

The Incentive to Kill: An Examination of the Motivations for German Perpetrators During World War II

By
Agathe Manikowski

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master's of Arts

In the Department of Political Science

University of Ottawa

May 2011

© Agathe Manikowski, Ottawa, Canada, 2011

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my thesis supervisor Professor Dominique Arel, without whom, I would have never been able to produce anything of this scale in both size and content. His guidance and critiques have helped me immensely for this work. I would also like to thank him for giving me incredible opportunities by hiring me at the Chair of Ukrainian Studies and as his teaching assistant.

I would also like to thank my fellow grad students, namely Allyson Gillett, Thomas Metcalf and Shayla Brush, who have been there for me and helped me every step of the way in these past two years. I am very grateful for all of their encouragement.

Furthermore, I would like to whole-heartedly thank my parents for all of their guidance and support but most importantly for their confidence in me being able to take on this degree.

Additionally, I want to thank Adam for all of his encouraging words, for putting up with me through my thesis writing hardships and for always being there for me.

Lastly, I want to thank Karen for always being supportive and for being the first person to say she would love to read my thesis.

Thank you all so much.

Abstract

Why do ordinary individuals participate in mass violence perpetrated against civilians? That is the question I will attempt to answer in the following paper. I consider these men ordinary to the extent that the majority was not socially deviant. Looking at the case of Nazi Germany, two groups stand out as good case studies: the SS Einsatzgruppen and the SS cadres in the Death camps. The following analysis will focus on the motivations of these men to commit mass murder. I argue for a causal sequence of action, beginning with the onset of Nazi ideology, further followed by the dehumanization of the victim and the brutalization of the perpetrator. I will demonstrate how the ideology present during German interwar society influenced these men into participation. Dehumanization and brutalization are complimentary factors that push these men into action.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The General Context of my Research	1
The specific context of my research	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	5
Social Deviance	5
Brutalization.....	6
Coercion	7
Authority	8
Obedience	8
Bureaucratic Logic.....	9
Conformity	10
Cultural Predisposition	11
Chapter 3: Main Argument: Ideology followed by Dehumanization and Brutalization Factors	14
Ideology	14
Dehumanization	19
Brutalization	19
Chapter 4: Case Studies	21
The SS Einsatzgruppen	21
Purpose of the Einsatzgruppen.....	21
Men of the SS Einsatzgruppen	22
The Training Process.....	23
The Undertaking of the Einsatzgruppen.....	24
The Fulfillment of These Tasks	25
Motivations for Action	28
Post-War Justifications	30
SS Personnel in Death Camps	33
What Were the Death Camps?	33
The Camps' Functions	34
Camp Personnel.....	36
The Euthanasia Program	37
The Fulfillment of These Tasks	38
Motivations to Participate	39
Post-War Justifications	41
Chapter 5: Analysis	44
Ideology	44
German Inter-War Society	44
A Question of Belonging	46
Party Adherence and Real Nazis.....	47
Indoctrination.....	49
Orders and Choice.....	51
Dehumanization	51
Brutalization	53

Mass Killing: A Recurring Occurrence	54
Rwanda.....	54
Former Yugoslavia.....	55
Chapter 6: Conclusion	58
Appendix 1: Timeline of the Holocaust	60
Appendix 3: Map of Einsatzgruppen Action.....	62
Appendix 4: Talled Victims of Einsatzgruppen	63
Appendix 5: Map of Death Camps in Poland	64
Bibliography.....	65
Books	65
Chapters in Book.....	67
Articles	68
Websites	68
Court Documents	68
Film.....	68
Essay.....	68

Chapter 1: Introduction

The General Context of my Research

Why do “ordinary” people—who would otherwise probably never kill another human being—take part in mass violence? What could possibly motivate these individuals to suddenly take part in the (often gruesome) mass killing of seemingly innocent people? How do they rationalize their actions? These are all questions that I will attempt to answer in the following thesis.

The willing participation in mass killings by individuals has been investigated for decades. I define mass killings as “the intentional killing of a massive number of noncombatants”.¹ I will also use the concept of mass violence, which unlike mass killings, does not necessarily include death. Mass violence is an instance in time and space, where murder was not always the ultimate objective. In the case of Nazi Germany however, I will focus on mass killings, as that was clearly the ultimate objective. When looking at instances of mass violence in the history of the world, one wonders what could possibly push a seemingly stable person, a neighbor, a friend or even a family member to take part in atrocities such as humiliation, torture, mutilation and murder. Unfortunately, cases of mass violence are common and most of the perpetrators have been “ordinary” individuals. The issue of individuals participating in mass violence is very important to try to comprehend and analyze. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, we have seen this occurrence reenacted in the Armenian genocide, World War II, Cambodia, ex-Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Darfur and a myriad of other cases. There has been extensive research and literature on this topic. There are arguably six main reasons that seek to explain why individuals engage in mass violence: social deviance, coercion, authority, conformity, cultural predisposition, and, what I find most compelling, ideology, defined here as a rigid way of making sense of history and politics, through the logic of ideas, fostered and nurtured in a societal environment and implemented by political movements and organizations.

The specific context of my research

The most compelling case of individuals partaking in mass violence is that of Germany in World War II. When looking at the extent of the organization and personnel involved in the execution of the Final Solution, one cannot overlook the fact that most of these people would probably never have participated in such acts if it were not for the extraordinary conditions created by the Nazi Party. My research will focus on *why* individuals in German security forces—specifically SS troops—participated in mass killings during World War II. In this paper, I choose to focus specifically on the motivations of ethnic Germans from Reich Germany, rather than on non-Germans or *Volksdeutsch*—ethnic

¹ Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*,

Germans living abroad in German-occupied territories. The reason why I will focus on ethnic Germans is because I argue for the effects that Nazi ideology directly had on the Germans living in the Reich in the inter-war period. The effects would have been different on Germans who did not live in the Reich at the time and also, the scale would have been much too large for the purpose of my research.

Germany's systematic elimination of Jews makes this an essential case to analyze. German forces also perpetrated large-scale massacres of Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Roma civilian populations. Considering the facts enounced above, an important question arises. This question will be central to my research: ***Why do ordinary individuals participate in mass violence perpetrated against civilians?***

I consider these men ordinary to the extent that the majority was not socially deviant. On the contrary, many of the men, mostly officers I will be looking at, held doctorates in various departments, as I will explain further along. Moreover, a distinction has to be made between *ordinary* as men completely disconnected from any experience with violence or war who in different circumstances would probably never have taken part in any violent action; and *ordinary* as men with some training and war experiences but again, in different circumstances, would probably never have perpetrated brutal violence and humiliation towards civilians. I will focus on the latter, as I will be looking at SS armed units.

The aim of my research is to analyze the actions and assess the motives of men asked to commit mass killings. The targets for these men were civilians: unarmed men, women and children or prisoners of war. In my research, I argue that a main reason why Germans participated in the mass killing of civilians during World War II is ideological. I believe that the main motivation for the German "executioners" is based on a strict manner of making sense of history and politics, through the logic of ideas, fostered and nurtured in a societal environment and implemented by political movements and organizations. Anti-Jewish feelings were triggered by many factors but the most important was the loss of the First World War and the subsequent dictation of the Versailles Treaty.² Following the defeat of the war, Germans felt humiliated and betrayed, as they felt they won their conquest of the eastern front and saw no reason to accept such a humiliating Treaty. In the end, Germany was not only blamed for the war, but also lost territory, the right to armed forces and population.³ Feelings of resentment, jealousy, anger and discrimination had been fostered in German society. Hitler and Nazism empowered aggrieved individuals imbued with these feelings and, with effective propaganda, Nazi ideology became, for the most part, accepted and supported.⁴ Consequently, ideology was a core motivator for the actions of Germans, but I do not

² Adopted in May 1919, it restored Alsace-Lorraine to France, as well as former German occupied parts of Belgium, Denmark, and most importantly, it restored Poland. Germany had to officially accept the blame for the war. Payments were to be made to the Allies and Germany was to be completely disarmed.

³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010), pp. 7-9

⁴ George L. Mosse. *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1978).

believe it is sufficient in itself to explain the onset of mass violence. Furthermore, I add two factors that I believe explained behavior: brutalization and dehumanization. I argue that perpetrators are further affected by the brutalization incurred by the recurring violence they are exposed to daily. Also, thanks to propaganda and ideological motivations, the targeted victims are viewed as sub-human by the perpetrators, further facilitating violence.

I will apply my theories to two case studies: the SS Einsatzgruppen and the SS units in death camps.⁵ The SS Einsatzgruppen were mobile killing units who were sent to what is now Eastern Europe, to systematically round up Jews—men and eventually women and children—in every village in order to kill them in mass shootings. There were overall six death camps, also known as extermination camps, in Poland: Majdanek, Chełmno, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bełżec, Treblinka and Sobibor. Majdanek and Chełmno were of a smaller scale and were more of a starting platform for the other four, which is why I chose not to focus on them. A distinction must be made between extermination camps and concentration camps. The latter were labor camps with high levels of casualties but whose purpose was not the methodical extermination of Jews and other unwanted men and women. The SS units in death camps were SS men hired to work in the camps, mostly holding administrative or supervising positions to ensure the successful running of the camps [in order to have a better grasp on the timeline of events during World War II, see Appendix 1]. All of these men had direct contact with the victims. I have chosen to focus my research on these two case studies, as it will provide a comparative representation of the perpetrators and their motivations. For both groups, I will be looking at their backgrounds, their levels of indoctrination to anti-Semitism, both prior and during the war, their tasks and finally, based on their testimonies from trials, witness testimonies and personal letters or memoirs found in much of the literature, I want to see how they rationalized their actions. My research will focus exclusively on ethnic German perpetrators involved in the systematic elimination of the Jews—along with the Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals and others considered inferior or as a danger to the Reich. I define anti-Semitism as a form of discrimination that may include mild to extreme levels of hostility towards people of the Jewish faith.

Through this study, I wish to show that two of the most brutal yet effective killing methods during World War II were conducted and executed by “ordinary” men. I will compare these men’s upbringings and social standings prior to their drafting into the SS, as well as their respective years of joining the party and their allegiance to Nazi ideas. Additionally, I will analyze their actions in order to illustrate the extent of their ideological motivations. Ultimately I would like for my research to facilitate an understanding of some of the circumstances leading up to mass killing and of the motivation of perpetrators, through the case of Nazi Germany.

I will begin my paper with a chapter containing a review of the literature on the main schools of thought I have mentioned above. Afterwards, I will explain my argument of ideology, followed by the impact of brutalization of the perpetrators and of dehumanization of the victims. The subsequent chapter will be an empirical presentation

⁵ By SS camp personnel I mean, Germans serving for the SS Hauptscharführers, SS Scharführers, SS Urterscharführers as well as former personnel from the Euthanasia program. I will be excluding camp guards, as most were not German. (Yitzhak Arad. *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, p.19)

of my case studies. Once I have presented who these men were and what their respective duties involved, an analysis of my findings will ensue. In my last chapter, I will apply my theories to my case studies in order to demonstrate their roles in the motivations of these men and its relevance for the comparative study of mass violence.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following section summarizes what I think are the most significant arguments found in the literature on what spurs individuals to engage in the mass killing of civilians. I differentiate five schools of thought regarding the motivations for participation in mass killings: social deviance, coercion, authority, conformity, and cultural predisposition.

Social Deviance

Deviance can be defined as the state of an individual that can be caused by one's psychological predisposition to violent behaviour. I want to underline that psychological deviance is attributed to individuals prior to their participation in mass killings. When looking at instances of mass killings, the argument of psychological deviance is not very popular. As explained by Valentino, psychological studies of perpetrators of violent crimes have consistently found that only five percent enjoyed their murderous tasks. Further studies on war veterans have shown that between two and fifteen percent seem to lack any reluctance to murder and could do so without remorse. Consequently, a very small percentage of soldiers take pleasure in the act of killing.⁶ As further explained by Valentino, when a mass killing is being organized, often the psychologically deviant are actively recruited to serve as perpetrators, directly enlisted from prisons. However, it is important to underline that these types of perpetrators represent a very small percentage.⁷

In World War II Germany, there was a case of deviant men being asked to participate in the killings: the SS *Sondereinheit Dirlewanger* brigade. Formed in late 1940, this unit would operate in Occupied Poland (known as the "General Government" [*Generalgouvernement*]) and Belarus, in charge of surveying concentration camps and take part in the elimination of "partisans".⁸ This unit was responsible for more atrocities than any other SS unit.⁹ Interestingly, this unit was composed almost solely of former German detainees from prisons or camps, guilty of crimes related to poaching and hunting¹⁰ as well as murderers and the clinically insane.¹¹ These men were particularly ruthless and extremely brutal, a main reason why they were chosen for this task. Additionally, these men were skilled hunters who would find pleasure in hunting humans like wild animals.¹² This special commando killed at least thirty thousand civilians in Belarus.¹³ This case is the perfect example of a group of psychologically deviant individuals in the context of mass killings.

⁶ Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions*, p.40

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Christian Ingrao, *Les chasseurs noirs: la brigade Dirlewanger* (Saint-Amond-Montrond, France : Perrin, 2006), p.12

⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p.241

¹⁰ Christian Ingrao, *Les chasseurs noirs* p.14

¹¹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands* p.242

¹² Christian Ingrao, *Les chasseurs noirs* p.23

¹³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p.242

It is important to note that this was an isolated case and that, as mentioned, a very negligible percentage of perpetrators were deviant; therefore I consider this argument insufficient in probing individual motivations. It is not an argument I wish to look at.

Brutalization

Brutalization is a type of deviance but that, contrarily to social deviance appears once the killing has begun. It can be defined as a state of joy when taking part in a massacre. Browning argues that war creates an environment that lends itself to increased violence based on specific factors. The men of the 101st Reserve Police Battalion as studied by Christopher Browning in his book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, carried out their killings methodically, as a result of specific government policies. Men in this state of mind act not out of frenzy, bitterness or frustration but rather by calculation. Once the killing began, the men became increasingly brutalized. Furthermore, their actions became routine and with that, the killing became easier.¹⁴ “In this sense, brutalization was not the cause but the effect of these men’s behaviour.”¹⁵ Another important element related to the brutalization of the perpetrator caused by war is the element of distancing between the perpetrator and his victims. For Browning, this behaviour along with that of racial prejudices, mutually reinforce themselves facilitating the onset of violence on behalf of the policemen.¹⁶

John W. Dower also underlines the importance of brutalization and dehumanization, in his book *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, Dower emphasizes the importance of two inter-related concepts, that of racism and of the “Other”, in order to explain the brutality of American soldiers in the Pacific war. Regarding racism, Dower emphasizes the title of “race war” to define the Pacific war, as it “exposed raw prejudices and was fuelled by racial pride, arrogance, and rage on many sides.”¹⁷ Moreover, Dower points out two types of distancing: physical and psychological. When looking at the Americans and Japanese, the view and constant reminder of the Japanese as the enemy contributed immensely to the psychological distance needed for the facilitation of the killing on the battlefield.¹⁸ The enemy became remote, a different species and worthless, ultimately used as a number to tally up the perpetrators’ growing list of casualties.¹⁹ Thanks to the developments of newer technologies at the time, such as the machine gun, tanks, and planes, as well as the planning by strategists, removed from the actual scene, of the different combating measures, physical distancing was greatly facilitated.²⁰

My case studies will focus more on the psychological distance between the perpetrator and the victims, rather than a physical one, as in both cases, the was no

¹⁴ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1998) p.161

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p,160

¹⁷ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p.4.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.11

¹⁹ Ibid., p.294

²⁰ Ibid.

physical distance between the two. I will be using the brutalization of the perpetrator alongside the dehumanization of the victim as completing factors to the onset of violent behaviour by perpetrators. I believe it is important to take into consideration the effects of war, more specifically, the effects of murdering unarmed civilians. I will illustrate how the murder of thousands of people daily, brings about routine of action, dissociation, and unnecessary violence.

Coercion

The concept of coercion can be defined as “the imposition of external regulation and control upon persons, by threat or use of force and power.”²¹ We distinguish two types of coercion. First there is that of physical force used directly against an individual to cause a desired behavior or admission. Second we have dispositional coercion, where one man threatens another with a sanction if the request has not been granted.²²

Jacques Sémelin argues that because there is almost always a commanding leader whom the men have to obey, perpetrators often argue that they found themselves in a state of compulsion: to kill or be killed.²³ In the case of the Rwandan genocide, not participating in the slaughter of Tutsis and moderate Hutus was indeed very risky and often led to grave consequences.²⁴

Scott Straus conducted a study demonstrating that the main reason for Hutu participation in the genocide by coercion, with 64.1% of respondents choosing that reason. The coercion was the result of direct, face-to-face mobilization of individuals, leaders and groups that directly solicited these people’s participation at commercial centers, on roads, pathways or in their homes. According to the respondents, they were coerced by threat of property damage, financial penalty, physical harm or death.²⁵ Participation was obligatory, and came down to either being punished or committing violence.²⁶ This is why moderate Hutus were also targeted. Violence started with government officials who did not support the idea of persecution of the Tutsis.

The importance of coercion, however, varies greatly across cases. It has been shown in much of the literature on the Holocaust that perpetrators clearly had a choice to take part in the killings.²⁷ As stated by Goldhagen:

Any explanation, which relies upon the notion that the perpetrators operated under external compulsion, or even under an erroneous presumption on their part that they had no choice but to kill, can be dismissed immediately. [...] It can be said with certitude that never in the history of the Holocaust was a German, SS

²¹ Roland J. Pennock and John W. Chapman (eds), *Coercion* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1972), p.1

²² *Ibid.*, p.17

²³ Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, p.258

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 259

²⁵ Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide : Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 2006), p.136

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.122.

²⁷ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d’Europe* ([Traduit de l’anglais, *The Destruction of the European Jews.*] Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2006).

man or otherwise, killed, sent to a concentration camp, jailed, or punished in any serious way for refusing to kill Jews.²⁸

Christopher Browning has brought up the same point.²⁹ The perpetrators used the argument of coercion extensively during their respective trials. This can be seen in the closing statement for Erich Naumann, Commanding Officer of Einstazgruppe B, at Nuremberg: “it is unjust to punish a person who acted in compliance with an order. For, if he had refused to comply with the order, the subordinate would probably have been shot.”³⁰ Despite what much of the perpetrators stated during their respective trials, they did have a choice not to act, they were not subject to coercion. For instance, The German SS men I have chosen to look at have been recruited free of coercion; consequently, I do not consider this argument pertinent for my research.

Authority

Obedience

The main difference between authority and coercion is that coercion specifically deals with a threat attributed to an individual if he fails to act; while authority refers to the obedience to orders based on the significance or hierarchy of the person who is giving out the orders.

Stanley Milgram illustrates the impact of an authoritative figure on an individual’s judgment. He conducted an experiment for which he invited a group of students to participate. This involving an authoritative figure (a man posing as a scientist in a white coat) giving out orders to a “teacher” who in turn would question a fellow student, the “learner”, a list of questions and for every wrong answer he would receive what the “teacher” believes were electric shocks. The “scientists” would tell the “teachers” to increase the voltage, which most did, despite being under the impression that their shocks were truly harming the recipients.³¹ Milgram concludes that people respond to authority in an unexpected way. In addition, when the “scientist” was not wearing a white coat, people would not respond as well as when he did. This further illustrates the importance associated with the status given to the scientist.³²

In order to better understand perpetrators’ motivations, Sémelin emphasizes the importance of assessing the role of command hierarchy in the triggering of killings. He maintains that depending on the nature of the groups, hierarchy is more or less rigid. Furthermore, in instances of mass murder, there is almost always a leader whom the perpetrators obey. Often, the perpetrators would argue for less responsibility, mere cogs in the wheel directed by a higher placed individual or group of people. Consequently, the most common defense argument in respective courts, including Nuremberg, was: “I was

²⁸ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.379

²⁹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p.170

³⁰ Nuremberg Military Tribunals [NMT], *Case 9: U.S. vs. Otto Ohlendorf et al. (“Einsatzgruppen Case”)*, p.332

³¹ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974)

³² Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.260

only obeying orders.”³³ Many considered orders from Hitler as sacred and impossible to disobey for moral reasons.

Goldhagen further makes a bold argument: that the German people—in this case German officers—were very obedient, especially towards Hitler and his ideology, even going so far as to disobeying an order from Himmler to stop killing Jews near the end of the war, as they still wanted to do what they felt had to be done to protect their Motherland. Obedience on behalf of the men was inherently present when it came to following orders issued by the Nazi Party with regards to the prosecution, in many different forms, of the Jews.³⁴

The appeal to authority was invoked by Nazi officials put on trial after the war and conveniently deprived them of agency, an argument that the court rejected. Nevertheless, I do believe that the argument of authority has importance in better understanding the onset of mass violence, because a majority of perpetrators act in accordance with a certain leader and his ideology. There is always a figure of authority involved in instances of mass violence. However, I also believe it played a tertiary role for the men of the Einsatzgruppen and of the camps, because of the fact that they all had a choice not to participate. For the purpose of my research, I choose not to focus on this argument.

Bureaucratic Logic

Bureaucratic logic can also be incorporated in the realm of authority, as it represents individuals who respond to orders from above but do not consider themselves responsible for their actions, for they are not directly involved with the act of mass killing. Raul Hilberg argues for the importance of bureaucratic discipline in his pivotal publication for Holocaust studies: *The Destruction of European Jewry*. He emphasizes the importance of the role of German bureaucrats in the murder of five million Jews. They were the ones in charge of this immense operation: from signing decrees, to the formation of the trains. They were fully aware of all the details and, as argued by Hilberg, proved their pioneering talent in the absence of directives and a fundamental understanding of the task at hand.³⁵

Hannah Arendt, in her book *Eichmann In Jerusalem*,³⁶ puts forward the argument that Eichmann was the perfect example of an ordinary man within the modern system of bureaucracy. She argues that the obedience to orders by these “killers behind desks”, is not pressured by society or ideology, but rather is a product of institutionalized routines and careers brought upon by dictatorships. She explains how the nature of every bureaucracy is to make functionaries and cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, thus dehumanizing them.³⁷ She concludes that Eichmann acted in accordance with

³³ Ibid., p.258

³⁴ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, pp. 382-383

³⁵ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1826.

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1965)

³⁷ Ibid., p.289

the rule, examined his orders and did not fall back on his conscience.³⁸ Arendt calls this mechanism of administrative routine: the “banality of evil”³⁹.

In Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he explains the Holocaust as a conglomeration of social factors, that separate the means to the ends and becomes rational in bureaucratic terms. He argues that the perpetrators of the Holocaust participated in mass killings because they had all become bureaucrats, no longer in touch with their acts, morals or choices and were career driven, trapped inside the bureaucracies of modernity.⁴⁰ For Bauman, the Holocaust becomes the perfect example of modernity in its most perverse way, as an exceptional and significant test, made possible by all of the hidden possibilities of modern society.⁴¹

In my research, my assumption is that ideology and individual choice were important factors. As for bureaucratic discipline, it is less relevant since I wish to look at the men who participated directly in the killings, who witnessed the results of their tasks daily and were directly faced with the reality of their actions. My case studies deal with German men on the field rather than those giving out orders within an office.

Conformity

Christopher Browning is the main advocate of the theory of conformity. In his celebrated book *Ordinary Men*, he presents the case of Józefów, a city in German occupied Poland, where German policemen were ordered to eliminate all the Jews in the summer 1942 by mass shooting. These Jews included men, women and children. It is important to underline the fact that these policemen were not part of a military unit and most were not part of the Nazi Party. In that sense they were “ordinary” Germans. Prior to the killings, the men were given a choice as to whether they wanted to participate in the killings. Only few chose to sit back, leading Browning to ask a crucial question: why did so few say no?⁴²

Browning bases his observations on interviews with the 101st Police Battalion conducted by the Office of the State Prosecutor from 1962 to 1972 for the subsequent trial proceedings.⁴³ He presents various arguments in an attempt to answer this question, such as: a lack of time for reflection, a surprise effect, the need not to break bonds with their comrades, the fear of being seen as a coward, and the rationalization that not taking part would not change the fate of the Jews. He argues that these men were identifying with their uniforms, as policemen, and their comrades. There was a need not to separate oneself from the rest of the group, not come off as a coward, especially considering that the men did not know each other prior to the draft. Therefore, stepping out would mean that one would leave his fellow policemen and ultimately show weakness. Once the men built strong ties, the other side of conformity could be seen with a belief in a “band of

³⁸ Ibid., p.293

³⁹ Ibid., p.252.

⁴⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernité et Holocaust* (translated from English by Enzo Traverso; Paris, France: éditions La Fabrique, 2002)

⁴¹ Ibid., p.40

⁴² Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men* p.71

⁴³ Ibid., p. xvii

brothers' ideal, not desert your comrades or be disloyal to them. Consequently, we can conclude that conformity played a significant role in the decision of these men to participate in the massacre.⁴⁴

Browning refutes other possible explanations, such as the assumption that they were obliged to follow orders and were not given a choice by illustrating cases where the men were indeed given a choice to either participate or sit out. He begins with the argument of ideology, as he does not believe, through his interviews with the men, that they strongly believed in Nazi ideas. In addition, Browning refutes Goldhagen's argument of cultural predisposition.⁴⁵

In today's literature on mass violence, there is a great debate between these two authors: Browning versus Goldhagen. Both studied the same Police Battalion, and both presented contradictory explanations as to why these men participated in the mass killings. I will explain Goldhagen's argument in the following section.

Philip Zimbardo's experiment provides a good exemplification of the power of conformity. In 1971, at Stanford University, Zimbardo, a psychology professor, proceeded with an experiment using a group of volunteer students who were separated randomly into guards and prisoners. All volunteers were cleared of any social deviance prior to the experiment. The guards were asked to keep order within the pseudo-prison. At first, the prisoners were not taking the guards seriously. When one of the guards decided to use humiliation tactics on the prisoners, the rest of the guardsmen got involved and their behaviors got increasingly violent. Conformity can be seen on behalf of the guards, who, based on their psychological evaluations, were not violent individuals or prone to sadistic behavior. However, when one individual began using brutal tactics, the others joined in, and together, they managed to subordinate, humiliate, and mentally torture the prisoners.⁴⁶

I do not think it is sufficient to use conformity and the other minor factors such as the lack of time for reflection or the surprise effect, as the motivators for the murder of thousands of innocent Jews. Browning argues that the men did not have much ideological training and most did not believe in Nazi ideology.⁴⁷ Like Goldhagen, I do not agree with this statement. In my research, I will demonstrate, through my case studies, that German SS men, who participated in mass killings, did indeed believe in the Nazi ideology. Nevertheless, I believe conformism is an important contributing factor in the process of mass killing. I wished to take Browning's study a step further, by incorporating the aspect of dehumanization as another driving factor to physically take part in the massacre. Unfortunately, there is not enough available information to prove conformity within the men of the Einsatzgruppen and the SS men working in the death camps.

Cultural Predisposition

Daniel J. Goldhagen has written a very controversial yet crucial book, presenting the argument that German participation in the Holocaust derived from the fact that German

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp.71-73

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*, (London: Rider, 2007).

⁴⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p.75

culture developed “eliminationist anti-Semitism” in the late nineteenth century, as German society experiencing a painful transition to modernity.⁴⁸ Goldhagen defines “eliminationist anti-Semitism” as: “the belief that Jewish influence, by nature destructive, must be eliminated irrevocably from society.”⁴⁹ This brand of anti-Semitism, he further argues, intensified and found an outlet during World War II. In his book, he attempts to illustrate what he calls the “cognitive models” that informed German thinking about the world and politics, and more specifically about Jews. When these beliefs appear to be uncontested, individuals come to accept them as self-evident.⁵⁰ For Goldhagen, the fact that there is no proof that shows that the beliefs of anti-Semitism and racial superiority have changed or disappeared in the early twentieth century, then we must believe that they continued to exist.⁵¹

Goldhagen dates anti-Semitism back to the middle Ages through the power of the Church. In Germany per se, in the nineteenth century, writers were emerging with influential literature concerning the Jews, giving them the new denomination of “asocials”. Then, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Jews became a distinct race. They were being linked to prostitution, stealing and were charged with “ritual murders”. Furthermore, he states that the Germans believed the Jews failed to assimilate into German society over the decades; therefore, the only solution was to “eliminate them” from that society.⁵² Considering the lack of protest on behalf of the Germans towards the harm inflicted on the Jews during the Nazi regime, as well as their will to associate themselves with the Nazi party and with the societal elimination of the Jews, for Goldhagen this all helps to further illustrate the extent of this cultural anti-Semitism.⁵³ Like Browning, he used the 101st Reserve Police Battalion, whose men were ordered to kill all Jews in the town of Józefów, as a case study. Goldhagen refutes this argument thoroughly. He argues that most of these men were older, therefore not very impressionable or malleable; furthermore, these men were brutal, motivated and even those who asked not to participate in the killings did so only after they proceeded with the killings, and often got back to work after a short break. For Goldhagen, it was not about peer-pressure, but rather a will to kill in often unnecessarily brutal ways. Goldhagen’s argument has its limitations. The main issue with it is the generalization of anti-Semitism,⁵⁴ which he applies to the entirety of the German population, and links this concept to German culture.

⁴⁸ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.80

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.48

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.46

⁵¹ Ibid. p.47

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ For lack of a better term, I will use anti-Semitism as a describing concept; nevertheless, I consider it over-generalized. I agree with Raz Segal, in his explanation of how the nature of relations and tensions between groups that co-exist over an extended period of time changes because of shifts in the political, social, psychological and military contexts. Like Segal, I agree that it has become a blunt concept in need of much clarification and distinction that emerge in specific contexts. (Raz Segal, “Between “ethnic cleansing” and “final solution”: The Persecution and Destruction of Subcarpathian Rus’ Jews during World War II, *Danyliw Seminar*, 2010 pp.1 and 3).

Another problematic aspect is his take on post-1945 Germany. According to Browning, Goldhagen argues that the eliminationalist German anti-Semitism he has been arguing has been around for centuries has mostly disappeared after the war, thanks to changes in public conversation, reeducation, a legal ban on public anti-Semitism and a lack of institutional reinforcement. All of a sudden, Germans are just like us.⁵⁵ As argued by Browning, if Germany's political and social culture can be changed by education and banning of certain expressions, then it seems that they could have been transformed in the decades preceding 1945, especially during Nazi rule.⁵⁶ Goldhagen should be clearer with the state of German culture post-1945 in order for his argument not to be questioned for its validity. Lastly, Browning argues that Goldhagen's evidence with regards to the Police Battalion was extremely selective in order to meet his theoretical structure. For instance, he presents the example of an interview with Sergeant Bekeimer, a particularly brutal man. Goldhagen uses parts of his testimony to show that these men enjoyed killing; yet, according to Browning, he used the example of one man, who was disliked for his brutality and generalized the case to all the men.⁵⁷

I believe that Goldhagen provides us with a good basis for understanding the motivations for the people of Germany to support, fully or within limits, Nazi ideology and ultimately the manners in which policies were implemented.⁵⁸ How people can be collectively prepared to engage in mass violence is key to my research. I will, however, only use his argument as of the post-World War I era, as I believe it is the most relevant period for this upbringing of the future perpetrators of World War II. I do not wish to refer to German anti-Semitism as a cultural phenomenon but rather as a social one, meaning that it does not go back to one's historical roots and practices but rather that motivations to violence are not sought in cultural codes, but rather in the social circumstances of a specific time and place.

⁵⁵ Goldhagen clearly states at the beginning of his book that Germans are nothing like us prior to 1945 (Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p.27) ; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p.193

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.215

⁵⁸ I do not want to presume that all Germans supported the extermination policies, especially considering that those not involved in the killings were mostly unaware of what was taking place in Poland and in the Soviet Front. Nevertheless, with a mix of propaganda, training, and some will power, this is the society from which the perpetrators came from.

Chapter 3:

Main Argument: Ideology followed by Dehumanization and Brutalization Factors

Now that I have presented the main schools of thought on the subject matter, I will now present my main argument, centered around ideology, which I believe explains best the motivations behind German perpetrators in World War II. I will begin by presenting my definition of ideology, followed by an overview of the historical background explaining this phenomenon and finally a better understanding of how I plan on using and applying dehumanization and brutalization to my case studies.

Ideology

In order to explain the motivations of the perpetrators, I argue that the most important instigator was ideology. I define ideology as a rigid way of making sense of history and politics, through the logic of ideas, fostered and nurtured in a societal environment and implemented by political movements and organizations. For the purpose of my study, I argue that German perpetrators in World War II acted so because they were convinced that their actions were justified. They believed that the Jews were a threat to the Reich, most were strong supporters of German nationalism and consequently of Hitler's policies. I argue that after World War I, a general feeling of resentment fueled by the Versailles treaty was very palpable in German society. Consequently, German society was filled with racism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, and fear against outside enemies—more specifically, communism. I believe that the state of society molded the minds of Germans and, therefore, the perpetrators.

I will use Goldhagen's argument, mostly the factual evidence he uses to demonstrate his point; however, for my argument, I will not be talking about anti-Semitism as a phenomenon inherent to one's culture, but rather as a social occurrence that can be attributed to certain events and various triggering factors. I do not deny the fact that German society, prior to World War I was exposed to anti-Semitic and nationalist ideas. Nevertheless, I argue that this ideology erupted after the loss and repercussions of World War I within German society. Furthermore, with the arrival of a rallying force, Hitler, the discrimination worsened. He knew how to escalate nationalism and anti-Semitism in Germany through speeches, propaganda and his promise of a better life for non-Jewish Germans, which he provided.⁵⁹

As stated by Mosse, the aftermath of World War I revitalized racism in all its forms, whether National Socialist, conservative or just nationalist. It is important to underline that prior to World War I, there were anti-Semitic and racist undertones in European societies. Prominent writers and scholars who were focusing on anti-Semitism were found to be very influential and helped create myths around Jews.⁶⁰ The "Dreyfus

⁵⁹ Harald Welzer, "On Killing and Morality: How Ordinary People Become Mass Murderers" in Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (eds.), *Ordinary People As Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.165-183.

⁶⁰ George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, p.168.

Affair” that took place in France in the 1890s, namely the conviction based on false information accusing a Jewish captain of the French army of treason, sentencing him to a penal colony, is a great example of the mounting anti-Semitism in Europe. This case is important because it exemplifies the anti-Semitic practices that were seen throughout Germany in this period. As expressed by Saul Friedländer, there was an ideological radicalization reinforced by a growing nationalism and anti-Marxism, which marked the last decades of the nineteenth century and reached their climax after the First World War, the Russian and Bolshevik Revolutions.⁶¹ Authors such as Otto Weininger would describe the Jew in their writings, as someone who lacked beliefs, had no soul, no concepts of a higher order and so, an anarchist who denied the polity. Furthermore, Weininger saw the Jew as being a communist, and according to him, communism meant the absence of spirituality.⁶² There was also the case of Richard Wagner, who through his operas, wanted to bring eternal German truths back to his people. He considered them to be festivals intended to introduce Germans to the Aryan dream.⁶³

In addition, the onset of colonialism and its link to the supremacy of the white man helped solidify these feelings.⁶⁴ Colonialism for the Germans was also important when talking about the East. In the nineteenth century, the political discourse was centered on a unified and greater Germany. As Poland was partitioned, there was an important Polish population in Prussia. There were also clusters of Germans spread out between Russia, Prussia and Austria; consequently, in the late nineteenth century German nationalist movements were increasingly emerging. Following the Franco-Prussian war in 1872, the German states were unified in a new German Reich, but for many nationalists, this was only a small feat, as it did not include the German speaking lands of the Habsburg empire.⁶⁵ Within the new Germany there was also growing nationalism because of the threat caused by non-Germans who had settled in these territories.

According to Mazower, Nazism borrowed from nationalist movements from the Prussians regarding the treatment of Poles. They instituted expulsion policies and segregation tactics against Slavs.⁶⁶ As Hitler came to power, he saw the opportunities brought on by imperialism with the view of the East as a “Garden of Eden”. Hitler wanted the Germans to become an imperial power. The way this was to be done was clear: the “Germans would deport, kill, assimilate, or enslave the native populations, and bring order and prosperity to a humbled frontier.”⁶⁷ Germany needed to expand and needed “room to breathe”, this was to be done in the east, a territory they believed they won over during the First World War. This will be further explained below. Subsequently, German farmers would establish farming settlements, producing food for

⁶¹ Saul Friedländer, *L'Allemagne Nazie et les Juifs*, ([Originally published as: *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939*], Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil, 1997), p.14

⁶² George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, p.109.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp.103-104

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.172

⁶⁵ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire : How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), p.19

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.19-22.

⁶⁷ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands* 160

the rest of the Reich.⁶⁸ This goes to show that the Nazis' plans were not only focused on anti-Semitism but also on the conquest of Eastern Europe and of its "inferior" people.

Within Germany, Jews were the most important targets. Many myths were created about the Jews, fundamental for much of the anti-Semitism. They became more influential in the last decades of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth. Traditional legends were revived and used as instruments of political mobilization. In one instance, Jews were being accused of ritual murders, allegedly consisting of murdering Christian children and drinking their blood during a feast of Passover.⁶⁹ In addition, we find the myth of the "wandering Jew", which claimed that Ahasverus, a Jew that led Christ to his crucifixion, could neither live or die, and represented terror and desolation. This ancient myth became a symbol of the cursed fate of the Jewish people.⁷⁰ This illustrates the levels of anti-Semitism present prior to World War I but I argue that the repercussions of the loss of the war transformed theory into reality.

During the First World War, anti-Semitic ideas were growing stronger. Along with the elements mentioned above already present, many Jews did not participate in the war or were unable to fulfill their duties as soldiers to their Motherland. Rumors swirled that Jewish participation in the First World War was extremely low, and that many were being freed from armed service or were trying to evade combat. They were denounced as incompetent and cowardly.⁷¹ This led to a questioning of their allegiance to Germany.⁷² Furthermore, there was an important link created between the Jews and the Bolsheviks. This link resurged in German political life, during elections in 1912. The main political problem was considered to be the mounting force of the left. Moreover, Jews were the target of persecution by the radicalist right as well as the Nationalist-Liberals. Thus, they joined or supported the left, communist party.⁷³

Jews were accused of being revolutionaries and in 1921, a monograph was published entitled *Comrade Levi*, portraying a communist Jew who was on the best of terms with his rich banker father, and together, they wanted world power.⁷⁴ This only reinforced the link. Jews were accused of playing an important role in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, because it promised true equality to Jews and an end to discrimination. Nevertheless, even though the participation of Jews was only a small fraction within their respective nations, it was enough to fuel old stereotypes. Any Jew seen trying to overthrow the old order was seen as a Bolshevik and as anti-national.⁷⁵ Hitler firmly believed that Jews were the most powerful in the Soviet Union, and that Bolshevism was "a monstrous product of the Jews."⁷⁶ Further myths were created accusing Jews of being revolutionaries and exploiters.⁷⁷ This created even more animosity towards the Jews, keeping in mind that communism was a big threat for the

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.160

⁶⁹ George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, p.113

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp.114-115

⁷¹ Saul Friedländer, *L'Allemagne Nazie et les Juifs*, p. 84

⁷² Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* p.81

⁷³ Saul Friedländer, *L'Allemagne Nazie et les Juifs*, p.85

⁷⁴ George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, p.179

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.177

⁷⁶ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p.144

⁷⁷ George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*, p.178

Germans because of the strong belief in a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy coming from Russia that was ready to take over the rest of Europe.⁷⁸ Persecution directed at the Jews in Germany began in 1933 with the arrest of ten thousand members or sympathizers of the left considered as the “communist threat”, who were then sent to labour camps.⁷⁹ As explained by Friedländer, even though the “threat” was managed, the paranoia kept rising.

Propaganda further fueled hatred against the Jews, for instance, in articles published in September 1939, we find quotes such as: “The Jewish people ought to be exterminated root and branch. Then the plague of pests would have disappeared in Poland also at one stroke” and also “the Jew is a devil in human form.”⁸⁰ This mindset is also very apparent in Hitler’s statements: “where the Jews were left to themselves, as for instance in Poland, the most terrible misery and decay prevailed. They are just pure parasites.”⁸¹

Life in the inter-war years in Germany was not only filled with the hardships led on by the Versailles Treaty but also with nationalism, anti-Semitism and a need for the Germans to reaffirm their country in the European space. An important feeling at the time was that of Germany versus the rest of the world. The acceptance by the Weimar Republic of the Versailles Treaty plunged Germany in its darkest days. First, Germans did not want the government to accept the treaty. Second, the mark’s value was dwindling daily: in 1921, it slid to seventy-five for one dollar and by early 1923 it got to 18,000. Third, when the Germans had asked to be granted a moratorium on the payments, in 1923, the Allies declined and soon after, for lack of payments, France occupied the Ruhr—the industrial heart of Germany. By November, the mark had fallen to four billion for a dollar. Jews were doing better financially thanks to their involvements in businesses, law firms and other higher ranking jobs. The economic paralysis united the German people by fueling nationalism, which excluded the Jews.⁸² Anti-Semitism and nationalism were increasingly present in society and the structures within it, such as schools, universities, churches, the military and professional associations, with many presenting themselves as proudly anti-Semitic.⁸³ Germans blamed the democratic Weimar Republic for the failure of the economic structure of German society.⁸⁴ “They knew that as individuals they were bankrupt. And they knew hunger when it gnawed at them, as it did daily. In their misery and hopelessness they made the Republic the scapegoat for all that had happened. Such times were heaven-sent for Adolf Hitler.”⁸⁵

The German’s Workers’ Party was founded in Munich in January 1919. It aimed for the destruction of the Weimar Republic, the revision of Versailles, revanchism—namely a policy centered around revenge—anti-bolshevism, militarism and anti-

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.179

⁷⁹ Saul Friedländer, *L’Allemagne Nazie et les Juifs*, pp.28-29

⁸⁰ Whitney R. Harris, *Tyranny on Trial: The evidence at Nuremberg* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954), p.285

⁸¹ Ibid., p.282

⁸² William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1959), p.61

⁸³ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.82

⁸⁴ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p.61

⁸⁵ Ibid.,p.62

Semitism.⁸⁶ Racism became the official government policy on January 30 1933 when Hitler took over the chancellorship of the Reich. Propaganda was mounting, as it would further emphasize Jewish myths and create new ones. The Nazis instituted anti-Semitic policies such as the twenty-five-point Party program, which included attacks on the Jews, and call for their exclusion from German society. One of its declarations stated that: “Only members of the nation may be citizens of the State. Only those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the nation. Accordingly no Jew may be a member of the nation.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, the majority of German people were very much aware of what the government was doing to Jews and most assented to the measures and often lent their support to them.⁸⁸ The Nuremberg Laws instituted by the Nazis September 15 1935 further alienated the Jews from German society. Some examples of these laws are: the deprivation for Jews of German citizenship and the forbiddance of marriage between Jews and “Aryans”. In the following years, thirteen more decrees supplementing these Las would outlaw the Jews from society completely.⁸⁹ Actions against Jews became increasingly violent, ultimately culminating in *Kristallnacht*. *Kristallnacht* was orchestrated by Joseph Gobbels, the Minister of Propaganda, on the night of November 9-10 1938. Germans from all over Germany participated in the shattering of glass of Jewish storefronts, the burning of synagogues and to the beating of Jews in the streets.⁹⁰ According to Goldhagen, this was the time when the Germans could have stood up for the Jews but they did not.⁹¹ Additionally, there was a clear absence of protest on behalf of non-Jews for the policies that were becoming increasingly brutal towards the Jews. This was not because of “brainwashing” or the inability for Germans to express their dissatisfaction⁹², but rather because there was a certain amount of support on behalf of ethnic Germans. Protests did take place but for other reasons, such as against the Nazi party’s targeting of Poles, and against the Euthanasia program⁹³ by those who were aware of its purpose.⁹⁴

I argue that as the war broke out, these feelings of resentment towards Jews and other “inferior” groups along with this strong sense of German strength and nationalism only got stronger. I believe that when this theory is applied to my case studies, one will be able to better understand their motivations for participating in mass murder. Nevertheless, in order to propel these men into full-fledged massacres, it is important to include contributing factors that better explain this occurrence. That is why I argue for the importance of the dehumanization of the victim by the perpetrator as well as the brutalization of the perpetrator caused by the environment of war and their respective tasks.

⁸⁶ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.85

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.90

⁸⁹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p.233

⁹⁰ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, pp.99-100.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.116

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Also known as T4, the program was aimed to rid the German people of anyone (ethnic German or not) considered mentally or physically deficient.

⁹⁴ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.117

Dehumanization

In order for these men to be fully capable of participating in mass killings of innocent individuals, including women and children, they had to view their victims as being stripped of their human status.⁹⁵ As explained by Kelman and Hamilton, massacres are possible to the extent that their victims are deprived of two essential qualities, in the eyes of the perpetrator: identity and community. Therefore, when an entire group of individuals is defined in terms of a category to which they no longer belong to, the moral restraints against their systematic murder can more easily be overcome.⁹⁶

Looking at Nazi Germany, this process of dehumanization can be credited to propaganda, training and certainly ideology. The Jews they were ordered to kill were portrayed by the higher authorities, and ultimately by the perpetrators themselves, as enemies of the Reich. They were seen as communist partisans and evildoers who, if not killed right away, will destroy the future of Germany. The rationale for killing children, as stated by Himmler, was to prevent these children from avenging their families and their descendants: “The following question was asked to me: “What do we do with the women and children?” I had made up my mind and found an obvious solution. [...] I could not let their descendants grow up and seek vengeance on our children and our descendants. The decision had to be made to eliminate this nation from the Earth.”⁹⁷ As stated above in the ideological makings of German society, the Jews were already seen as different, separate from society and ultimately as something evil.⁹⁸ When looking at the other groups that were targeted, such as Gypsies, they were also viewed as sub-human and an obstacle to the future *Aryanization* of the Reich. This was motivated by their will to eradicate inferior races⁹⁹ and with this dehumanization, the principles of morality did not apply anymore. Thus, I argue for the dehumanization of the victim as a second driving force for the mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, and other targeted groups.

Brutalization

In addition to ideological motivations and the dehumanization of the victim as motivating factors for the perpetrators, I also argue for the onset of brutalization on behalf of the perpetrator towards his victims. I distinguish three main characteristics of this phenomenon. First, as argued by Sémelin and Ingrao, we find the constancy and routine of action.¹⁰⁰ Because the perpetrators perform the same action over and over, such as shooting in the back of the head daily or unloading men and women from incoming

⁹⁵ Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, “Sanctioned Massacres” (in Neil J. Kressel (ed.), *Political Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, New York, NY: Paragon House, 1993), p.238.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p. 279

⁹⁸ George L. Mosse. *Toward the Final Solution*; Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.

⁹⁹ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*; William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.246.

trains, they become accustomed to their tasks and in turn, the likelihood of moral resistance becomes reduced. This also leads to a professionalization of their actions into a skill.¹⁰¹ According to Kelman and Hamilton, routinization fulfills two functions: the reduction of a necessity to make decisions, thus minimizing the risks of moral questions arising; and the avoidance of implication in the action, as the perpetrator focuses on the details of his job actions, rather than its meaning. The process of routine creates a situation where the actions become normal, correct and legitimate. In turn, this is most effective with the help of distance.¹⁰² A second characteristic consequent to repetition is the dissociation this routine creates. The killer becomes highly desensitized to his victims and to the violent acts he is committing. As Hilberg explains it, it creates distance and dissociation. Thirdly, as explained by Browning, brutalization in the perpetrator can manifest itself through unnecessary violence, which has taken place in both the Soviet campaign and in the death camps, and through meticulously calculated actions.¹⁰³ I will use the concept of brutalization applied to the perpetrators as the third driving force for murder.

In summary, I argue that German perpetrators of mass violence during World War II have grown up in an atmosphere of nationalism, anti-Semitism, racism, and many hardships. Many future SS men were brought up in this atmosphere through their education, their families and friends as well as their professions. This, I argue, created a strong, ever-growing basis for these perpetrators' ideas, convictions and motivations. This basis was exploited to its fullest by the Nazi regime and its policies of extermination.

I precise the term "motivation" with regards to the function of ideology for the perpetrators, but I argue that motivation is not enough to put theory into practice. I believe that in order to push someone to take part in such brutal actions, and by that I refer to beating, starving, shooting or gassing, there need be other factors. This is where conformity and dehumanization come in. I believe that an ordinary individual needs to be in direct contact with a group of men who are doing the same task as he is, in order to physically and mentally be able to participate. In addition, with regards to dehumanization, it is equally as important for the victim to be portrayed as sub-human and as inferior to the perpetrator.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp.246-247.

¹⁰² Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, "Sanctioned Massacres", p.237

¹⁰³ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*.

Chapter 4: Case Studies

The SS Einsatzgruppen

In order to illustrate how the aforementioned theories apply to German perpetrators during World War II, the first case study I will be presenting concerns the SS Einsatzgruppen. The following section will examine these mobile killing units during their murderous campaigns in the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1943. I chose to look at this group of men, because the tasks asked of them were unimaginably brutal, they had direct contact with the hundreds of thousands of victims they killed and they were “ordinary” men to the extent where, in a different time and place, they would have been unlikely to engage in mass killing.

Purpose of the Einsatzgruppen

The creation of units composed of SD (Security Service) officers; “militant soldiers” of the SS (large paramilitary organization) and Gestapo policemen (Secret State Police) as initiated during the Putsch of Röhm in 1934.¹⁰⁴ Their tasks consisted of arresting and executing Nazi or SS opponents.¹⁰⁵ “Intervention commandos” (*Einsatzkommandos*) were also working in the Sudetenland, Austria and Czechoslovakia where their missions consisted of securing the area, liquidating any organization hostile to the Reich, safeguard documents and proceed with “necessary” arrests. Initially, these “intervention groups” were preventative and defensive.¹⁰⁶ In the preparation of the attack on Poland, Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the SD, was asked by Himmler, head of the SS and the German Police, to establish a group of men with high professional standing: the SS Einsatzgruppen. In July 1939, Heydrich reached an agreement calling upon the creation of these special units. The bulk of the commanders came from Heydrich’s SD, which consisted mostly of intellectuals; while the manpower came largely from the Security Police and the Order Police as well as from the SS. Once the war began in September, the units were sent to Poland to perpetrate their first acts of mass killing.¹⁰⁷

In May 1941, Himmler established the purpose of this special task force in the coming invasion of the Soviet Union (launched on June 22). The Einsatzgruppen were to accompany the German Army (the Wehrmacht) and destroy all “threatening” elements, primarily Communist officials (the so-called “Commissar” order) and resisters (partisans)

¹⁰⁴ This refers to the so-called “Night of Long Knives” when the leadership of the politically threatening Nazi Party militia was executed, paving the way for the rise of the SS as the security arm of the Nazi party-state.

¹⁰⁵ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire: les intellectuels dans la machine de guerre SS* (Paris, France: Fayard, 2010), p.202.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.206

¹⁰⁷ Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p.67; Timothy Snyder, (*Bloodlands*, p.127) writes that these Einsatzgruppen “probably killed about fifty thousand Polish citizens in action that had nothing to do with combat.”

and “saboteurs,” which in practice meant Jews, since the Nazis considered the Soviet Union to be a “Jewish state.” Initially, Jewish males of combat age were targeted. As the campaign radicalized in Summer and Fall 1941, entire Jewish communities were murdered.

There were four Einsatzgruppen, each with subordinate units called Einsatzkommandos or Sonderkommandos, holding the equivalent of five hundred to eight hundred men [for a clearer image, see appendix 2].¹⁰⁸ These commando units were much smaller and more mobile, as they were used for intervention purposes along with the Wehrmacht on the front lines. In theory, the missions of the Sonderkommandos were to enter the occupied territories at the same time as the army and then proceed to investigate public buildings, archives and various centers. They would often set up anti-Jewish operations and their execution. Meanwhile, the Einsatzkommandos, better equipped with weapons, would proceed to arrests and verifications behind the front lines.¹⁰⁹ Their tasks consisted of verifying all of the people they were interning or placing in ghettos; afterwards, they would take charge liquidating the ghettos by execution. Nevertheless, in practice, the roles each of these commandos often overlapped and were not as clear-cut. For instance, in Einsatzgruppe C, no differentiation was made between the Sonderkommandos and the Einsatzkommados, as all were in charge of securing a section of newly acquired territory.¹¹⁰

Men of the SS Einsatzgruppen

Considering the purpose of my research is to investigate why these men participated in mass murder, it is important to look at who took part in the Einsatzgruppen based on available information. They were enlisted men from the SS, the Waffen-SS, (paramilitary unit consisting of *Volksdeutsche*) the regular police, as well as locally recruited police and auxiliaries made up of local volunteers and native fascist militia—among them we find Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians.¹¹¹

Most of Einsatzgruppen and commando leaders were German intellectuals with very respectable degrees and careers. When looking at the defendants of case nine of the Nuremberg Military Tribunal, out of the twenty-four defendants, six were SS Generals; five were SS Colonels; six were Lieutenant Colonels; four were Majors and three were Junior Officers. Among them, eight were lawyers, one was a University professor and others had academic careers. Some of these men’s feats are worth mentioning. Paul Blobel, an architect, was the head of Sonderkommando 4a; he was in charge of the successful elimination of 33,771 Jews of Kiev in the ravine of Babi Yar, in two days. Franz A. Six, a former professor of Political Science, was the Commander of Vorkommando Moscow—a commando unit of Einsatzgruppe B. Walter Blume, also a lawyer, was Commander of Sonderkommando 7. Heinz Jost, a specialist in law and economics, commanded Einsatzgruppe A. Gustav Nosske, a student of economics,

¹⁰⁸ NMT, *Case 9*, p.15

¹⁰⁹ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.290

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.291

¹¹¹ Joseph Tenenbaum, “The Einsatzgruppen”, (*Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 17, Jan. 1955), p.47. It is important to talk about the work and impact of the auxiliaries but I chose not to include them in my study, as they are not Germans from the Reich.

banking and law, was commander of Einsatzkommando 12 between June and September 1941, during which time he reported the execution of 13,000 persons in less than three months. Edward Strauch, a Doctor of Law, commanded Sonderkommando 2 in Latvia and in cooperation with Franz Jeckeln, participated in the murder of 10,600 men, women and children in Riga on 30 November 1941. Later, from his commanding sector in today's Belarus, 33,970 executions of Jews were reported. Emil Heinrich Biberstein, a pastor in the Lutheran Church until 1938, was the head of Einsatzkommando 6, and supervised the murder of two to three thousand people. A final example was Otto Ohlendorf, a lawyer and specialist in economics, who commanded Einsatzgruppe D and had been responsible for the deaths of 91,678 people during his first nine months in command—an average of three hundred and forty murders per day.¹¹²

We may now look at the general reasons for these men to have joined the Nazi Party (officially known as the NSDAP— German National Socialist Party). Out of forty dates of entry, thirty were dated prior to the party taking over leadership. Therefore, it seemed to have stemmed more from a militant reasoning rather than an opportunist one. Furthermore, many of these men were important activists in the 1920s and 1930s, especially within their educational institutions. This was the case for Ohlendorf and Best who were part of many groups supporting German nationalist causes.¹¹³ These men supported the views of the Nazi Party, which can be seen in their final statements during their postwar trials. As Heinz Jost explained: “I decided in 1928 to enter the NSDAP because I believed that I found in this party the movement which alone would be able to prevent the decline of Germany, and would be in the position to offer resistance to the ever increasing pressure of Bolshevism within Germany and abroad.”¹¹⁴ This can also be seen in Erich Naumann's statement: “Ill conditions within the German people, patriotism, and conscientiousness were the reasons which, in 1929, caused me to join the NSDAP.”¹¹⁵ A final example is that of Waldemar Klingelhofer: “The realization of the ever increasing Bolshevik danger in the East made me join the NSDAP at a time when the political, social and economic conditions in Germany threatened to develop towards chaos, which was bound to open the doors of Germany to Bolshevism.”¹¹⁶

The Training Process

In May 1941, members of the Waffen-SS, the Gestapo, the KRIPO (Criminal Police) and the SD were asked to go to the training police school in Pretzsch or Düben, Saxony. There, the one hundred and twenty Einsatzgruppen and Einsatzkommando leaders went through military training exercises as well as an initiation to the various customs of the countries they were about to invade.¹¹⁷ Basic SS guidelines were also taught, such as total

¹¹² Ibid., pp.50-52; NMT, *Case 9*.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp.132-133

¹¹⁴ NMT, *Case 9*, p.390

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.392

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.406

¹¹⁷ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p.358; Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.213

devotion to Hitler, obedience, struggle and vigilance.¹¹⁸ There was also a level of ideological indoctrination, as illustrated here from an order from Hitler presented to the men: “Communist functionaries and activists, Jews, Gypsies, saboteurs and agents must basically be regarded as persons who, by their very existence, endanger the security of the troops and are therefore to be executed without further ado.”¹¹⁹ Also, with the help of anti-Semitic propaganda, the men were often presented with an image depicting the elite SS man, blond, in front of a swastika flag clenching his weapon looking vigilant and ready at the forefront of battle against “world Jewry”.¹²⁰ Furthermore, as Walter Blume explains in his affidavit, “it was stated that eastern Jewry was the intellectual reservoir of bolshevism and, therefore, in the Fuehrer’s opinion, must be exterminated.”¹²¹ Reinhard Heydrich presented this speech fairly often to the men. Nevertheless, based on the testimony of Claus Hueser, the men were only taught the basics regarding their tasks: they were told that they had to shoot people on the side of a trench, and that this had to be done with their pistols with a shot at the back of the head.¹²²

At Pretzsch and Düben, Heydrich had assembled three thousand men and with that formed the Einsatzgruppen. Einsatzgruppe A followed the Wehrmacht into the Baltic States towards Leningrad; Einsatzgruppe B operated in Belarus; Einsatzgruppen C operated in north and central Ukraine; and Einsatzgruppe D was responsible for the zone between Bessarabia and the Crimea, including southern Ukraine.¹²³ The process of annihilation began with the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941;¹²⁴ the following day, those three thousand men were sent out to commit mass murder [for a map of the undertakings of the Einsatzgruppen, see appendix 3].¹²⁵

The Undertaking of the Einsatzgruppen

As presented in Otto Ohlendorf’s affidavit concerning the organization of the Einsatzgruppen, they were responsible for the security within the operational area of the army units they were following. They had the primary task of clearing the area of Jews, Communist officials and agents; which was accomplished by killing all racially and politically undesirable elements considered dangerous to the securization of the area by Nazi officials.¹²⁶ In Estonia for instance, the process would begin with the arrest of all male Jews over the age of sixteen, as well as all female Jews between the ages of sixteen and sixty for labour. Then, the registration of all Jews according to age, sex and fitness for labour would take place. Finally, all male Jews over the age of sixteen, with the exception of physicians and appointed Jewish elders were to be shot.¹²⁷ As of August

¹¹⁸ Helmut Langerbein, *Hitler’s Death Squads: The Logic of Mass Murder*, (Texas, US: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), p.19.

¹¹⁹ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, pp. 358-359

¹²⁰ Helmut Langerbein, *Hitler’s Death Squads*, p.21

¹²¹ NMT, *Case 9*, p.140

¹²² Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.323

¹²³ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, p.358

¹²⁴ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d’Europe*, p.489

¹²⁵ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, p.359.

¹²⁶ NMT, *Case 9*, p.93

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.144

1941, there was a shift in policy, as Jewish women and children were also to be eliminated.¹²⁸ Another task performed by the group was to segregate and exterminate undesirable prisoners in prisoners of war camps in the East.¹²⁹ The aim, according to Heydrich, was to “protect the German people from Bolshevik agitators and to gain a firm grip on the occupied territory at the earliest possible moment.”¹³⁰

The Einsatzgruppen’s tasks are clearly stated in a letter from Heydrich to all Einsatzgruppen chiefs concerning ‘the Jewish question in the occupied territories’ dated from 21 September 1939. First, they had to concentrate all of the country Jews in the big towns, as territories were to be cleared of Jews. Another aim was for there to be very few ‘concentration towns’ (ghettos) yet if they were needed, they should be at railroad junctions or lie directly on a railway.¹³¹ Furthermore, their execution methods were very clearly defined. A killing site was chosen two to three miles outside the towns, away from the victims’ views. Prisoners or auxiliaries would dig mass graves. Jews would be gathered up and divided into groups to facilitate the work of the execution squads. They were then driven or brought to the killing site, where they had to undress and hand over their valuables, register and finally line up facing either the side or the front of the ditch. The victims were either killed by one shot to the neck or by machine-gun fire.¹³²

As was mentioned, the Einsatzgruppen were also active in the General Government but in smaller numbers.¹³³ They would kill approximately seventeen hundred persons a week with about two hundred and eighty men per commando; therefore, each member would, on average, kill one person a week during six weeks.¹³⁴ In the USSR, the Einsatzgruppen killed over five hundred and fifty thousand people, fifty thousand from June to August and five hundred thousand from September to December 1941. Thus, they killed fifty five times more than in the General Government.¹³⁵

The Fulfillment of These Tasks

Now that we have seen what the assignments were for the SS men, we can look at how their tasks were fulfilled in practice. Very often, the Einsatzgruppen were greatly helped by local militias. Three main methods were being used: pogroms; trench shootings; and *Aktions*.

Pogroms were violent mass demonstrations carried out by locals. As explained by Stachekler, commander of Einsatzgruppe A, “It had to appear to the outside that the indigenous population itself reacted naturally against the decades of oppression by the Jews and against the terror created by the Communists in recent history, and that the indigenous population carried out these first measures of its own accord.”¹³⁶ The Baltic

¹²⁸ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d’Europe*, p.515

¹²⁹ NMT, *Case 9*, p.118

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.127

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-122

¹³² Helmut Langerbein, *Hitler’s Death Squads*, p.37

¹³³ Other parts of inter-war Poland, such as the areas around Poznan and Danzig, were annexed to the German Reich.

¹³⁴ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.288

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.289

¹³⁶ Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide*, p.171-172

States were one of the areas where the Germans got most cooperation. As the Soviet Union occupied the territories in 1940, many residents considered the Soviets as the enemy, and others agreed with the Nazis that the Jews and communists were closely linked. This led to pogroms initiated by local Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian militias. In Kowno, Lithuania, the first pogrom was initiated by the local militia leader with the help of Stachekler on 25 June 1941, resulting in more than fifteen hundred Jews killed, several synagogues destroyed as well as some sixty Jewish homes. Over the next few nights, the total number of Jews killed was around twenty-three hundred.¹³⁷ Pogroms were carried out throughout the occupied territories: in Ukraine, Bielorussia and Poland; however, not all were as successful as in the Baltics.¹³⁸ As explained by Breitman, pogroms were effective for eliminating Jews from smaller communities but not in larger cities. A gradual approach was necessary, so the Nazi officials created ghettos for the Jews. This is when the second stage of elimination started taking place.¹³⁹

The trench shootings executed by the commandos as presented in their task description were done in stages. First, to facilitate the process, Jews were asked to gather under pretense of registration or accommodation in the ghettos. This was the most effective method to “catch Jews”.¹⁴⁰ Another common tactic used by the SS was that of fear. If someone was suspected of helping a “partisan”, they would first get arrested and their house burned down, then they would be shot. Considering they were often dealing with hunger stricken populations, the Germans would bribe them with food in order to get people to come forward with information concerning “partisan” helpers. Based on a report from Einsatzgruppe A dated 17 August 1941: “the tactics, to put terror against terror, succeeded marvelously. From fear of reprisals, the peasants came a distance of 20 kilometers and more to the headquarters [...] to bring news about partisans, news, which was accurate in most cases. [...] 48 helpers of partisans, including 6 women, were shot so far.”¹⁴¹ In Kiev, 80,000 persons were liquidated, but as stated in an operational report on 3 November 1941: “Although only a participation of approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Jews had been expected at first, more than 30,000 Jews arrived who, until the very moment of their execution, still believed in their resettlement thanks to an extremely clever organization.”¹⁴²

Finally, we have German *Aktions*, which were specific methods of ghetto deportations starting in 1942. The SS authorities in charge developed a method that consisted of surprise, speed, terror and the victims’ cluelessness. The ghetto would be surrounded by security reinforcements, while small units of SS and Jewish police would disperse in the ghetto forcing Jews to take their belongings and gather in a pre-designated location. Those having difficulty walking were often shot on the spot. From there, the Jews would be placed onto trains to the nearest extermination camp.¹⁴³ A witness at the Nuremberg Trial explains how an *Aktion* took place in Ukraine on 13 July 1942. A large group of SS men along with members of the Ukrainian militia encircled the ghetto

¹³⁷ Ibid., p.172

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.173

¹³⁹ Ibid., p.175

¹⁴⁰ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, p.360

¹⁴¹ NMT, *Case 9* p.168

¹⁴² Ibid., p.151

¹⁴³ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, pp.54-55

driving everyone out to the streets, often applying force. Small children were often left behind in all of the haste. Subsequently, SS men were driving the people along the road forcing them to a running pace all the while hitting them until they reached a freight train. Some buildings were impossible to penetrate so grenades were used to blow them up. “Women carried their dead children in their arms, children pulled and dragged their dead parents by their arms and legs. [...] Blood and brains were spattered over the house wall.”¹⁴⁴

When looking at the trench shootings, various tactics were used. For instance, in Einsatzgruppe D, Ohlendorf always tried to keep a distance between the killers and their victims; in addition, he wanted to keep it as impersonal as possible: “he [the soldier] should feel himself part of a unit acting as such and acting only on the orders of his superiors, thus eliminating any individual sense of guilt.”¹⁴⁵ He would also make sure the victims were calm to the last minute to prevent any random shootings. Other tactics were adopted under Otto Rasch of Einsatzgruppe C: he believed every man should partake in the collective responsibility of murder; consequently the scenes of horror were to create a bond within the unit.¹⁴⁶ Paul Blobel, chief of Sonderkommando 4a, would use large execution squads with each squad shooting for about one hour and then be replaced by the next group. His commando executed about 10,000 to 15,000 persons—women and children included.¹⁴⁷

Blobel was known to be extremely cruel and blood-thirsty, which may explain why he led one of the most notorious mass killing operation, in Babi Yar, northwest of Kiev. After Ukrainian auxiliaries posted notices ordering all Jews to appear at a designated location for resettlement purposes. On the morning of September 29, more than thirty thousand Jews turned up. They were led to a ravine in Babi Yar where they were forced to lie face down, while the Sonderkommandos would proceed with the shootings.¹⁴⁸ A statement by Kurt Werner, member of Sonderkommando 4a illustrates how shootings took place:

The Jews had to lie face down on the earth by the ravine walls. There were three groups of marksmen down at the bottom of the ravine, each made up of about twelve men. [...] Each successive group of Jews had to lie down on top of the bodies of those that had already been shot. The marksmen stood behind the Jews and killed them with a shot in the neck.¹⁴⁹

The executioners worked in shifts, and were kept supplied with ammunition and rum. Subsequently, after two days of killing, Blobel proudly reported having supervised the execution of 33,771 Jews.¹⁵⁰

By the winter of 1941-1942, the following figures of Soviet Jewry were reported: Einsatzgruppe A killed 249,420 Jews; Einsatzgruppe B had killed 45,467; Einsatzgruppe

¹⁴⁴ NMT, *Case 9*, pp.202-203

¹⁴⁵ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p.366

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.367

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.212-213

¹⁴⁸ Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide*, p.212

¹⁴⁹ Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess (eds), *“The Good Old Days”: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, (New York, NY: Konecky & Konecky, 1991), pp. 66-67

¹⁵⁰ Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide*, p.212

C killed 95,000; and Einsatzgruppe D murdered 92,000 [for an example of such number, see appendix 4].¹⁵¹ Despite the numbers and the effectiveness of these groups, the psychological and physical consequences on the men were beginning to be felt as exhaustion started to set in.¹⁵² As stated by a member of Einstazgruppe A: “many abound themselves to alcohol, many suffered nervous breakdowns and psychological illnesses; for example we had suicides and there were cases where some men cracked and shot wildly around them and completely lost control.”¹⁵³ Himmler decided to visit the troops in order to raise their morale. In Minsk, he attended the execution of two hundred Jews. He was utterly shocked and disgusted by the gruesome scene, almost collapsing. He told his men that despite the difficulty of this task, it had to be done and they had to fulfill their duties. However, after his speech, Himmler decided to instate a new tactic: the gas vans.¹⁵⁴

Gas vans were previously used in Prussia and Pomerania. They consisted of vans with exhaust fumes connected to the inside of the van. The prisoners were gassed and then had to be unloaded by the commandos: “When the van was opened, the bodies—men, women, children—with distorted faces, covered with vomit and stained with excrement, still carried the visible signs of their painful death.”¹⁵⁵ The use of these vans, which remained limited to specific areas, demonstrates the development in the future methods of killing by gassing in the extermination camps.

Motivations for Action

In order to attempt to understand what could have motivated these men to partake in these mass murders, it is important to see what the East meant for the National Socialists. I have already explained the imperialist aspect of Nazi ideology but it is important to understand how this policy further fueled the image of grandiosity of the Germans, and the insignificance of non-Germans. Prior to—and during—the invasion, the East represented a mythical space, a virgin land in need of conquering by the Germans to be molded into something exceptional. Considering it was occupied by “inferior” ethnic groups, it became the land of all possibilities.¹⁵⁶ According to Hitler, only Germans could occupy the soil of ‘Greater Germany’ and this entailed removing the indigenous inhabitants. Central Europe was the key to the riches of Eastern Europe and Western Asia; therefore, according to this conquest theory, the *Volk*—ethnic Germans—were to aggressively defend this area from “biological conquest” from the east. Once Germany took over Poland in 1939, the Poles were to be pushed eastward and in the meantime they would serve as serfs to the Germans. Hitler had entrusted this program to Himmler, giving him the title of “Reich Commissar for the Consolidation of German Nationhood”

¹⁵¹ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p.362.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.363

¹⁵³ Ernst Klee et al., “*The Good Old Days*”, pp.81-82

¹⁵⁴ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p.366

¹⁵⁵ Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press; Washington, DC: Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), p.39

¹⁵⁶ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.213

(*Volkstums*).¹⁵⁷ This illustrates the background in the conquest of the Soviet Union. With this mentality, there is no doubt that these men considered themselves as the powerful leading race, fully in charge of the fate of the inhabitants.

Furthermore, the invasion of the Soviet territories also represented a battle against the ‘Bolshevik-Jew’ enemy. This becomes the second motivation for invasion and ultimately mass-murder: security. The Jew was seen in three forms; first as being subhuman, second, as economically dangerous to the Reich, and third as a Communist. We can see the first type of interpretation in propaganda presenting the Jew as pest or vermin and with the spreading of rumours that the entire population of Eastern Europe was contaminated with typhus, cholera and the plague, sicknesses that thanks to the Germans’ great hygiene have disappeared long ago in Germany.¹⁵⁸

Most Germans firmly believed that Jews could inflict colossal harm because of their ‘talent in infiltration’, most importantly economic infiltration. They were considered as an alien body occupying Germany, since according to Goldhagen, the Jews became a nation, rather than a religious group, within Germany.¹⁵⁹ In addition, once the war began, Jews were being accused of attacking German troops, of encroachment as well as for arson and for a “spirit of opposition”.¹⁶⁰ In 1942, Himmler said to Mussolini: “In Russia, we had to shoot a considerable number of Jews, both men and women, since there, even the women and older children were working as couriers for the partisans.”¹⁶¹ As underlined by Ingrao, these messages were constant and a collective psychosis was created generating behaviors of extreme violence beginning with the first day of combat.¹⁶²

Lastly, we find the Jew as the Communist. For the Nazis, the Soviet Union was dominated by Jews and Bolshevik barbarity; thus, the land of both mortal enemies for the Germans.¹⁶³ During training, booklets were given out to the men explaining the importance of combat on the Eastern front and, more importantly, it presented ‘Bolshevik-Jews’ as brutal, merciless, ruthless and extremely dangerous.¹⁶⁴ Consequently, the men of the Einsatzgruppen were led to believe that the Jews were an important security threat to the Reich, either for their lack of human qualities, for their financial monopoly or for their allegiance to communism. When looking at a report of Einsatzgruppe A, it states:

Especially severe and extensive measures became necessary in Lithuania. In some places [...] the Jews had armed themselves and participated actively in guerilla warfare and committed arson. Besides these activities, the Jews in Lithuania had collaborated most actively hand in glove with the Soviets. The sum total of the Jews liquidated in Lithuania amounts to 71,105.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁷ Robert Koehl, “Toward an SS Typology: Social Engineers”, (*The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. Vol. 18 No. 2, Jan. 1959), pp.233-234

¹⁵⁸ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.254

¹⁵⁹ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.65

¹⁶⁰ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head*, p.367

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.367

¹⁶² Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.255

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.249

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.254

¹⁶⁵ NMT, *Case 9*, p.161

As expressed by Höhne, the Einsatzgruppen had become an army of death unparalleled to the rest of the SS, dedicated to their tasks, reaching a level of insensibility. Moreover, the fact that their tasks were executed in the vast lands of the East, so far from their homes, the mass killing operations seemed less of a reality.¹⁶⁶

Post-War Justifications

Overall there were three major strategies for justification as seen in the Nuremberg trials. The first was that of negation; the second of avoidance; and the third of justification.¹⁶⁷ The strategy of negation was used by such defendants as Franz Six, head of the Vorkommando Moscow. His strategy involved completely avoiding a proper answer to the questions asked. He claimed not have known about the Final Solution until after the war; yet it has been shown that he was aware of everything that took place in the East as he would receive all of the Einsatzgruppen reports.¹⁶⁸ Walter Blume also used negation as his defense strategy, and his case was very representative of other defendants. He recognized his involvement in the executions as commander, but clearly stated he did not consent to the extermination policies. He declared knowing about the order to kill all Jews in the East, but stated that he was strongly against the execution of the orders. He would admit to whatever the evidence clearly had on him; however, he would play on all unclear sections of his file. Hans Ehlich also used such tactics, by taking advantage of the fact that the Americans had a hastily prepared case and did not yet manage to fully grasp the Nazi party's organization.¹⁶⁹

The second strategy was that of avoidance, the most used. This strategy consisted of covering up their respective bureaus' activities in order to diminish their responsibilities, even though they were clearly very aware of them. Ohlendorf and Best are examples of defendants making use of this tactic. Best, for instance, managed to make himself free of any direct accusations of murder, but instead only of 'complicity to murder', landing him a much smaller sentence, a strategy used by most of the SD and Gestapo men. Furthermore, the men would coordinate their defenses to gain more credibility.¹⁷⁰

The final and most important strategy for my study, was that of justification, used by Ohlendorf, among others. He did not deny any of the facts but constantly went back to the ideological motivations he so strongly adhered to, creating a moral justification for himself.¹⁷¹ He began his closing statement by stating that "all literature published in the last two years dealing with the problems of National Socialism seriously and, particularly, religious literature, agrees that National Socialism is not the cause, but the effect of a spiritual crisis."¹⁷² He goes on to describe the states of mind of all those who took part in the Einsatzgruppen and in the machinery of National Socialism:

¹⁶⁶ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, pp.363-364

¹⁶⁷ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, pp.404-424

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.404-405

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.405

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.420-421

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.426

¹⁷² NMT, *Case 9*, p.384

They entered on their task convinced that they were backed by a genuine and justified moral force. They felt that their work was necessary even if it opposed their own inner tendencies and interests, because the existence of their people was in deadly peril. They were the same good average citizens as you find them by the millions in all countries. They never thought of criminal activities or criminal aims. They felt that they had been put into an inevitable, awful, and gigantic war which was to decide not only on the survival of their nation, their families and themselves but they saw in themselves the protective shield guarding also other nations against one common enemy.¹⁷³

Most defendants admitted knowledge of the facts but also considered Hitler's order sacred and legitimate. As expressed in the trial transcripts, many believed that Jews were indeed bearers of Bolshevism and were the enemies of National Socialism; therefore, it was necessary to fulfill Hitler's orders and exterminate Jews in the Soviet Union. This can be seen in Jost's closing statement: "I decided in 1928 to enter the NSDAP because I believed that I found in this party the movement which alone would be able to prevent the decline of Germany, and would be in the position to offer resistance to the ever increasing pressure of bolshevism within Germany, and also abroad."¹⁷⁴ This type of defense can also be seen in Blume and Klingelhoefers' statements. In his affidavit, Blobel also indicates that he was assigned the execution of "communists, saboteurs, Jews and other undesirable persons."¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, some of the defendants, such as Sandberg and Ott, justified their actions as a reprisal measure against partisan activities, considered legal under international law.¹⁷⁶ Sandberg's defense lawyer explained the background to the "partisan war" and the danger of Bolshevism according to Hitler, which consequently was reflected in his "legal" orders. In addition, for Ott the defense strategy was based on the danger brought about by the Bolshevik partisans: "A tremendous number of documents, including some of the prosecution, show how great the partisan danger was, by describing the strength, armament, organization and fighting methods of the partisan bands."¹⁷⁷ This illustrates to what extent ideological beliefs motivated these men to participate in mass killings.

It is important to mention that all of the twenty-four defendants argued that they had acted under superior orders and that they could not oppose or refuse to execute them.¹⁷⁸ Yet, as I have already mentioned, it has been proven that no one has ever suffered any detrimental consequences if they chose not to participate or if one defied an order under the Nazi Party.¹⁷⁹ Now that we have seen the purpose of these intervention groups, who these men were, what tasks they undertook, what motivated them and how they justified their actions, we get a better understanding of what could have pushed these men to take part in such gruesome tasks. These groups were created specifically to eliminate unwanted individuals from the future Germanized East. My research will show

¹⁷³ Ibid., p.389

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p.390

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.212

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp.222-223

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.364

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p.222

¹⁷⁹ Ernst Klee et al., *The Good Old Days*, pp.76-86

how these men were motivated by Nazi ideology and further aided by the process of dehumanization of their victims as well as their own brutalization through their recurring tasks at hand. However, before I do so, I will first present my second case study, the SS men working in death camps.

SS Personnel in Death Camps

Extermination camps were the result of an evolution and combination of concentration camps and the use of gas as a weapon of extermination. For the purpose of my research, I will be looking at SS personnel in death camps in the General Government between 1942 and 1944. The camps I will be looking at are Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinka [for a map of the Death camps in Poland, see appendix 5]. It is important to note that the Auschwitz complex was used primarily for labour, while Birkenau was primarily used for exterminations. For simplification purposes I will refer to this camp simply as Auschwitz. Each of these four camps managed to eliminate immense numbers of victims: Auschwitz—over one million,¹⁸⁰ Sobibor—250,000,¹⁸¹ Belzec—600,000¹⁸² and Treblinka—730,000.¹⁸³ I have chosen to look at these men because, as was the case with the Einsatzgruppen, these men were around their victims at all times, seeing them, hearing them and smelling their remains. Even though they did not partake in physical shootings, they were directly responsible for the death of millions of innocent men, women and children. I wish to see how the perpetrators rationalized their involvement in such atrocities, but first I will provide an overview of these men and their tasks.

What Were the Death Camps?

As the Einsatzgruppen's work was beginning to take a greater toll on the men, a new method of extermination had to be set in motion. As stated by the Governor General of occupied Poland, Hans Frank: "We have to finish off the Jews, but how? We can't shoot them all. We can't poison them either. We need to find a way that would guarantee us success on a large scale."¹⁸⁴ Himmler assigned Reinhard Heydrich the task of preparing a plan for what became known as the "Final Solution" (*Endlösung*), using all available means. A meeting was convened to discuss this as well as the various aspects of implementation of the Final Solution. The Wannsee Conference was held on 20 January 1941. It was then officially decided that the Jews were to be eliminated.¹⁸⁵ There, the process of annihilation was officially drawn out; the Jews would be taken from transit ghettos, which they were placed in earlier, and then transported 'further east', to designated death camps.¹⁸⁶

Himmler decided to expand the gassing experiments that took place in Chełmno and create death factories in the *Generalgouvernement* as well as in the annexed regions. Christian Wirth, the head of the Euthanasia Program¹⁸⁷ was in charge of this program. There, he had acquired a special technique of gassing victims by carbon monoxide, which will now be applied on Jews, among others. In Chełmno, Wirth had built gas chambers

¹⁸⁰ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p.xiv

¹⁸¹ Whitney R. Harris, *Tyranny on Trial*, p.190

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, pp.11-12

¹⁸⁴ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p.187

¹⁸⁵ There is a lively debate in Holocaust Studies as to when exactly the decision to kill all Jews was taken. Some disagree that the Wannsee Conference was the turning point.

¹⁸⁶ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, p.12

¹⁸⁷ See the section below on the Euthanasia Program

made to look like showers in which one would inject carbon monoxide; this technique was then applied to Bełżec, Sobibor and Treblinka.¹⁸⁸ For Auschwitz, Wirth perfected his technique by introducing Zyklon B, a more effective gas used to wipe out vermin.¹⁸⁹

The death camps' locations were chosen according to the most important concentration of Jews as well as the closest railways. In 1941, Bełżec, still a labour camp, became the central camp for Jews from Lublin, Kraków and Lwów [Lviv].¹⁹⁰ Experimental killings were conducted in the early days of the camp to obtain the most effective system of death by gas. Many Jews who later helped build the camp were used as subjects for the testing. Bełżec was the first official death camp starting its first operations in March 1942.¹⁹¹

Sobibor's construction began in March 1942. It was situated in the Lublin district and was built at a much faster pace: from April to March 1942, with the help of Jewish workers.¹⁹² The same experimental killings were practiced. A witness to these experiments describes it: "about 30-40 women were gassed. [...] Both of us stood by the motor and switched from neutral to cell, so that the gas was conveyed to the chamber. [...] About 10 min later, the 30-40 women were dead. The chemist and the SS leader gave the sign to stop the motor."¹⁹³

Treblinka's construction began in late May 1942. Jews were again used for construction and then shot. In the testimony of Jan Sulkowski,¹⁹⁴ he states: "The Germans killed the Jews either by beating them or shooting them. I witnessed the case where two SS men...during the felling of forests, forced Jews to stand beneath the trees which were to fall down."¹⁹⁵ The construction was completed in July 1942 and killing began shortly thereafter.¹⁹⁶

Auschwitz was initially a concentration camp with labour workers set up in the spring of 1940. Gassing experiments with Zyklon B began at Auschwitz in August 1941 on Soviet Prisoners of War. By February 1942, the first transports of Jews arrived and in March 1941, the killing operations were moved to Birkenau. Birkenau was a plot of farmland, a few kilometers away from Auschwitz. Its construction took place between March and June 1943 and soon after, the killing machinery was in motion.¹⁹⁷ A women's camp was also added in August 1942.¹⁹⁸ Rudolf Höss was appointed commander of the camp.

The Camps' Functions

¹⁸⁸ Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, p.187

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p.188

¹⁹⁰ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, p.23

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p.26

¹⁹² Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1616

¹⁹³ Yitzhak Arad, *Sobibor, Treblinka*, pp. 31-32

¹⁹⁴ A Polish man used to help with the construction of the camp and was later released, as was the case with all Poles used for the construction.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p.40

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, p.x

¹⁹⁸ Yisrael Gutman, and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994) pp. 6-17

The camps, in three years, killed close to three million people. They worked extremely effectively in a factory style: the victims would come off the trains in the morning and by night time their bodies would have been cremated and their belongings stored or sent off to Germany.¹⁹⁹ All four camps had the same basic functions.

The extermination camps had three main preoccupations: keeping their purpose a secret; efficiency; and the erasure of all traces. Secrecy was extremely important in order for there to be order and for plans to be executed properly. Even at arrival, the victims had no idea what was about to take place. For instance, in Treblinka, a sign was placed at the exit of the trains stating:

Jews of Warsaw, Attention! You are in a transit camp, from which you will be sent to a labor camp. In order to avoid epidemics, you must present your clothing and belongings for immediate disinfection. Gold, money, foreign currency and jewelry should be deposited with the cashiers in return for your receipt. They will be returned to you later when you present the receipt. Bodily cleanliness requires that everyone bathe before continuing the journey.²⁰⁰

In Höss' testimony at Nuremberg, when asked whether the victims had any knowledge of what was in store for them, he explains: "The majority of them did not, for steps were taken to keep them in doubt about it and suspicion would not arise that they were to go to their death. For instance, all doors and all walls bore inscriptions to the effect that they were going to undergo a delousing operation or take a shower. This was made known in several languages."²⁰¹ In order to keep it secret, it was extremely difficult for anyone, high ranking or not, to enter the premises of the camps unless instructed to. Surprise visits by higher-ranking officials were often halted before entering.²⁰² The SS within the camps would constantly be on their guard. Nevertheless, the smell of the burning corpses was very present: "When one would arrive from Katowice, the fires of Auschwitz were visible nineteen kilometers before the site."²⁰³

Regarding efficiency, the entire process of putting to death was done in a "chain" type of operation. Each step was regulated and closely watched over in order to prevent the prisoners from realizing what was happening. The operations began at the signal of an oncoming train, during which all of the personnel would gather. Once the train doors opened, most of the victims had only a few hours left to live. Most of the victims had no idea what was awaiting them, and even if they heard rumors or were warned, they did not believe it. Nevertheless, the German administrators did not want to take any risks so they had to act swiftly.

Once the train wagons were emptied of the living and of the dead, they were sent to disinfection. During the discharging of the trains, the victims were separated: the elderly, sick and children on one side, while the few men picked out for labour were on the other side. Very few women were spared. The men, women and children not chosen for labour—the great majority—were asked to undress and go shower for disinfection.

¹⁹⁹ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1595

²⁰⁰ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, p.83

²⁰¹ Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal. *Vol XI: April 1946-17 April 1946*, p.401

²⁰² Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, pp.1772-1783

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.1780

The SS personnel would play on these peoples' illusions of these being transit camps and would promise them warm soup after they shower. The Jews were then hurried to the gas chambers, naked, often whipped. As explained by Hilberg, in the wintertime, some had to wait their turn for hours, naked, outside the gas chambers, listening to the screams of those inside.²⁰⁴ Once the signal was given, all the lights would be shut off in the room and either the motor would be set in motion or, as was done in later years, a Red Cross truck would arrive with the Zyklon. In about five minutes, all were dead. The room would then be aerated and the doors opened. Foreign auxiliaries would then unload the bodies, which were at first buried in communal trenches and later cremated.²⁰⁵

Camp Personnel

Regarding the SS personnel in the camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau was composed of a different set of men than the other three Operation Reinhard camps²⁰⁶. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, the guard battalion was called the SS Totenkopfsturmbann. It was composed of company-sized units, the SS Totenkopfwach-Kompanie. The company held about two hundred people. Throughout the entire enterprise, there was a total of 6,800 SS men who served in the camp. Most were born in two waves: between 1907 and 1913 and between 1919 and 1924. Regarding education more specifically, there is not a lot of information available but Lasik deduces that about 73% of the SS personnel had elementary education; about 21.5% had a secondary education and only 5.5% had a higher education.²⁰⁷

With respect to the nationalities of these men, the great majority were ethnic Germans from the Reich, but there was also a steady influx of *Volksdeutsche*, as of 1942. Those men held the lowest ranks and were discriminated against because they lacked experience and many did not speak German well. Consequently, most held guard duties or were chiefs of prisoner blocks. The other SS personnel arriving at Auschwitz came from various SS front-line formations, or recruitment offices and from the concentration camps.²⁰⁸

An important point to underline is that all of these men were allowed to decline participation in these camps. As stated by Lasik: "No existent camp document contains any evidence of punishment inflicted on an SS man for refusing to take part in the Holocaust. That people were willing to murder thousands of others does, however, testify to the destructive and efficient functioning of the camp ideology and a regime that aimed to dehumanize some prisoners. But the first to undergo the dehumanization process and on a much larger scale were the SS personnel who served there."²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p.1790

²⁰⁵ Ibid., pp.1783-1802

²⁰⁶ Operation Reinhard was the name given to the killing campaign in the East, with the gassings of 1.3 million Polish Jews at Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka in 1942. It was followed later by adding Auschwitz.

²⁰⁷ Aleksander Lasik, "Historical-Sociological Profile of the Auschwitz SS" (in Yisrael Gutman, and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*), p.279

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p.286

Now with regards to the Operation Reinhard camps (Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor), the personnel came from various sources. First we find SS and policemen who served under Globocnik's²¹⁰ command in the Lublin district until Operation Reinhard. Second, we have members of the SS and Police staffs or units. Third, we have many former workers for the Euthanasia Program who brought with them knowledge and experience with regards to setting up and operating gassing institutions for mass murder. They held the key posts involved in extermination methods, the planning, construction and the command of these camps. Over four hundred Germans were employed for the Euthanasia Program and then spread around the three camps to serve as SS members.²¹¹ Almost all of these SS men came from the lower middle class, with only a few who attended secondary school. Most were former nurses, craftsmen, former workers or salesmen. Almost all were Nazi or SS members, some before Hitler came to power, and some after. Most of these men were between thirty and forty years old. Furthermore, most were married and had no criminal record, yet they constantly provided initiative in trying to improve the extermination process.²¹² A majority of the SS men in power came from stable households, trained for modest jobs.²¹³ According to Arad: "the SS personnel who ran the camps and supervised the extermination activities were absolutely "ordinary" people. [...] The anti-Semitism that festered within them was no doubt part of their origin and was an accepted phenomenon among large segments of German society."²¹⁴

There was also non-German personnel at work in the camps. There were hundred of guards known as Trawniki.²¹⁵ Within Auschwitz-Birkenau, the organization of the personnel was slightly more complex with three important groups: the camp commander, commandos of Jewish, Slavic and German prisoners created within the camps to control the prisoners, and administrative leaders. The administrative personnel would consist of a mix of SS men and bureaucrats in charge of finance and general camp management.²¹⁶

The Euthanasia Program

Considering that a large portion of the German personnel I will be looking at came from the Euthanasia Program, I feel it is important to see what the program entailed. In September 1939, Hitler signed an order that gave Reich doctors the task of putting to death people (mostly ethnic Germans) who were sick or were considered incurable. Throughout the war, five thousand infants and kids with Down syndrome, who were malformed or had a physical or mental deficit, were killed. Doctors would place them in special centers and give them special medication that would induce pneumonia, a coma

²¹⁰ Odilo Globocnik was the SS and Police leader of the Lublin district of the General Government. He was in charge of choosing extermination sites for the Operation Reinhard camps.

²¹¹ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1659

²¹² Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, p.198

²¹³ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1661

²¹⁴ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, p.198

²¹⁵ Men generally from Ukraine, Latvia or Lithuania, many from Soviet POWs concentration camps, who were trained in a SS facility near the village of Trawniki and were used for ghetto clearing operations and death camp duties.

²¹⁶ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, pp.1664-1669

and death.²¹⁷ As of 1940, tens of thousands of individuals were gassed in special rooms in these ‘euthanasia centers’, using pure carbon monoxide by nurses and doctors. When they were not eliminated through gas, they were given special medication that would induce death. The victims were usually already living within the hospices. Furthermore, in 1940, gassings by vans was introduced in Eastern Prussia and the Polish territories where over two thousand mentally ill individuals were killed.²¹⁸ Through this description we can see just how similar the Euthanasia program was to the future killing centers. This program set a brutal precedent for the personnel involved with its murderous tasks.

The Fulfillment of These Tasks

As explained above, the camps all had the same general functions and so, much of the same duties performed by the personnel. It is important to mention that either Ukrainian guards or the Jewish commando groups performed much of the dirty work.²¹⁹ Their duties included the unloading of the bodies, cremation, block commanders and other duties with objective to maintain order within the camp. Most of the Jews ‘employed’ were almost always killed afterwards.²²⁰ Nevertheless, all SS men were given assignments in the camps’ administration and were in charge of specific tasks. When a transport of Jews arrived, the amount of work required all the manpower at the camps’ disposal. All were involved in the routine extermination process.²²¹

As the trains would arrive, all personnel had to gather at the tracks and proceed with the selection process. In Auschwitz, there were sixty men designated to receive transports. They would help with the selection and take the victims to the gas chambers. Among the men were SS doctors and medical personnel who would choose people for medical experimentation and then proceed to inflict gruesome and cruel practices on the victims. The SS personnel would be in charge of the entire extermination process, and would be present from registering prisoners, collecting the victims’ goods and directing them to the gas chambers.²²² When looking at the gas chambers, the task of unloading would be performed either by SS men, Trawniki or Jewish prisoners. The bodies would be dragged out and inspected for gold teeth or jewelry. In addition to the gas chambers, there were SS men responsible for shooting the prisoners who were incapable of making it to the gas chambers.²²³ For instance, there was SS member Robert Juhrs, who explains how the men, unfit to walk, were taken to the pits where he was order to shoot them: “I regarded the killing of these people in this way as a mercy and redemption. [...] I am absolutely sure no one felt any torment.”²²⁴

²¹⁷ Ibid., p.1610

²¹⁸ Ibid., p.1611

²¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p.271

²²⁰ For the purpose of my research, I will not be looking at these groups as I am interested only in German non-prisoners at work.

²²¹ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, p. 20

²²² Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal. *Vol XI* pp.397-402

²²³ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*

²²⁴ Ibid., p.72

Camp commanders would have to ensure that everything ran smoothly according to protocol.²²⁵ The biggest consequence of such functions and duties was the dehumanization of the victims, as well as the inevitable occurrence of cruelties perpetrated against them.²²⁶ The SS considered the Jews arriving on the trains as already dead. Parodies and mockeries were awaiting the Jews at their arrival to the camps. The entire environment of camp machinery was very precarious to brutal behaviors on behalf of Trawniki and SS men. There were strict rules prohibiting any overly brutal behaviors, as explained by Wittmann: “A certain level of “decent German behavior” prohibited the guards from sinking to the level of depraved sadists”,²²⁷ nevertheless, there were constantly instances of ‘unlawful’ behavior. For instance, at Auschwitz SS Wilhelm Boger created a swing turned into a torture device for the prisoners.²²⁸ Furthermore, cruel medical experiments were constantly performed on handpicked victims.²²⁹ Daily, victims would be brutalized, if not through the ‘legal’ use of whips then through other torturous mechanisms such as food deprivation, horrible living conditions with a complete lack of sanitation and excessive labor demands.²³⁰

Motivations to Participate

Now that I have presented an overview of the camps and its personnel, I will try to get a better grasp of the motivations of the SS perpetrators in the camps. The information concerning the “common SS” in the camps is limited. However, with the use of trial transcripts for camp commanders and other leading SS men, along with some SS testimonies, we can try to get a more comprehensive idea of why these men participated.

When looking at an excerpt of Himmler’s speech in Poznań [Posen] in 1943, we can see the resemblance in the type of justification used by these SS men and by those of the Einsatzgruppen:

The question came to us: What happens to the women and the children?—I have decided to find a very clear solution for this as well. Namely, I did not consider myself authorized to exterminate the men—meaning: to kill them or have them killed—and allow the avengers, in the form of their children and grandchildren to grow up. The difficult decision had to be made, to let this entire people disappear from the earth.²³¹

This was the goal, and it had to be done. He also stated in a letter to SS Rudolf Höss, that the Jews were the eternal enemies of the German people and that if they do not succeed in destroying the biological foundation of the Jews now then sooner or later they will

²²⁵ Rudolph Höss, *Death Dealer: the memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1996).

²²⁶ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d’Europe*, p.1663

²²⁷ Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice: The Auschwitz Trial*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p.113

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.118

²²⁹ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d’Europe*, pp.1729-1748

²³⁰ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d’Europe*; Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*.

²³¹ Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice*, pp.198-199

destroy the German people.²³² To further emphasize this clear motivation for action at the time, Höss, in his memoir, clearly stated that he was a National Socialist and that he was convinced that once Germany took over Europe and become dominant, it would break the dominance of the Jews.²³³ When interviewed by American psychologist Gustave Gilbert, he made an important statement regarding the ideological foundations for action. When asked whether the Jews he had murdered were guilty or had deserved their fate, Höss explained that the SS men were not supposed to think about that, as they had never heard anything else.²³⁴ The propaganda they were exposed to, he explains, was present in every realm of everyday life in the Reich: “It only started to occur to me after the collapse that maybe it was not quite right, after I heard what everybody was saying.”²³⁵ This further emphasizes my argument of a certain societal Nazi indoctrination in interwar Germany.

When looking further at the motivations of SS involved in the machinery of the death camps, we see a very similar set of ideas, as can be seen with SS Hanns Albin Rauter from Sobibor:

As long as the Jews are still here, we will never get any peace. It is my mission to get rid of them as quickly as possible. [...] We simply want to be freed from this blight, and the Jewish problem must be solved once and for all. [...] Anyone who knows that the Jews stand for as a people and as a race would do the same.²³⁶

Also from Sobibor we find the third SS in command: Karl Frenzel. In an interview conducted by a Sobibor survivor in 1985, he talks about joining the party in 1930 and how he was a loyal German Christian—the Nazi approved branch of Evangelism. Furthermore, he seems rather remorseful but as underlined by the interviewer, his remorse began in 1945, once the Germans lost the war.²³⁷ Another example is that of SS Walter Burmeister, a gas van driver from Chelmno, who stated after the war that he felt he could not refuse to carry out his murderous tasks because he believed in the righteousness and legitimacy of his actions, which was helped by his exposure to Nazi propaganda during the war.²³⁸ Additionally, when looking at SS Kurt Mobius, involved in the deportations to death camps, he explains that he believed the propaganda and that the Jews were guilty criminals and subhuman.²³⁹

The trial proceedings, which took place for the SS in death camps, will be discussed in the following section. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that almost all of the defendants used the Superior-Orders defense, as explained by Wittman. Yet, as I have prior mentioned, there has never been a case of reprimand for anyone who refused to fulfill their duties in the camps. As described by many witnesses at the trials, many men refused to participate in various tasks: from platform selections to executions, and no

²³² Rudolph Höss, *Death Dealer*, p.28

²³³ *Ibid.*, p.141

²³⁴ Gustave M. Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, (London, UK: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1986), p.238

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor: A History of a Nazi Death Camp*, (New York, NY: Berg, 2007), p.244

²³⁷ Thomas T. Blatt, “The Confrontation with the Murderer”,

URL: <http://www.sobibor.info/confrontation.html>

²³⁸ Ernst Klee et al. “*The Good Old Days*”, pp.219-220

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.220-221

one was ever punished for it by camp authorities or by camp administrators in Berlin.²⁴⁰ Also, anyone who wanted to be transferred out or dismissed would have had no problems in doing so. However, as stated by Wittman, this will was very rare.²⁴¹

In order to better understand the motivations of the SS in the camps, it is important to keep in mind that German society since 1933 was focused on an ongoing conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As underlined by Welzer, society at the time was centered on those who belonged and those who did not. He argues that this distinction is the common characteristic of murderous societies and that in the end, the only solution is to kill ‘them’.²⁴² Furthermore, the persecution of the Jews ultimately improved, the situation of non-Jewish Germans, within the Reich, as there was an increase in the prosperity with Hitler’s welfare state.²⁴³ Also, the ease with which mass murder could be integrated into society was mostly due to the fact that the personnel used in killing centers was not particularly trained and as was presented above, mostly came from regular jobs. As stated by Hilberg: “Even the killing units and the killing centers did not obtain professional killers. Every lawyer in the RSHA [Reich Main Security Office] was presumed to be suitable for leadership in the mobile killing units; every finance expert of the WVHA [Economic and Administrative Main Office of the Nazi SS] was considered a natural choice for service in a death camp.”²⁴⁴ Therefore, considering the SS from the camps mostly came from the lower middle-class German society, which was highly exposed to anti-Semitism, it becomes clear how these ideas, along with the dehumanization of the victim, became motivating factors for taking part.

Post-War Justifications

Trials for death camp personnel mostly took place in the 1950s and 1960s in West Germany. The information available for my research is limited in this respect. Since I do not have access to any of the trial transcripts, I will be largely basing myself on very limited secondary literature regarding the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials to determine how these men justified their actions.²⁴⁵

The Frankfurt Auschwitz trials took place between 1963 and 1965 and tried German and non-German auxiliaries as well as guards and administrative personnel. The general consensus between all of the accused was that they acted under orders and that they had no choice, with lines such as “I was but a small fish in a big pond” or “I simply

²⁴⁰ Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice*, p.79

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.82

²⁴² Harald Welzer, “On Killing and Morality: How Ordinary People Become Mass Murderers”, pp.167-168

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.169-170

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.178

²⁴⁵ The main purpose of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials was to attempt to convict those who acted in exceptionally cruel manners towards the victims, because trying personnel who was acting according to Nazi law at the time was harder to present as a murderer. This was mainly due to the fact that the West German criminal code rejected the retroactive legal category of “crimes against humanity,” and also due to technicalities in West German law at the time, which made it clear that the prosecution had to deal specifically with subjective motives for cruelty, treachery, sadism or the desire to kill. Consequently, the trial focused mostly on deviant men, which I do not wish to look at. (Rebecca Wittman, *Beyond Justice* , pp.100-101).

followed orders”.²⁴⁶ As illustrated by Hermann Langbein, present at the trials, SS Maximilian Grabner who was head of the camp Gestapo and famous for his cruelties, tried to deny any involvement, only to later state that he participated because he could not change anything, that he was under orders and he did so to protect his family.²⁴⁷ There were also some Germans who stated that they acted in service of their Führer and simply wanted to help their people.²⁴⁸ Furthermore, most would try to relieve themselves of any direct responsibility for crimes in the camps, as most men did not pull a trigger or physically murder a victim, hence such lines of defense. It is important to mention that for Himmler, refusal to obey orders was not regarded as disloyalty or a crime but rather as a weakness of character. Moreover, to him, the extermination process of the opponents to Nazism was seen as a sign of particular strength of character and of a mind-set that fit all of the qualities of the ideal SS member. Therefore, one can see why many men did not want to disobey orders, they wanted to be the ideal Nazi SS—this included the ideological guidelines that went along with such an image.²⁴⁹

Other accused former SS members justified themselves with much less remorse. For instance, Franz Stark, when asked about the feelings that motivated him then, answered that his only objection to what was taking place was that it was done by gas, which he considered unmanly and cowardly. Another example was SS Pery Broad who believed that the idea of the main camp was not bad because one got labour workers out of it.²⁵⁰ A last example illustrates just how emotionless some of these men were. In the case of SS Robert Mulka, the commandant’s adjutant, he was asked why he attempted to get away from Auschwitz, to which he replied that what bothered him the most were the stripped pajamas worn by the prisoners, as well as the general atmosphere created by the staff: “no, those men simply had no style.”²⁵¹

At Nuremberg in 1946, Höss was asked to testify for the prosecution of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, chief of the Gestapo. During his interrogation he was asked how it was possible for him to take part in what he had done. His answer was clear and straightforward: “the only one and decisive argument was the strict order and the reason given for it by Reichsführer Himmler.”²⁵² Höss was the definition of a National Socialist, when he joined the party in 1922 and became member of the SS in 1934.²⁵³ It is clear he wanted to be an ideal soldier and was convinced of Himmler’s justification for the Final Solution. For Franz Stangl, SS commandant of Sobibor and later of Treblinka, who opened up about his motivations to interviewer Gitta Sereny, he insisted that he had to follow orders or else, he was afraid his family would have been punished if he declined in the participation: he considered himself a prisoner.²⁵⁴ Curiously, when asked why he thought the Führer was ordering the extermination of the Jews, he replied that it was

²⁴⁶ Rolf Bickel and Dietrich Wagner (dir.), *Verdict on Auschwitz: The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963-1965* (Strafsache 4 Ks 2/63), 1993/2005, Germany.

²⁴⁷ Helmut Langerbein, *Hitler’s Death Squads*, p.505

²⁴⁸ Rolf Bickel and Dietrich Wagner (dir.), *Verdict on Auschwitz*.

²⁴⁹ Helmut Langerbein, *Hitler’s Death Squads*, p.510

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.509

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.511

²⁵² Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal. *Vol XI*, p.401

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.397

²⁵⁴ Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, (London, UK: Deutsch, 1974), p. 134

because they wanted their money. “Have you any idea of the fantastic sums that were involved? That’s how the steel was bought in Sweden.” This was not very convincing to Sereny; however, she then asked why cruelty and humiliation were used for the murders if it were just for their money. Stangl answered: “To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies. To make it possible for them to do what they did.”²⁵⁵ Sadly, this answer illustrates the importance for cruelty and dehumanization to take place in order for millions of people to be killed.

Most of these perpetrators, as much as they may have tried not to be, were scrupulous and brutal. The environment these men were in undeniably brutalized them and their behaviors. Unfortunately, post-war trials were not very successful at finding the thousands of men involved and even less at sentencing them. An illustration of this can be seen in the following statistics: between 1950 and 1962, West Germany investigated 30,000 former Nazis but only tried 5,425 and of those sentences, only 155 were convicted of murder.²⁵⁶ Additionally and unfortunately, the trials do not do justice to the real meanings behind the motivations of these men.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p.101

²⁵⁶ Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice*, p.15

Chapter 5: Analysis

I have presented my theories along with my case studies; therefore, I will now demonstrate how they apply. In the following section, I will show that the men of the Einsatzgruppen and the SS that were directly involved in the death camps were motivated by ideology. Moreover, I want to show how the dehumanization of the victim along with the brutalization of the perpetrator caused by war, further pushed them to participate in the mass killings.

Ideology

German Inter-War Society

The men of the Einsatzgruppen and the SS who participated in the death camps came from the same post-World War I German (and Austrian) society.²⁵⁷ As explained in the 'Ideology' section, German society in the inter-war period was in serious turmoil and in a time of growing nationalism and anti-Semitism. The grave economic conditions leading to food shortages and hyper-inflation produced severe hardships for the Germans.²⁵⁸ Consequently, many Germans chose to blame the Jews and even to persecute them, because as I have already mentioned, the Jews were dominant in the financial and business realms. An illustration of this situation can be seen in the statement by a worker for the euthanasia program named Allers :

Do you know the real story about the Jews? [...] You don't know what it was like in the 1930s. I wanted to become a lawyer. A family member brought me to the Ministry of Justice in Berlin. As we walked through the hallways, every door had a Jewish name on it. There should have been more Germans. The Jews had everything, the press, the banks, the businesses; in Berlin it was all in the hands of the Jews.²⁵⁹

The American historian Daniel Goldhagen provides examples of this mindset. One is a report by the President of the Swabian district government in March 1920, when talking about the agitation and disagreement of people regarding the rise of food prices: "One hears everywhere that 'our government is delivering us over to the Jews'"²⁶⁰. Another can be seen in a report from Munich on the political climate in October 1919, which stated that pogroms against Jews appeared "quite possible"; and third, two years later, a police report stated: "the mood for Jewish pogroms is spreading systematically in all parts of the country."²⁶¹ Whether the reality of pogroms was a real threat or not, Goldhagen's examples further emphasize the threat and resentment against the Jews.

²⁵⁷ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*.

²⁵⁸ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.

²⁵⁹ Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, p.90

²⁶⁰ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p.82

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*,

I further argue that interwar society played a role in the beliefs and upbringings of these men, especially when looking at the state of Germany then, with a constant emphasis on ‘us’ versus ‘the rest of the world’ following the Versailles Treaty, and the promotion of a charged patriotic spirit in Germany. During World War I, children were taught the importance of the war and of the work of German heroes at the front lines. There was constant mobilization “of the spirit and of the heart” by the pupils.²⁶² As of 1917, patriotic courses were offered in schools, which instigated a heroic morale repeatedly taught to the students,²⁶³ with lasting effects. Reinhard Höhne, exemplifies the outcomes of such an education, when he stated that during his years in school, he developed a competence for politics and for the first time he began the combat against “vermin, followed by trash”—he was referring to communists and separatists.²⁶⁴ He exemplifies German men infatuated with the concept of nationalism and the never-ending combat against supposed traitors of the German nation. There is no doubt that the state of German society at the time had an important impact on all the men who were brought up in this period. As I have demonstrated, in both cases, all of the SS men I am looking at grew up in this period. To further support my claim, we can look at a quote I have mentioned before: Höss explaining that SS men had never heard anything different than how Jews were guilty of everything they were accused of and that they needed to be eliminated.²⁶⁵ Moreover, I presented the case for Karl Frenzel who became remorseful only after 1945, which I believe—in both his and Höss’ case—is an indicator of just how socialized and to a certain extent obscured by Nazi ideas they were.

Another indicator was the level of nationalist anti-Jewish clubs and organizations present in universities. During the interwar years, student organizations throughout Germany showed themselves to be anti-Semitic, focusing on topics such as nationalism and ‘*volkschism*’. Furthermore, ‘Aryan paragraphs’ were adopted calling for the exclusion of Jews from these clubs and even from studying at certain universities. It becomes clear that anti-Semitism was the widespread norm on campuses.²⁶⁶ Considering most of the SS men in my study went through at least high schools if not higher leveled institutions—as I have already demonstrated—links were bound to be created as well as a sense of belonging between these non-Jewish Germans taking part in these clubs. Ingrao has shown the adherence of many future Einsatzgruppen leaders to such organizations, such as the *Turnerschaften*, which until 1919 was a sports club, then turned into one based on ‘*volkisch*’ ideas, combatting Reich enemies, including Jews. There was also the *Deutsche Studentenschaft*, which in 1921 became a center for students in charge of university organization and turned into a center for revolutionary nationalism.²⁶⁷ Goldhagen makes an important point, reiterated by Ingrao, that if anti-Semitism was present within educational institutions, then the youth of Weimar Germany was exposed to these currents, consequently shaping their minds and ideas creating the future cadres of Nazi Germany.²⁶⁸ With this fact we can safely say that a great majority of Germans who

²⁶² Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.28

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.29

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.37

²⁶⁵ Gustave M. Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, p.238

²⁶⁶ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.83

²⁶⁷ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, pp.53-54

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.51; Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p.82

attended schools and universities were exposed to such ideas. As for those who were less educated, they were likely to be just as exposed to these currents through other socializing factors, such as professional groups, churches and family members.²⁶⁹

When looking at the men of the Einsatzgruppen and of the SD, I have underlined the fact that these men were intellectuals. What is most interesting is that these men had advanced degrees and many held important positions within their respective universities. Their areas of specialization, however, all centered around pro-Germanic ideals, nationalism and the “purity” of the German nation. For instance, Richard Frankenberg, Siegfried Engel and Hans-Joachim Beyer wrote theses in history, which were marked with “*volkisch*” undertones. As underlined by Ingrao, these theses all supported the ‘German cause’.²⁷⁰ This fact shows just how dogmatic these men had become were prior to the onset of the war. It is hard to deny that these men had strong beliefs in what they were doing. In addition, when they joined the SD, most had joined various militant organizations affiliated with the Nazi Party, such as the National Socialist University Students’ League and the National Socialist Peoples’ Welfare. These groups would support propaganda campaigns and voluntary social mobilization for the “Germanization” of occupied territories.²⁷¹ What this further suggests is that these men were likely to have had an impact on their fellow classmates and on their students, with their teachings on the topics of nationalism, “Germanization” and “*volkschism*”.

I have already presented the overall educational backgrounds for the Einsatzgruppen and for the SS Death camp workers. These groups of men came from very opposite educational and social, spheres, and yet their actions are equally brutal. This shows just how nation-wide this mass killing program was and how many people, no matter what social status they held, were involved.

A Question of Belonging

In order to further our understanding regarding the motivations for action by these SS men, we can take a closer look at Jacques Sémelin’s explanation of perpetrators crossing the threshold into violence. The metamorphosis from ordinary man to murderer begins by nurturing an ideology that rallies individuals to what he calls a “burst of collective action,” by creating an “us” against an evil and harmful “them”. With the manifestation of this polarization, the ideology creates a high intensity climate prone to war, by means of symbols, myths and slogans, which in turn further aggravates fears. In the case of Germany, the societal environment was very precarious, as people were already in a high state of anxiety due to a difficult economic and political situation.²⁷²

Harald Welzer further develops this notion of polarization. He explains that the Nazi structure of extermination rested on a categorical definition of who did not belong and from this, drew its attractiveness and subsequent popularity.²⁷³ He further argues that anti-Jewish policy formed the center of the developmental dynamics of German society at

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.85

²⁷¹ Ingrao, 134-135

²⁷² Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.241

²⁷³ Harald Welzer, “On Killing and Morality: How Ordinary People Become Mass Murderers”, p.167

the time, as it became a field for political activity that was able to permeate all other fields. This set forth what he calls “free enormous individual and collective energies, without which the gigantically destructive abilities of this regime cannot at all be understood.”²⁷⁴ His reasoning is very much in line with my argument. Welzer looks not only at why “perfectly normal people” became murderers, but also how, as of 1939, a large majority of ‘normal’ people could decide to take part in this process of exclusion, which they did not see as bad or dramatically different from their value system. Social belonging, he argues, is the one coordinate that was shifted during this time and it changed everything. This is when the “us” versus “them” social phenomenon took on a new importance.²⁷⁵

The most crucial aspect of his argument for the purpose of my research is his interpretation of the impact of National Socialization of German society and how it motivated the perpetrators. He argues that this socialization was characterized by daily changes in the lives of Germans, which made an anti-Jewish worldview perceptible, tangible and a lasting reality. These changes included the slow and steady process of exclusion of the Jews from German society, through laws and slowly mounting violence, and most importantly, the confirmed perception that it was good to not be Jewish. Also, there was Hitler’s welfare state—due in great part to Hitler’s anti-Jewish policies—and the changes that can be seen in the prosperity of those who belonged—versus those who did not.²⁷⁶ An idea also supported by Götz Aly, “the fact that ‘everyone was doing well’ in the ‘Third Reich’ is even today part of what is passed down from generation to generation in German families.”²⁷⁷

Party Adherence and Real Nazis

I argue that the perpetrators who joined the Party earlier were more likely to have strong beliefs and were in agreement with Nazi policies. To demonstrate this point I will use the work of the sociologist Michael Mann. Mann conducted an important study looking at the biographies of 1581 men and women involved in the Nazi regime and wanted to determine whether these participants were “Real Nazis” or “Ordinary Germans”.²⁷⁸ Some of his findings are crucial for the purpose of my research. For instance, he looks at the time period of when men from the Reich joined the party. He labels “Old Nazis” men who joined the party before 1933.²⁷⁹ He also creates three age cohorts to clarify his findings: a. men born before 1901; b. men born between 1901 and 1912; and c. men born after 1912.²⁸⁰ His findings show that for 48% of the first cohort were Old Nazis, compared with 47% for the second, and with 18% for the third.²⁸¹ What is significant

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p.168

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p.169

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p.170

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Michael Mann, “Were the Perpetrators of Genocide “Ordinary Men” or “Real Nazis”? Results from Fifteen Hundred Biographies”(*Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Winter 2000), p.331

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p.354

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p.355

here is that 44% of these men—out of a sample of 1341—were Old Nazis, that is, Germans who joined the Party before it came to power, furthering my argument of ideological indoctrination as a key motivator.²⁸²

In the case of the Einsatzgruppen, I have already presented information regarding these men's reasons for joining the NSDAP and with that, it becomes clear that these men joined because within this party, they had found policies they adhered to.²⁸³ As Ingrao explains, in the sample of eighty SD members he has studied, only one presented ideological objections to Nazi policies of mass extermination.²⁸⁴ I argue that these men who joined prior to the party's ascension to power and those who joined at a young age, were more likely to have believed in the party's ideology and in Hitler's way of dealing with problems in German society.

When looking at what type of men were part of these organizations, Mann has significant findings with the Einsatzgruppen, and the T4 and death camps personnel. Looking at the Einsatzgruppen, of the 311 members from his sample group, only fourteen were raw recruits, while seventy-six were Nazi or SS members, one hundred and forty-four were Nazis and policemen and forty-eight were Nazis and had served in a concentration camp or the T4 program, while the rest (twenty-seven) served either in the police or the Waffen-SS.²⁸⁵ These are significant numbers, that emphasize the amount of Nazi party members that worked previously in various Nazi subsidized organizations. When looking at the T4 program, out of 118 perpetrators, an overwhelming one hundred and ten were prior Nazi or SS members, with only eight being recruits. In addition, as explained by Longerich, one type of personality—the specialist—tended to predominate among the leaders of Einsatzgruppen. This described a man with theoretical training and practical experience, but also very committed to Nazi ideology, “a radical agent acting out of conviction.” Amongst the seventeen members of the leadership of the Einsatzgruppen, all had previous experience with either the SS or the police and thirteen were members of the NSDAP or of one of its organizations joining prior to 1933.²⁸⁶

Regarding the Operation Reinhard camps, in a sample of sixty-seven, only six were newcomers, while the remaining sixty-one all served in some kind of Nazi-related organization. In Auschwitz, of the 286 perpetrators, only thirty-nine were recruits. This is significant, because it shows to what extent these recruits were overshadowed by prior Nazi Party and SS members, and many had prior experience in other government killing institutions. As stated by Mann: “Though almost all had started their careers in these institutions by being unexpectedly asked to kill, by about 1942 they were providing Nazi institutions with considerable murderous experience.”²⁸⁷

²⁸² Mann : 44% Old Nazis ; 12% Young Nazis (joined between 1933-1937 and aged under 25); 14% Bandwagon Nazis (joined between 1933-1937 aged 26 or more); 1% Raw Nazis (joined after 1938, aged 25 or less); and 29% Wartime Nazis (joined after 1938 aged 26 or more). Ibid., pp.354-355

²⁸³ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, pp.132-133

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p.141

²⁸⁵ Michael Mann, “Were the Perpetrators of Genocide “Ordinary Men” or “Real Nazis”?, p.355.

²⁸⁶ Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: the Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.186

²⁸⁷ Michael Mann, “Were the Perpetrators of Genocide “Ordinary Men” or “Real Nazis”?, p.356

Mann concludes his study by stating that he found strong indicators that the core of Nazi genocide represented by his sample was accomplished by ideological and experienced Nazis. He has also found suggestions that this ideology does not merely revolve around anti-Semitism, but also derives from broader currents of nationalism and loyalty to the party-state.²⁸⁸ “In the present study the perpetrators clustered towards the “real Nazi” end of the spectrum.”²⁸⁹

Indoctrination

When looking at the ideological indoctrination of the SS we can see just how prepared these men were for their gruesome tasks. According to Jürgen Matthäus, indoctrination was possible through a mix of direct and indirect methods, affecting the men in varying degrees. With this approach, Himmler managed to shape the behaviors of these men to a specific attitude, a posture and a mind-set, characterized by an energetic ruthlessness, determination and the ability for the men to adjust their actions according to the necessity of the moment.²⁹⁰ To achieve this ideal behavior, informal gatherings would take place such as get-togethers, parties or social events.²⁹¹ This in turn created a constant environment of socialization between the men and a place where anti-Semitism and other ideological elements could be discussed and shared. Moreover, as explained by Matthäus, anti-Semitic issues were an important part of ideological indoctrination. Himmler would cultivate other state and party agencies such as the Hitler Youth, schools or the army, which had already been well on their way in the process of indoctrination.²⁹² This explains why so many young Germans joined the NSDAP.²⁹³ Himmler further ensured that the concept of the ‘Jew has to go’ formed an integral part of the ‘esprit de corps’ within all of the realms of the Reich under his authority. As illustrated by Matthäus: “Socialized during the Third Reich and subjected to a constant barrage of anti-Semitic propaganda, those young men who joined the SS and police during the war not only knew the Final Solution as one of the abstract aims for the Nazi millennium but had witnessed its practical implementation in German public life since 1933.”²⁹⁴

An important point is the importance of the gradual increase of radicalism within the Reich. As I have explained before, the persecution and targeting of the Jews started very early. What this meant was a certain level of rationalization regarding murderous actions. The effectiveness of this mechanism can be seen in the justifications found in letters that SS men sent home where the most violent acts that they committed were

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p.357

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p.358

²⁹⁰ Jürgen Matthäus, “Antisemitism as an Offer: The Ideological Indoctrination of the SS and Police Corps during the Holocaust, Lessons and Legacies,” (in Dagmar Herzog, ed. *Lessons and Legacies*, vii: *The Holocaust in International Perspectives*, Northwestern University Press: 2006), p.118

²⁹¹ Ibid., p.119

²⁹² Ibid., p.120

²⁹³ Michael Mann, “Were the Perpetrators of Genocide “Ordinary Men” or “Real Nazis”?”

²⁹⁴ Jürgen Matthäus, “Antisemitism as an Offer: The Ideological Indoctrination of the SS and Police Corps during the Holocaust, Lessons and Legacies,” p.120

presented as a logical and justified consequence of Hitler's belief that a world war would lead to the destruction of European Jewry.²⁹⁵

If we look at the actions of the Einsatzgruppen men, I strongly argue for ideological motivations, because these men had to be convinced of the necessity and righteousness of their actions. They must have been convinced of what Himmler was communicating regarding the danger of 'partisan' Jews and the need for eliminating even the women and children in order to protect the future of the Reich from future retaliation and vengeance. The annihilation of 'Jewish Bolshevism' was one of the war aims for the Eastern campaign. 'Bolshevism' was seen as dominant among the Jews in the Soviet Union. This has been one of the National Socialists' most persistent myth.²⁹⁶ Therefore, because the Jews were seen as a Bolshevik danger, their supposed retaliatory force was considered very present and extremely dangerous, hence fueling their motivations for their elimination. Evidence of this mindset can be seen in letters sent from the front by members of SS commandos to their loved ones, such as Karl Kretschmer of Sonderkommando 4a:

We are fighting this war for the survival or non-survival of our people. You back home, thank God, do not feel the full force of that. [...] My comrades are literally fighting for the existence of our people. The enemy would do the same. I think you understand me. As the war is in our opinion a Jewish war, the Jews are the first to feel it. Here in Russia, wherever the German soldier is, no Jew remains.²⁹⁷

We also see this in a letter by Walter Matter of an Einsatzkommando, writing to his wife after operations in Belarus: "The death we gave to them was a nice, quick death compared to the hellish torture of thousands upon thousands in the dungeons of the GPU. [...] Let's get rid of this scum that tossed all of Europe into the war..."²⁹⁸ Furthermore, as I have already presented, in the trial proceedings many of the men reiterated these thoughts of preemptive actions by claiming that their duties were imperative to ensure the security of the Reich from Jewish 'partisans'.²⁹⁹ Longerich brings up an interesting point of contradiction with this Nazi idea. While "Russian Bolshevism" was seen as representing "the attempt by Jews to achieve world domination for themselves",³⁰⁰ Hitler also stated that these Jews looked like a "house of cards, that only needed to be nudged on the outside for it to collapse."³⁰¹ This contradiction gave Hitler a certain legitimation for the war in the East, because, on the one hand, it would appear as a legitimate means of self defense against alleged plans for world domination by the Jews, while also creating a unique opportunity for the conquering of a vast empire with relatively little effort.³⁰²

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p.122

²⁹⁶ Peter Longerich, *Holocaust*, p.180

²⁹⁷ Ernst Klee "The Good Old Days", p.163

²⁹⁸ Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.250. The GPU was the former Soviet secret police, actually called the NKVD during World War II.

²⁹⁹ NMT, *Case 9*.

³⁰⁰ Peter Longerich, *Holocaust*, p.180

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

Orders and Choice

The point has been made before but remains very important. The perpetrators were allowed to decline participation without any harm done to them. In the postwar literature, it has been repeatedly documented that these men always had a choice.³⁰³ Nevertheless, as Wittman points out, very few took up the offer of transferring out or being dismissed from their duties in the death camps. I argue that this can be interpreted as a will to take part, a will to keep going with their gruesome duties and consequently, a belief that their murderous tasks are necessary.

Another very important point concerns the Einsatzgruppen. Ever since the Nuremberg Trials and Ohlendorf's defense statement, it has been believed that the Einsatzgruppen were given their orders in March 1941, prior to their murderous action. However, recent research has shown that Ohlendorf's defense was a strategy to claim that he had been acting upon orders received, in order to reduce to a minimum the extent to which he had been free to act. This theory was further supported when some of the former commando leaders stated that they would receive 'framework orders', "intended to be 'filled in' on the initiative of the commandos and by subsequent orders."³⁰⁴ Additionally, the murder of women and children was added later, as I have already shown. It is clear that the process was in fact not reduced to a single order. This shows a certain degree of vagueness in the way orders were issued to these men. As argued by Longerich, "this practice presupposes a certain collusiveness, a strongly developed feeling of consensus amongst those involved about how anti-Jewish policy was going to develop in the future."³⁰⁵ When looking at a letter by Heydrich to the Einsatzgruppen command, the vagueness is striking: "Those to be executed are all: Functionaries of the Comintern (and all professional Communist politicians of any kind), People's Commissars, Jews in Party and state posts, other radical elements (saboteurs, propagandists, snipers, assassins, agitators, etc.)"³⁰⁶ The 'etc' is revealing, as it suggests that those to be executed were not clearly specified or delimited.³⁰⁷

The reason why this is all significant is because it further shows how the justification of 'following orders' becomes completely delegitimized. The orders were not only arbitrary, they kept changing and developing in the hands of the men in charge and resulted in an astounding number of casualties and brutalities. Ideology is thus crucial to understand the motivation of perpetrators. The implementation of mass violence, however, required two additional factors: the dehumanization of their victims and their own brutalization brought on by the war.

Dehumanization

³⁰³ Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice* ; Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* ; Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* ; Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*.

³⁰⁴ Peter Longerich, *Holocaust*, p.188

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.189

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.190

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

The concept of dehumanization was already present in German society before the war. We have seen that in Germany, the Jew was constantly portrayed as vermin, or an unwanted ‘creatures’, in speeches and media propaganda.³⁰⁸ An important question to ask is how do these men go from the vision of individuals as sub-human to the act of systematic killing?

Kelman and Hamilton distinguish three phases in the overcoming of moral inhibitions against violence. The first is the authorization of one’s future actions. This absolves the perpetrator of bearing the responsibility to make these moral decisions on his own. The second is routinization, which occurs when the repetitive nature of the action dulls the urge to raise moral questions. Finally, the third is dehumanization, which comes into play once the perpetrators’ attitudes toward the targeted victims and themselves become so structured that it becomes unnecessary and impossible for them to view this relationship in moral terms.³⁰⁹ This becomes possible when a specific group is identified as being a separate category stigmatized by history and excluded from society by perpetrators. With the help of propaganda, labels further help deprive the victims of an identity and of their belonging to a community.³¹⁰ As explained by Kelman and Hamilton: “The only way they can justify their actions is by coming to believe that the victims are subhuman and deserve to be rooted out. And thus, the process of dehumanization feeds on itself.”³¹¹

In Nazi propaganda, the vermin image of the Jew was pervasive, for instance in articles published in September 1939, we find quotes such as: “The Jewish people ought to be exterminated root and branch. Then the plague of pests would have disappeared in Poland also at one stroke” and also, “the Jew is a devil in human form”.³¹² This mindset is also very apparent in Hitler’s statements: “where the Jews were left to themselves, as for instance in Poland, the most terrible misery and decay prevailed. They are just pure parasites.”³¹³ Once again, I argue that Germans along with SS perpetrators were heavily exposed to this type of propaganda and applied to their tasks. This can be seen in a report by Jäger, chief of Einsatzkommando 3: “I am of the opinion that we must begin the sterilization of the male “labour Jews” immediately, to avoid reproduction. If, despite of this, a Jewish woman were to be pregnant, she will be liquidated.”³¹⁴ Jäger presents the Jews as subhuman capable of infecting society and in need of liquidating.

As explained by Sémelin, the simple fact of bringing groups of people ‘en masse’ for murdering purposes de-individualizes them: “Quantities depersonalizes and consequently desensitizes.”³¹⁵ In his interview with Gitta Sereny, Stangl explains his perception of Jews as ‘cargo’ and explains how he never saw them as individuals but rather as a huge mass.³¹⁶ In death camps, we can see the dehumanization of the victim by

³⁰⁸ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*; George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution*.

³⁰⁹ Herbert Kelman, and Lee Hamilton, “Sanctioned Massacres”, pp.232-240

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.239

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² Whitney R. Harris, *Tyranny on Trial*, p.285

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p.282

³¹⁴ Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire*, p.270

³¹⁵ Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.272

³¹⁶ Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, p.201

the perpetrator as soon as they arrived off the trains. There would also be orchestras that would 'welcome' the Jews. In Treblinka, SS Kurt Franz had a dog named Barry. The dog symbolized the dehumanization process when he would be commanded to attack victims for the pleasure of the SS, to his master's command: "Man, attack this dog".³¹⁷ The emotional distance between the SS men and the victims was seemingly unbridgeable.

Brutalization

A first important aspect of the brutalization of the perpetrator can be seen in the repetition of their actions. To a certain extent, the men eventually become accustomed to their tasks of murder. They acquire increasingly professional skills to turn their behavior into a routine activity. As explained by Sémelin, "the collective practice of killing immediately transports the perpetrators into a sphere of omnipotence. They suddenly enter another world, created by the terror of their weapons alone. It is a world in which human beings entirely at their mercy have already ceased to exist, even as they reach the point when they become corpses."³¹⁸ When looking at the methods of training for the Einsatzgruppen, we can see this routinized process of shooting the victims in the back of the neck and by the hundreds, if not thousands, daily. With such a constant recurrence of gathering individuals, digging trenches and then shooting them, routine was always present. A letter by an Einsatzkommando to his wife illustrates this sense of routine: "So I also took part in the day before yesterday's huge mass killing. When the first truckload [of victims] arrived my hand was slightly trembling when shooting, but one gets used to this. When the tenth load arrived I was already aiming more calmly and shot securely at the many women, children, and infants."³¹⁹ Ingrao calls these tasks 'constants' of extermination by shooting, dissociating the killers from their victims. Most of the time, as I have already shown, all the men had to take part in the shootings to even out the load on the entire commando.³²⁰

It is even more present when we look at the death camps that are created on a structural basis of routine, from the moment the victims are loaded off the trains to the moment their bodies are disposed off. The distance between the victims and the SS was huge. Most camp personnel lost all sense of proportion and adopted behavioral patterns irreconcilable with Nazi rules and principles, such as sadism and corruption. This led to certain dangerous behaviors such as sadism and corruption. The SS would constantly mock and proceed with brutal torture on their victims with methods such as hunger, exposing them to cold, work surcharge, dirtiness and lack of privacy. Furthermore, we could find punishments for lack of discipline, the medical experiments and of course the gassings. However, any individual action by an SS or a foreign guard was to be avoided because the idea was for the sufferings to remain impersonal.³²¹

As explained by Sémelin, perpetrators deal with their murderous tasks by generating numbness in response to the outside world. Their bodies are doing what they

³¹⁷ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1663

³¹⁸ Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.266

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.250

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.274

³²¹ Raul Hilberg, *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, p.1673-1674

are asked to do, but their thoughts are elsewhere. They become dissociated with the situation.³²² Furthermore, as observed by Browning, there are two ways of dealing with brutalization. First, we find soldiers who are used to violence and numbed to taking human life. The men would commit atrocious acts that were outside of the realm of command. This could be seen within the death camps, as I have already illustrated. Second, we find brutalization expressed through methodically executed policies issued by the government. The men would not act out of frustration or frenzy but rather by calculation.³²³ This method was most common among the men of the Einsatzgruppen. “As in combat, the horrors of the initial encounter eventually became routine, and the killing became progressively easier...brutalization was not the cause but the effect of the men’s behavior.”³²⁴

An interesting point brought forward by Sémelin, regards the physical threat that the Jews were being accused of with their ‘bombings’ on the Germans. However, these ‘bombings were done by the Allied forces, not the ‘communist Jews’. Yet, a link—Jewish worldwide conspiracy—was created between this ‘external enemy’ that is attacking innocent Germans, and the ‘Jewish enemy’ that needs to be eliminated that helped justify and propel these men into their murderous deeds.³²⁵ Through such dynamics of justification, the boundaries between what is real and what is imaginary become blurred by shifting into violent action making the destruction of the entire group imperative.³²⁶

Mass Killing: A Recurring Occurrence

To what extent is my argument relevant to other cases of mass killing? The dehumanization of the victim by the perpetrator and the brutalization of the killer could be seen in Rwanda and Bosnia, arguably the two most widely reported cases of mass violence in the last twenty years.

Rwanda

Racial prejudice was quite prevalent in Rwanda, prior to the mass murder of 800,000 Tutsis in 1994. In fact, Peter Uvin argued that racist prejudice was a structural feature of Rwandan society. There were old myths of Tutsis being biologically different from Hutus. As further explained by Uvin, the distinctions between Hutus and Tutsis were based on moral and human superiority and inferiority, with the Tutsis being attributed the worst characteristics. They were being dehumanized.³²⁷

We trace back the principle of dehumanization to the colonizers, who used racist images depicting the differences between Hutus and Tutsis, with Tutsis holding higher

³²² Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.268

³²³ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp.160-161

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.161

³²⁵ Jacques Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy*, p.247

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.248

³²⁷ Peter Uvin, “Prejudice, Crisis and Genocide in Rwanda”, (*African Studies Review*, Vol.40, No. 2, Sep., 1997), p.99.

intellectual and moral capacities. The indirect rule of the Tutsis, as applied by the Belgians at the time, only worsened these images. Administrative authorities and the Church further reinforced these myths of superiority of the Tutsis. By the time Rwanda became independent, decades of myths were haunting the country, but the image of superiority was now taken by Hutus who now controlled the state.³²⁸ After a Tutsi guerrilla army invaded a border region of Rwanda in 1990, the dehumanization made a comeback, thanks to a very strong propaganda machine: speeches, rallies, extremist newspapers and radio stations. Tutsis were subjected to the worst kind of propaganda, with constant incitation to mass murder, as well as threats and prepared lists of individuals ‘to be eliminated’.³²⁹ As the massacre was approaching, dehumanization metaphors were becoming increasingly prevalent. Tutsis were considered as ‘cockroaches’, as well as ‘rats’ or ‘snakes’.³³⁰

An interesting point brought forward by Straus—who conducted interviews with perpetrators—is that his Hutu subjects would constantly go back to using a language of defense: “Many respondents equated Tutsis with “the enemy” (*unwanzi*) or with “accomplices” of “the enemy”.”³³¹ As with German perpetrators, the Hutus were convinced that the Tutsis represented a grave security threat. When Straus asked a perpetrator why he joined others in the massacre, his response is very illustrative of this point: “I will tell you: the president who maintained peace had just died, so it was said that the enemy was the Tutsi.”³³² Looking at Straus’ interviews, this parallel with the ‘Bolshevik Jews’ becomes every so clear. Another example regards the rationalization of killing women and children, the following are some of the answers: “These women and children, people said they brought food to those who were hiding”; “If the women and children remained, they could claim the goods that had been looted”; and finally, “ I told you it had been decided that we had to kill Tutsis; we did not differentiate age or sex.”³³³ Just like the Germans, the Hutus rationalized the killing of women and children to prevent a future threat.

When looking at the brutalization aspect of the murders, Straus underlines its inevitable appearance based on his interviews with former perpetrators. One respondent considered himself ‘no longer a person’. For Straus, “Both constructions suggest that witnessing violence and killing hardened and intensified the angry determination of the most violent perpetrators.”³³⁴ Because a great majority of the perpetrators of the massacre had no prior experience with killing, they would channel their trauma in an outward response: by becoming more aggressive and order others to kill as they have.³³⁵

Former Yugoslavia

³²⁸ Ibid., p.104

³²⁹ Ibid., p.110

³³⁰ Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, p.158

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., p.159

³³³ Ibid., p.164

³³⁴ Ibid., p.168

³³⁵ Ibid., pp.168-169

In former Yugoslavia, the massacre involving Bosnian Serbs and Muslims was extremely brutal in nature. Just like in Germany and Rwanda, propaganda was used prior to the war to incite Serbs to eradicate the Bosnians.³³⁶ The propaganda—mostly through the medium of television—was once again focused on security measures: it accused the future victims of ethnic cleansing of torture and brutalization of innocent people. For instance, it claimed that Muslims raped Serbian women, killing Serbs and chasing them from their territories, which they wished to ‘purify’.³³⁷ The negative portrayal of the Other began in the 1980s, with the Muslims in Kosovo, and escalated after Bosnia held its first free elections. The media, along with other leading politicians, intellectuals and religious figures, called Muslims ‘terrorists’. They alleged that they engaged in provocation and violence.³³⁸ Officials from the Serbian Orthodox Church reinforced these perceptions by labeling the Muslims as ‘defective human beings’.³³⁹ Stereotyping was the most prominent form of dehumanization. In the words of Norman Cigar, “Negative categorizing can have a devastating effect by dehumanizing the target group. It contributes to facilitating their killing as members of an undifferentiated collection of undesirables.”³⁴⁰ It became clear that the Muslims had to be dealt with in a method involving mass cleansing.

Once the war began, brutalization was very prominent among the men in the way they dealt with their victims. Many Bosnians were placed in detention camps, where they would be beaten and sometimes shot. One witness estimated that up to forty prisoners were killed at night with knives and hammers, and often then would be burned.³⁴¹ “He stated that he had witnessed the killing of one prisoner by seven guards who poured petrol on him, set him on fire and struck him upon the head with a hammer.”³⁴² The similarities with the brutalization seen in the Germans during World War II are striking. The journalist Tim Judah presents many testimonials by witnesses or former perpetrators, describing incessant cruelties daily inflicted on the victims, without any provocation. A statement made by Milan Kovacevic—a perpetrator who organized a cleansing action in the village of Omarska—further illustrates the onset of brutalization of the perpetrator: “Omarska was planned as a reception center...But then it turned into something else. I cannot explain the loss of control. I don’t think even the historians will find an explanation in the next 50 years. You could call it collective madness.”³⁴³ The most poignant instance of brutalization stems from the creation of rape camps by the Serbs. Bosnian women would be placed there and raped night and day for months, usually until they were far enough in their pregnancies to be useless to the perpetrators.³⁴⁴ The use of

³³⁶ Sylvie Matton, *Srebrenica : Un génocide annoncé*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), p.105

³³⁷ Ibid., p.107

³³⁸ Norman L. Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia : the policy of "ethnic cleansing"*, (College Station, TX : Texas A&M University Press, 1995), p.70

³³⁹ Ibid., p.71

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p.72

³⁴¹ Tim Judah, *The Serbs : history, myth, and the destruction of Yugoslavia*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p.234

³⁴² Ibid., p.233

³⁴³ Ibid., p.236

³⁴⁴ Sylvie Matton, *Srebrenica*, p.161

rape as a weapon of war becomes one of the highest instances of the brutalization of the perpetrator.

The case of the mass killing in Srebrenica, where Bosnia Serb troops executed between six thousand and eight thousand men, is also illustrative of the brutalization and dehumanization of the victim. The execution there was eerily similar to the Einsatzgruppen. Bosnians were asked to dig their own graves, while the Serbs proceeded to shoot them behind the head, most of them highly intoxicated while doing so.³⁴⁵ This resulted in very messy work and with the use of machine guns, even more havoc was created. Many men were badly wounded and were left to suffer.

These illustrations suggest that the brutalization of perpetrators and dehumanization of victims are part and parcel of the act of mass killing. In the words of the French journalist Sylvie Matton: “In Croatia and Bosnia, it was an entire army of serial killers that emerged in 1991 and then in 1992”.³⁴⁶ Bodies of the dead would be thrown like cattle into train wagons used for cattle. Bodies would be decapitated and mutilated.³⁴⁷ The dehumanization was inevitable for anyone to be able to follow through such cruelty. A directive from Mladic describes the dehumanization and cruelty: “Do you see them? They are walking like ants. [...] Get to work snipers! The ants are walking and our snipers are working.”³⁴⁸

These two examples of mass killings convey the comparative potential of the insights gained in our study of SS formations during World War II. Brutalization, dehumanization and ideology are crucial factors. The “ordinary” man needs a conviction to convince himself of the righteousness of mass killing, but the act itself deprives him, and his victims, of their humanity.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p.241

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p.159

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p.160

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The question of *why* “ordinary” individuals participate in mass violence has been debated in academic literature for decades, especially following the Holocaust. In my thesis I am trying to understand the mechanisms and the factors in place that can lead these individuals to partake in murderous actions. World War II Germany is the biggest and most analyzed case of mass violence. The SS Einsatzgruppen and the SS men in death camps provide two compelling case studies, as both groups participated directly in the systematic killing of unarmed civilians. Also, because one was more centered on an elite commanding force, while the other included more middle and lower class men, I believe these two case studies provide more of a generalized view of the perpetrators. Both of these groups incorporate Germans from all spheres of society, providing a better understanding of *why*.

I have argued that Nazi ideology has provided the necessary incentives for Germans to become perpetrators. I have shown that the SS men from my case studies supported crucial aspects of Nazi ideology especially regarding Jews and their place in the German world. I have shown how anti-Semitism increased in German society in the interwar period, following the Versailles Treaty. The interwar period was filled with hardships for Germany and with that, a polarization of “us” versus “them” and growing nationalism. Moreover, Jews were being targeted as communist partisans, further fueling these anti-Jewish feelings. The main ideas present in German society, which fed off these feelings of resentment, nationalism and the need to place blame, undoubtedly shaped the mentalities of the SS men I have looked at. I have chosen not to proceed with an in-depth analysis of Germany under Nazi rule, because instead, I decided to extract what I believe were important elements of Nazi Germany that would further illustrate the type of societal background these SS men lived under. I would also like to mention that there were certainly limitations in the freedom of expression Germans had under Nazi rule; however, I believe I have provided enough elements proving that the perpetrators held strong convictions with regards to their actions.

I further argued that the causal sequence of motivations began with that of ideology and was later followed by dehumanization and brutalization. Dehumanization of the victim and the brutalization of the perpetrator are two key complimentary mechanisms that are necessary for mass killing to happen, once this ideology has been set into place. A state of mind does not necessarily push one to act on his ideas. However, with the firm belief that the enemies are not human and do not deserve to be part of the human realm, the act of killing becomes more feasible. In addition to this, I argue that the routinization of actions as well as a disconnect between the perpetrator and his victims, further motivates the perpetrator to partake in the killings.

In this thesis, I have illustrated how men can go from ordinary citizens to brutal murderers. I began with an analysis of interwar society in Germany, and its inevitable impacts on the future perpetrators it has shaped; in addition, I analyzed the polarization between the Jews and the non-Jews heightened by fervent nationalism. I also looked at party adherence dates, indoctrination tactics and orders. For all three factors, my findings point towards the element of rational choice and of belief in the righteousness of these men’s orders. The most crucial element to my analysis regards the choice given to every

perpetrator to participate, or not, in the actions asked of them. With this, I believe it is clear that these men were motivated by their beliefs in Nazi ideology with the help of dehumanization of the victims and brutalization of the perpetrators.

There are certainly limitations to my work. First, the lack of primary sources, especially concerning the SS cadres in death camps, made my analysis of this case more difficult and open for questioning. When looking at the Einsatzgruppen, I mostly had access to sources regarding officers or commanders, which lends certain aspects to interpretation. I did try to provide as much information as possible in order to illustrate my argument as applied to these men; nevertheless, it can be debated. Second, when looking at the societal background for these men, I chose to look at a certain number of indicators; therefore, more details could have been added and possibly some elements of society would have been different in practice. Nonetheless, I did try to draw as close a portrait of German interwar society as I could, considering the length and limitations of this paper.

The purpose of this thesis is to attempt at understanding the aforementioned mechanisms and their affects on “ordinary” individuals. I believe this framework can be applied to other cases of mass violence, such as I have shown through the cases of Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. Certainly, the ideology stemmed from different backgrounds and developed in very different ways; however, when thinking back to both external cases I have looked at, we see the presence of a leader with a specific ideology in mind. These ideologies differed but in the end, they resulted in the killing of thousands of unarmed victims, based on their ethnicity or religion. Furthermore, both dehumanization and brutalization are inter-related factors that help propel the killers into action, as I have shown with two of the external cases of mass violence.

Two more avenues of research come to mind when looking comparatively at my work. First, it would be interesting to see how my argument would apply to another case study within Nazi Germany: the Wehrmacht. The army troops also committed atrocities during the war, making this a compelling case of perpetrators to study more in depth. Second, it would also be very interesting to look at my argument of ideology, dehumanization and brutalization, as applied to the case of former-Yugoslavia. Because the case is more recent generating more primary sources, and holds a lot of comparative elements to Nazi Germany with regards to the racism present in society, the eerily similar case could provide a very interesting study with fascinating findings.

To conclude, I wished to look at why these men participated in mass killings and I have found my answer. I truly believe that with the right hardships, societal mindset and a charismatic but radical leader, a great majority of individuals who would never believe in killing another human being could very easily participate in mass violence or mass killing. It is not something preventable, yet it can be observed. I believe it is imperative to first try to understand this phenomenon, as it is still very current to our history, before attempting to prevent it. I believe that almost no individual is safe from becoming something he would never think he could be.

Appendix 1: Timeline of the Holocaust

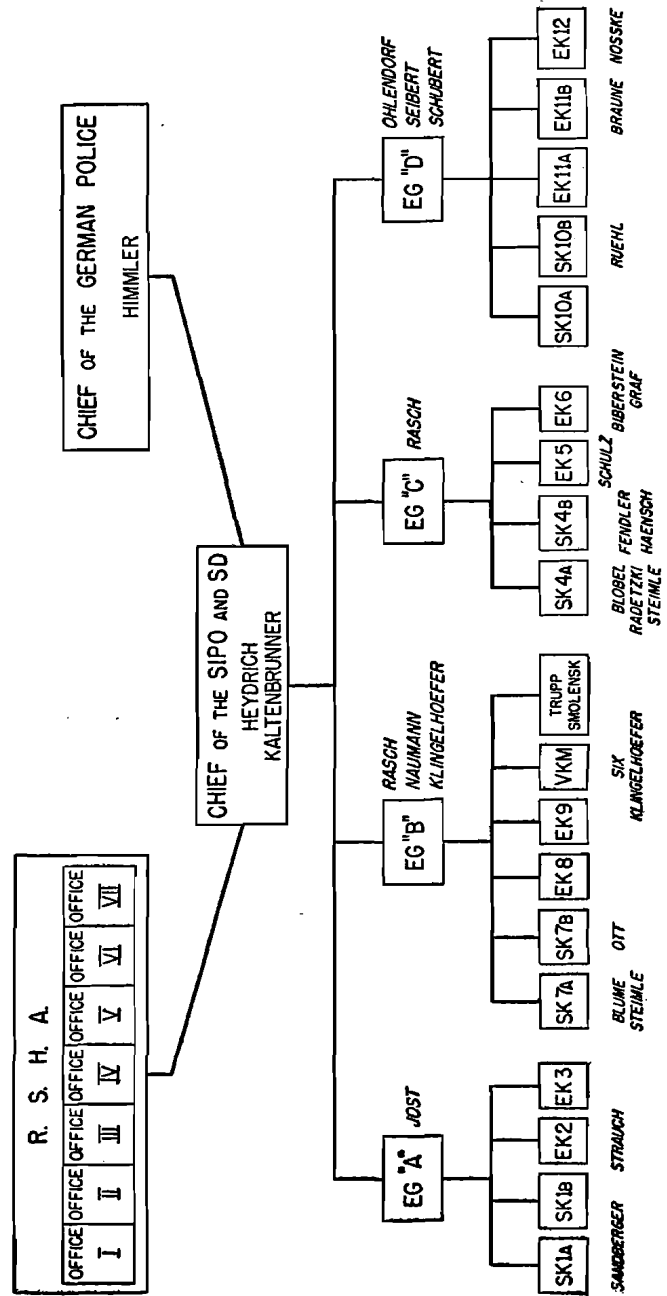
The Holocaust 1933-1945		
30 th January	Hitler became Chancellor of Germany	1933
22 nd March	First concentration camp opened in Dachau	1933
1 st April	Boycott of Jewish shops and businesses	1933
24 th November	Homeless, alcoholics and unemployed sent to camps	1933
17 th May	Jews prohibited from having health insurance	1934
15 th September	Nuremberg Laws took away Jewish rights of citizenship	1935
13 th March	Jews in Austria persecuted following 'Anschluss'	1938
8 th July	Munich synagogue destroyed	1938
9 th – 10 th November	Kristallnacht – night of extreme violence against Jews	1938
12 th October	Austrian and Czech Jews deported to Poland	1939
23 rd November	All Jews in Poland forced to wear yellow star armband	1939
20 th May	Auschwitz opened	1940
16 th November	Warsaw ghetto sealed off. 400,000 Jews were inside	1940
July	Mass murder of Russian Jews by Einsatzgruppen began	1941
31 st July	Reinhard Heydrich chosen to implement 'Final Solution'	1941
8 th December	Chelmno, first death camp, became operational	1941
January	Mass gassing began at Auschwitz-Birkenau	1942
Summer	Jews from occupied Europe taken to death camps	1942
29 th January	Order issued for all gypsies to be sent to death camps	1943
19 th April – 16 th May	Warsaw ghetto uprising	1943
Late	Many death camps closed and evidence destroyed	1943
14 th May – 8 th July	440,000 Hungarian Jews transported to Auschwitz	1944
30 th October	Auschwitz gas chambers used for the last time	1944
27 th January	Forced death marches from camps began	1945
30 th April	Hitler committed suicide	1945
20 th November	Nazi's put on trial at Nuremberg War Trials	1945

Source: History on the Net.
"Holocaust Timeline". URL:

<http://www.historyonthenet.com/shop/history/timelines-and-keywords/timelines/holocaust-timeline.html>

**Appendix 2:
Organization of
the SS
Einsatzgruppen**

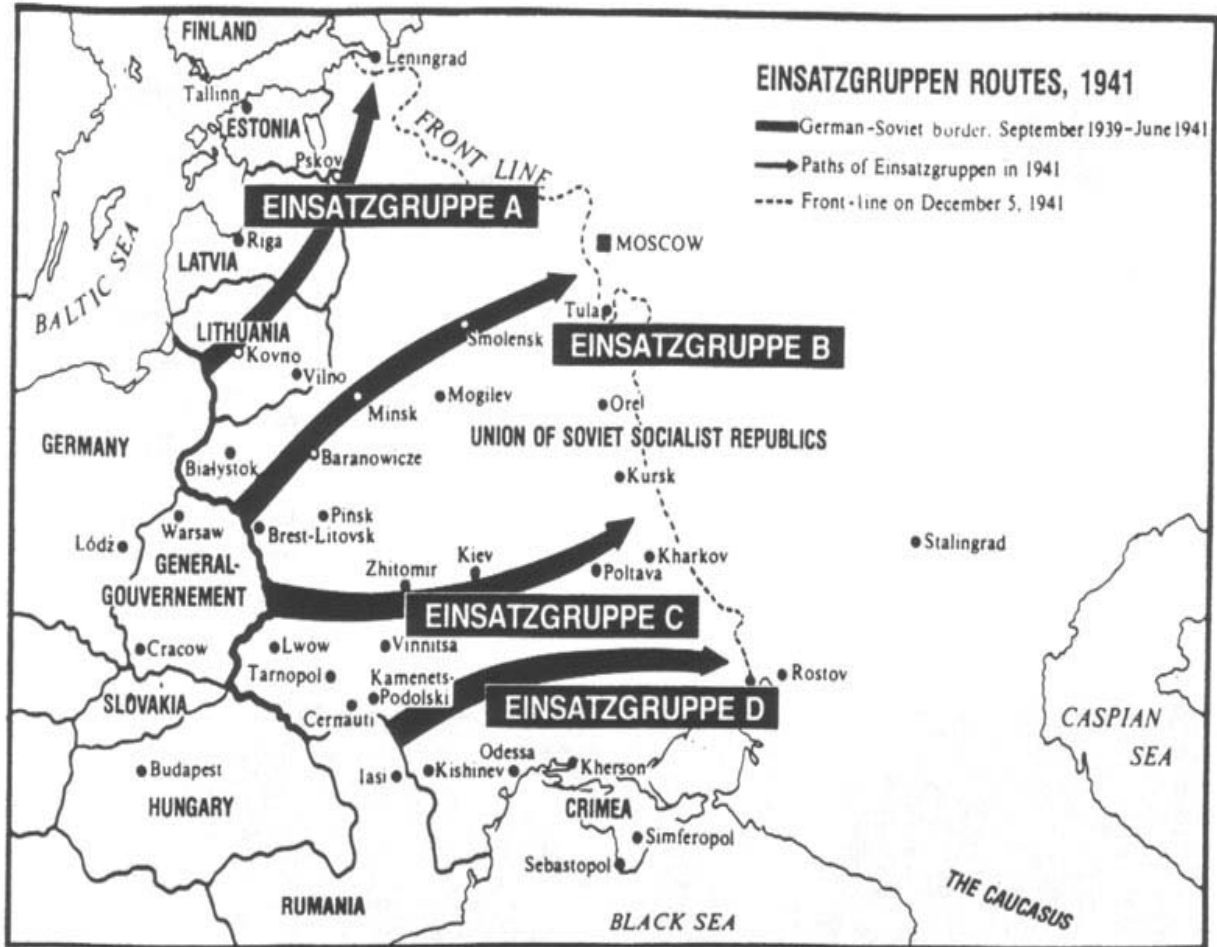
**ORGANIZATIONAL CHART
OF THE
REICH SECURITY MAIN OFFICE
AND THE
EINSATZGRUPPEN**



90

Source: Nuremberg Military Tribunals. *Case 9: U.S. vs. Otto Ohlendorf et al.* ("Einsatzgruppen Case"). URL link: http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Indictments.pdf#page=176

Appendix 3: Map of Einsatzgruppen Action



Source: Bill Schechter. *Jewish Generations Shtetlinks*, “Kholmich”. URL: <http://www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/kholmich/photos/Maps/MapEinsatzgruppen1.JPG>

Appendix 4: Talled Victims of Einsatzgruppen

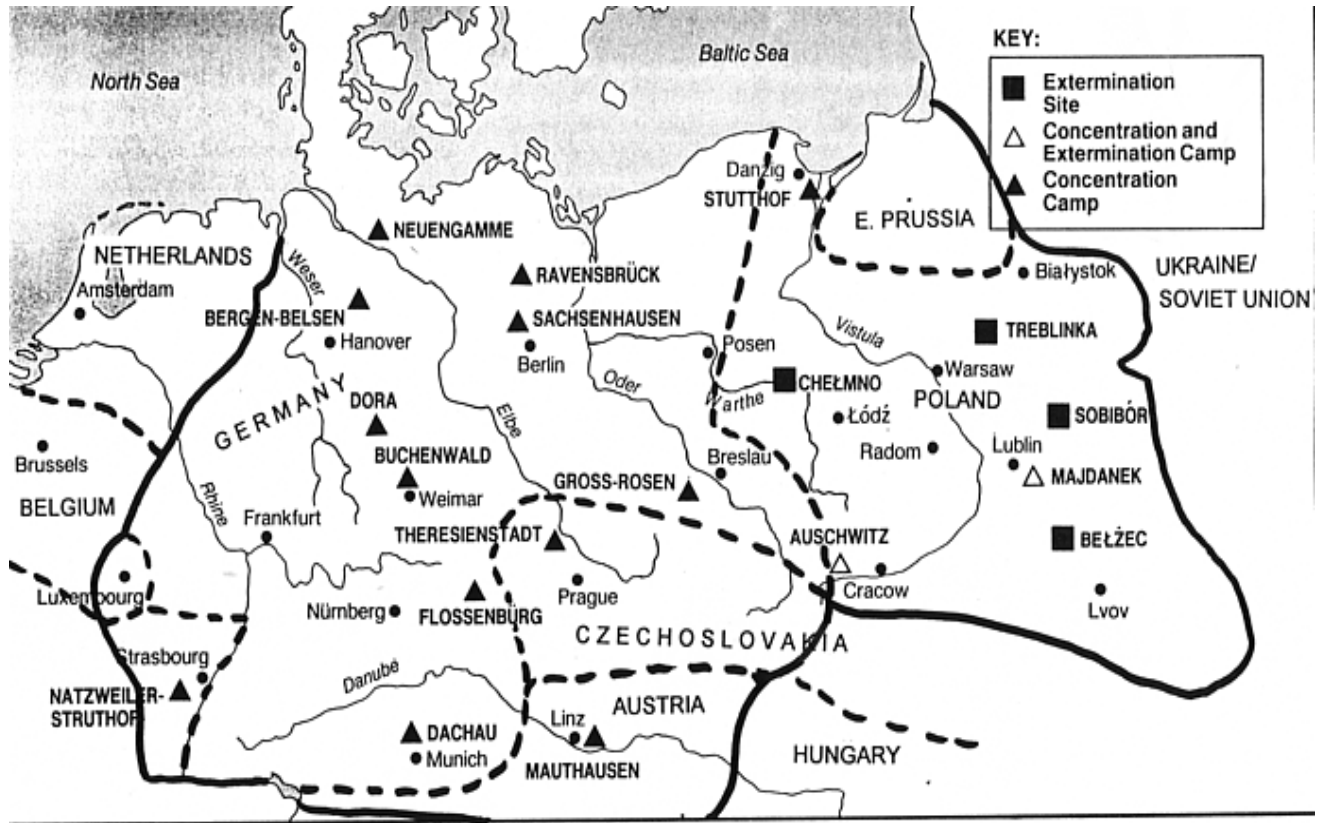
Enclosure 8: Survey of the number of executed persons

	Area	Jews	Communists	Total
Lithuania	Kovno town and surroundings.	31,914	80	31,994
	Shaulyai	41,382	763	42,145
	Vilnyus	7,015	17	7,032
Total ...		80,311	860	81,171
Latvia	Riga town and surroundings..			6,378
	Yelgava			3,576
	Lepaya			11,860
	Valmera			209
	Daugavpils	9,256	589	9,845
Total ...		30,025	1,843	31,868
Esthonia		474	684	1,158
White Ruthenia		7,620		7,620
Lithuania		80,311	860	81,171
Latvia		30,025	1,845	31,868
Esthonia		474	684	1,158
White Ruthenia		7,620		7,620
Total ...		118,430	3,387	121,817

Source: Nuremberg Military Tribunals. *Case 9: U.S. vs. Otto Ohlendorf et al.* ("Einsatzgruppen Case"), p.166.

http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Indictments.pdf#page=176

Appendix 5: Map of Death Camps in Poland



Map of Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps
 from: Arno Mayer, *Why did the Heavens not Darken? The "Final Solution in History* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), xvii.

— BOUNDARY OF REICH
 - - - PRE-1939 NATIONAL BORDERS

Source:

Professor Harold Marcuse, "Syllabus HIST 33d: Concentration Camps 1898-1945".

University of California Santa Barbara College, URL:

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/33d05/33d05L05Camps.htm>

Bibliography

Books

- Arad, Yitzhak. *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1965.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernité et Holocaust*. (translated from English by Enzo Traverso) Paris, France: éditions La Fabrique, 2002.
- Breitman, Richard. *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
- Browning, Christopher R. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1998.
- Cigar, Norman L. *Genocide in Bosnia : the policy of "ethnic cleansing."* College Station, TX : Texas A&M University Press, 1995.
- Dower, John W. *War Without Mercy: race and power in the pacific war*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.
- Firedländer, Saul. *L'Allemagne Nazie et les Juifs*. (Originally published as: *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939*). Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil, 1997.
- Gilbert, Gustave M. *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*. London, UK: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1986.
- Goldhagen, Daniel J. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- Gutman, Yisrael and Michael Berenbaum (eds). *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Harris, Whitney R. *Tyranny on Trial : The evidence at Nuremberg*. Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1954.
- Hilberg, Raul. *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*. (Originally published as: *The Destruction of the European Jews*). Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2006

- Höhne, Heinz. *The Order of the Death's Head: The story of Hitler's SS*. London: Secker & Warburg Ltd. 1969.
- Höss, Rudolph. *Death Dealer: the memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1996.
- Ingrao, Christian. *Croire et détruire: Les intellectuels dans la machine de guerre SS*. Paris: Fayard, 2010.
- Ingrao, Christian. *Les chasseurs noirs: La brigade Dirlewanger, Saint-Amond-Montrond, France* : Perrin, 2006.
- Judah, Tim. *The Serbs : history, myth, and the destruction of Yugoslavia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Klee, Ernst, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess (eds). *"The Good Old Days": The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*. New York, NY: Konecky & Konecky, 1991.
- Langbein, Hermann. *People in Auschwitz*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press; Washington, DC : Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004.
- Langerbein, Helmut. *Hitler's Death Squads: The Logic of Mass Murder*. Texas, US: Texas A&M University Press, 2004.
- Longerich, Peter. *Holocaust: the Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Matton, Sylvie. *Srebrenica: Un génocide annoncé*. Paris: Flammarion, 2005.
- Mazower, Mark. *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008.
- Milgram, Stanley. *Obedience to Authority, An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974.
- Mosse, George L. *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*. New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1978.
- Pennock, Roland J. and John W. Chapman (eds). *Coercion*. Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1972.
- Sémelin, Jacques. *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Sereny, Gitta. *Into That Darkness*. London, UK: Deutsch, 1974.

- Schelvis, Jules. *Sobibor: A History of a Nazi Death Camp*. New York, NY: Berg, 2007.
- Shirer, William L. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1959.
- Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010.
- Straus, Scott. *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Valentino, Benjamin. *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Wittmann, Rebecca. *Beyond Justice: The Auschwitz Trial*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Zimbardo, Philip G. *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. London, UK: Rider, 2007.

Chapters in Book

- Browning, Christopher. "Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans", in Shandley, Robert R. (ed.). *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998: 55-74.
- Kelman, Herbert C. and V. Lee Hamilton. "Sanctioned Massacres", in Neil J. Kressel (ed.). *Political Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. New York, NY: Paragon House, 1993: 232-240.
- Lasik, Aleksander. "Historical-Sociological Profile of the Auschwitz SS". In Gutman, Yisrael and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994: 271-287.
- Matthaus, Jürgen. "Antisemitism as an Offer: The Ideological Indoctrination of the SS and Police Corps during the Holocaust, Lessons and Legacies," in Dagmar Herzog, ed. *Lessons and Legacies, vii: The Holocaust in International Perspectives*. Northwestern University Press: 2006: 116-28.
- Welzer, Harald. "On Killing and Morality: How Ordinary People Become Mass Murderers" in Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (eds.), *Ordinary People As Mass Murderers : Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008: 165-183.

Articles

Koehl, Robert. "Toward an SS Typology: Social Engineers". *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. Vol. 18 No. 2 (Jan. 1959): 113-126.

Mann, Michael. "Were the Perpetrators of Genocide "Ordinary Men" or "Real Nazis"? Results from Fifteen Hundred Biographies". *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Winter 2000): 331-366.

Tenenbaum, Joseph. "The Einsatzgruppen". *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 17 (Jan. 1955): 43-64.

Uvin, Peter. "Prejudice, Crisis and Genocide in Rwanda". *African Studies Review*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Sep., 1997): 91-115.

Websites

Blatt, Thomas T. "The Confrontation with the Murderer". URL link (retrieved March 20 2011): <http://www.sobibor.info/confrontation.html>

Court Documents

Nuremberg Military Tribunals. *Case 9: U.S. vs. Otto Ohlendorf et al. ("Einsatzgruppen Case")*. URL link: http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Indictments.pdf#page=176

Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal. *Vol XI: 8 April 1946-17 April 1946*. URL link: http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Vol-XI.pdf

Film

Bickel, Rolf and Dietrich Wagner (dir.). *Verdict on Auschwitz: The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963-1965 (Strafsache 4 Ks 2/63)*. 1993/2005. Germany.

Essay

Segal, Raz. "Between "ethnic cleansing" and "final solution": The Persecution and Destruction of Subcarpathian Rus' Jews during World War II", *Danyliw Seminar*, 2010.