

Did the Holocaust Occur Because of Evil Men?

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I disagree with the assertion that “the Holocaust occurred because of evil people such as those described in *Ordinary Men*.” That assertion is much too simplistic, and it relies on the premise that every single person who participated in the Holocaust was ultimately driven to act solely because they were evil. This was not the case. Certainly, it is extremely difficult to determine individual motives for every single person who was involved in the Holocaust, but by looking at what actually occurred, and how it was handled by the people responsible for carrying out the orders, we can see that it is impossible to claim that the Holocaust was caused simply by evil. Furthermore, Freud’s concept of civilization does seem to be able to explain many aspects of the behavior of Police Battalion 101, which will be discussed further on in the essay.

The biggest problem with the given assertion is that it is making a blanket moral judgment about every person who took part in the Holocaust. Doing so eliminates a person’s claim to objectivity in the matter, and it creates an incomplete account of what actually occurred and how it came about. By claiming that evil people perpetrated the Holocaust, one is effectively demonizing them by writing off their actions as being due to their “evilness,” which leaves no room to investigate the actual justifications of the men involved. This dehumanizes, to a point, the various aspects of the individual, which were actually an important factor in understanding how and why the Holocaust occurred. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning says “the policemen in the battalion who carried out the massacres and deportations, like the much smaller number who refused or evaded, were human beings” (xx). From the beginning he makes it clear that it is essential that the people involved be looked at as human beings, as that is what they are. The actual reasoning for their actions deserves to be looked at in a much wider scope than the assertion above provides.

The identity and characteristics of those who were members of Police Battalion 101 must be looked at first, as they provide a much better picture of the individual and his actions. As Browning describes in his book, the men in the battalion were far from being indoctrinated radical members of the NSDAP. They were largely normal middle age men from Hamburg (which was considered one of the least nazified cities in Germany) who were of the working-class, and many of these men had families. The average age in the battalion was thirty-nine. This is important, because it means that they were not radicalized youth who had known nothing but Nazi rule and its ideologies. Also significant was the fact that only around 25 percent of the men actually were members of the Nazi Party (Browning 48). Those that were members of the Nazi Party, or of the SS/SA, were not considered very promising soldiers, as is evidenced by them serving in a reserve battalion. Because of their positions in life it is very difficult to see their actions as being a product of evil.

In Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, one is provided with a view into the actions of this large group of individuals, the Reserve Police Battalion 101, which was responsible for killing and transporting Jews in Poland. The view provided by the book is an important one, because it successfully demonstrates the importance of examining the true motives of the people involved. From the uncharacteristically detailed records of their actions in the Holocaust it is possible to reconstruct much of what went on at an almost personal level. It is important to note that a large number of these records are in the form of interrogations made in the early 1960s, around twenty years after the end of the war. This possibly raises some questions on the validity of the statements made, as details may have been forgotten, repressed, or changed, especially by those facing prosecution, but by comparing the accounts to others, and to actual historical data, Browning was able to filter out a large part of the inaccuracies. These reports show that in the

beginning, many of the men were incredibly emotionally upset about the killing, even the commanding officer, Major Trapp. In the first action at Jósefów, where the men were actually responsible for carrying out the executions of Jews, Trapp gave his men the option to decline to participate, and he protected those that did from any repercussions. Initially though, only between ten and twelve men actually took Trapp's offer (Browning 59). Trapp himself was incredibly emotionally disturbed by the killing, and was seen weeping heavily at his headquarters (Browning 58). The small number of men who declined to participate can be partially explained by Milgram's experiments on human behavior, which showed that people were strongly influenced by authority figures, peer pressure, and the distance between them and their victim (Browning 172-175). It is also reported that during the course of the killing, many men either asked to be relieved, or merely slipped off into the woods until it was over. As the number of the killings that the men had taken part in increased, one notices that quite a number of the men began to become desensitized by the nonstop murder, though there were always a portion who continued to refuse to kill or those who would evade responsibility whenever they could. Sometimes the repressed emotions of the men manifested themselves in other visible ways. One such example is one of the commanders, Wolfgang Hoffman, who began to suffer from horrible stomach cramps that often coincided with planned actions. Because of this he was relieved of duty, but he then went on to take part in action on the front lines in Russia (Browning 119). It is difficult to establish that his illness was entirely psychological, but it seems incredibly coincidental that it occurred whenever an action was to take place, and that the symptoms seemed to disappear once he was no longer responsible for overseeing the murder of Jews. These experiences of the men are proof that can be used to counter the assertion that those who participated in the massive killing were all evil. Clearly, their experiences and how they dealt

with the killing emotionally seriously cast doubt on the claim that they were evil. They were men, and each person handled the emotional burden differently. Some refused to kill outright, while others often asked to be relieved once some sort of personalization had occurred, such as meeting a German Jew from Hamburg. There were also men who were resolved to do their duty as ordered, and there were a few that seemed to take pleasure in killing. The key idea here is that there was a multitude of different attitudes concerning the killing, and it is important to realize that the men in Police Battalion 101 did not all believe in the Nazi ideology and policy of racial extermination, even though they were responsible for carrying it out.

Freud's idea of civilization and the way mankind interacts with civilization does seem to be able to explain some of what occurred in Police Battalion 101. Freud's definition of civilization is that it is basically the evolution that occurred based on both love and the struggle of mankind to survive in the world (Freud 82). Freud also notes that men are actually aggressive and hostile in nature and exquisitely explains man's behavior:

As a result their neighbor is not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Freud 69)

This behavior, as described by Freud, essentially mirrors the full range of actions of the men in Police Battalion 101 as soon as they came into a role of power over other individuals. Every single member of the battalion at one point or another engaged in or was accomplice to one of those actions. Though some members did not engage in all of these acts, a large portion of the reserve battalion, and fellow collaborating Poles in Poland, at one point or another were responsible for actions against the Jews, which corresponded with Freud's analysis of human

nature. It must be mentioned though that some members of the battalion did attempt to prevent some of the actions (aside from killing) from occurring, such as Major Trapp, who announced, “we have the task to shoot Jews, but not to beat or torture them” (Browning 87).

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud claims that men strive after happiness and attempt to sustain the happiness that they find (Freud 25). This he calls the pleasure principle, which is threatened by three different things, among which is one’s “relations to other men” and the suffering from this source is “perhaps the most painful to us than any other” (Freud 26). This suffering arises out of the sense of guilt that civilization has created in mankind that, according to Freud, was a response to man’s aggression (Freud 101). This sense of guilt, the super-ego, is strengthened and imbued by society with many of the moral and ethical values that the society considers important. Because of this, acts of aggression are regulated by the powerful sense of guilt, which is a major cause of unhappiness within society. It is obvious that this was the case for many of the men of Police Battalion 101. The acts that they were committing were causing many of them unhappiness. It could be said that those that suffered the most from unhappiness had stronger super-egos, which created a more powerful sense of guilt within those people (such as major Trapp) than in others. Perhaps the growing callousness and indifference to the task of killing was a result of their super-egos being suppressed, or possibly being retrained to accept the new “values” they were being forced into.

In line with what Freud wrote concerning unhappiness and the alleviation of this happiness, many of the men in Police Battalion 101 obviously suffered emotionally from their role in the killing, i.e. their relations to other men. They also used many of the methods prescribed by Freud to lessen the unhappiness that they felt. As discussed above, every person handled the killing differently, and these differences agree with Freud’s statement for finding a

method to negate this unhappiness that “there is no golden rule which applies to everyone: every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved” (Freud 34). One of the three methods that Freud mentions to alleviate unhappiness is intoxication. This method was used widely among those responsible for killing, especially the *Hilfswillige* (Hiwis).¹ Even many of those who were Nazis and very anti-Semitic began to drink heavily, such as Lieutenant Gnade, who in Poland “degenerated into a drunkard” (Browning 82). Freud also claims that another method used to ease unhappiness is substitutive satisfaction, which is basically the creation of psychological illusions that are separate from actual reality (Freud 24). This especially seemed the case for one battalion officer who contented himself with killing only children because he was able to convince himself that he was doing them a favor by being compassionate, as they would otherwise die without their already murdered parents (Browning 73).

Ultimately, these men did what they did not because they were evil, but because they were human. This is not meant to alleviate any guilt from the men for their actions, but it is to acknowledge that there were numerous motives for their actions that cannot be labeled solely as “evil.” Furthermore, it is also obvious that a multitude of factors, both social and psychological, were responsible for what occurred during the Holocaust. The effect of social and psychological factors on human behavior was also reinforced through Zimbardo and Milgram’s experiments of human behavior and Primo Levi’s “The Gray Zone.”² Unfortunately, there was not enough space to further address these ideas within the essay. From the evidence provided one can also see that, indeed, Freud’s concept of civilization can adequately explain the actions of Police Battalion 101. His description of human aggression and what man actually desires to do to his neighbor

¹ For an example, see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 82-83.

² For more information on the behavioral experiments, see Browning 167-187.

seems almost prophetic, as it describes almost perfectly the aggressions of the battalion towards the Jews. Though the actions of Police Battalion 101 were hideous, one must remember that the men were not some evil force, but had been everyday people, who, up until the war, had led an everyday life, yet they still managed to carry out cold blooded murder of innocents.

Works Cited

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York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.