew was depicted as a filthy denigrated and demonised ‘sub-human’. The deluge of racist anti-Semitic propaganda, reinforced at various levels of society, often culminated in

¹⁷O. Dov Kulka and A. Rodrigue, *op.cit.*, p.434.

¹⁸ Indeed it is beyond the scope of this essay to include those who no doubt did participate at a ‘distance’, those for example that worked as bureaucrats in Berlin or the General government, those involved in the transports, legislators, ect. The focus here is on those who participated more ‘directly’.

¹⁹ Though Goldhagen is critical of Browning's use of ‘ordinary *men*’ over his own ‘ordinary *Germans*’ because of his emphasis on culture and propaganda, I will nevertheless use the terms interchangeably.

²⁰ C. R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, p. 159.

²¹ I. Steinfeldt, *et.al*, *How was it Humanly Possible? A Study of Perpetrators and Bystanders during the Holocaust*, pp.70-71.

²² C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 216.

²³ Goldhagen's thesis suggests that Nazi Germany had arrived at a point tantamount to a collective unified purge mentality. See J. Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*.

²⁴ I. Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*, p.199.

Nazi indoctrination.²⁵ As John Dower put it, “the dehumanisation of the other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitated killing.”²⁶ This might account for the fact that some; perhaps 30 percent of Police Battalion 101 ‘enjoyed’ the liquidation of the Jews at Józefów and Łomazy.

Raul Hilberg has emphasised the *bureaucratic and administrative aspects*²⁷ of Hitler’s Reich as an aid to the slow erosion of moral sensitivity. Bureaucratic duties were often routinised, segmented and depersonalised and those who ‘enjoyed’ the distancing from the killing that their functions afforded them, nevertheless played an essential role in the cog of the Third Reich. However, their removal from the scene of the crime, though not mitigating their moral responsibility, stands in stark contrast to those who shot, *en mass*, Jewish men, women and children all over Eastern Europe as Operation Barbarossa advanced. Yet, without the former the latter surely would not have been possible.

Habituation of the killing process coupled with *routine* also seems to have played a part in the dynamics of creating killers for Hitler’s Reich. Browning adds; “having killed once already, the men did not experience such a traumatic shock the second time.”²⁸ Concomitantly, the pressure from peers to *conform*; the fear of being labelled ‘weak’ or ‘cowardly’ and the *threat of isolation*, offers some insight into not only the how or why ‘ordinary men’ took part in the initial savage killings and ‘Jew hunts’, but continued to do so.²⁹ Dower has also cited the *brutalisation effects of the war* leading to atrocity.³⁰ But a qualification is necessary here because many of the ‘ordinary men’ involved in the Final Solution had not been previously involved in combat, much less shot another human being as was the case at Józefów for example. Browning is accurate in his assessment therefore when he concludes that, “brutalisation was not the cause but the effect of these men’s behaviour.”³¹

The use of *alcohol*, which anaesthetised the moral sensitivity while simultaneously accentuating the moral depravity of the killers, has also been highlighted. At Łomazy Lieutenant Gnade of Police Battalion 101, was drunk senseless. But this was not unusual as one police officer testified; “most of the other comrades drank so much solely because of the

²⁵ C. R. Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

²⁶ J. W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, p.11.

²⁷ The original reference is obscured. However see C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁸ C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁹ C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 184-185.

³⁰ J. W. Dower, *ibid.*

³¹ C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 161.

many shootings of Jews, for such a life was quite intolerable sober.”³² But it is important to note that alcohol in itself was not the initial cause; rather it helped perpetuate the horrific and sadistic killings. Similarly, *division of labour* and the *removal of the killing process* to the camps appears to have diminished or even removed the sense of responsibility felt by many of the ‘ordinary men’ in Browning’s study.³³

The perpetrators at the post-war trials in Nuremberg, including the testimony from SS officers, Order police, Einsatzgruppen, as well as evidence from the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, strongly indicated *deference to authority or obedience to orders* as the primary motive for their participation in the Final Solution. However, it is worth noting that fear of punishment, as a *modus operandi* for the ordinary participants in the final solution does not compute with the evidence. Cases where the punishment due to non-obedience for police/soldiers was never commensurate with the *aktion* they were asked to engage in. In other words, Nazis were never shot for failing to shoot Jews.³⁴

Psychological Explanations

Social psychology suggests that the Nazis had framed their collective thought to accept an ‘in-group/out-group’ social dynamic. The Nazi notion of the pure Aryan blood, to which their sole allegiance lay, inevitably put it on a collision course with the Jewish out-group. Nazi propaganda and racist indoctrination therefore succeeded in shifting the dynamic from *no responsibility* for the Jews to an *active responsibility* of the state to remove this out-group.³⁵

The now famous experiments relating to obedience and deference to authority by Stanley Milgram³⁶ clearly have relevance to the Final Solution. Milgram’s intriguing results indicate that individuals easily inflicted pain on strangers mainly because a ‘legitimate authority’ directed them to. In relation to the Holocaust Milgram states that, “Men are led to kill with little difficulty”³⁷ Given the wider context set out above, negative consequences for those

³² C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p.82. Cf. the drunkenness of the Hiwis, p. 93. This point in fact probably belongs to ‘how’ the killers managed to do what they did rather than the ‘why’. The point is debatable however.

³³ C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁴ See C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, pp.170-171. Herbert Jäger and the German prosecutors of the 1960’s could not document a single case where there were dire consequences for failing to kill unarmed civilians. See C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁵ This corresponds to S. Friedländer’s idea of ‘redemptive anti-Semitism’, that is the consent of the ordinary population to the state who would provide a society free of Jews.

³⁶ S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental view*.

³⁷ S. Milgram, *ibid.*, p. 7, 177. Cf. C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p. 173.

unwilling to kill Jews were mainly confined to ‘peer pressure’ and ‘conformity’. What Milgram does offer to our understanding is *a posteriori* explanation of what individuals feared *might* happen rather than what did actually happen historically.

Conclusion

“The behaviour 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.” [*sic*]³⁸ Such are the wise words of one historian that serve as a constant reminder of the tacit and illusive nature of human behavioural psychology, not to mention its historical reconstruction. The endeavour of this essay has been to address the reasons why ‘ordinary Germans’ participated in the ‘Final Solution’. Our exploration of the macro and micro elements of this debate lead us to conclude that there is not one single reason alone that can substantiate or sustain a comprehensive rational explanation. What is clear however is that a conglomeration of factors, weighted differently according to historical circumstance, individuals involved and the methodology employed, offers a more substantive and nuanced argument. It is worth noting in the final analysis that the imperative to search honestly the corridors of the past compels us to heed the sound advise of Elie Wiesel who said; “[to] forget [the victims of the holocaust] would be not only dangerous but offensive.”³⁹ Memory secures the liberation of those who suffered at the hands of ‘ordinary men’.

³⁸ C. R. Browning, *ibid.*, p.188.

³⁹ E. Wiesel, *Night*, p. xv.

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