

**THE
HOLOCAUST
AND
HISTORY** The Known
the Unknown, the Disputed, and
the Reexamine

EDITED BY

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54. Doc I.896A. RvO.
55. *Ibid*.
56. Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, p. 993.
57. For a survey, see H. von der Dunk, "Jews and the Rescue of Jews in the Netherlands in Historical Writing," in Y. Gutman and G. Greif, *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period* (Jerusalem, 1988).
58. G. Hirschfeld, "Niederlande," in W. Benz, *Dimension des Volkermords* (Munich, 1991), pp. 137–65.
59. A balanced survey of the factors that contributed to the large number of victims in the Netherlands is contained in J. C. H. Blom, "The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands: A Comparative West European Perspective," *European History Quarterly* 19 (1989): 333–51.
60. The wolf trap was a Germanic symbol to which protective powers were ascribed. The insignia was popular among SS-minded Dutch National Socialists.
61. Christopher R. Browning, "Bureaucracy and Mass Murder: The German Administrators' Comprehension of the Final Solution," in *Comprehending the Holocaust: Historical and Literary Research*, ed. A. Cohen, J. Gelber, C. Wardi (Frankfurt/M., 1988).

21.

DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGEN

Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans?

Neither Christopher Browning nor I have enough space in this forum to respond fully to the positions of the other. We cannot here go into a lengthy, detailed examination of the evidence, which in the end would be necessary for us to have a satisfactory exchange of views.¹ So I confine myself to a few more general thoughts. Before beginning, let me say that Browning's views are challenging and helpful. This will, I hope, be the beginning of an ongoing discussion that will help to clarify the issues—not just for Christopher Browning and me, but perhaps also for others, who may not have devoted as much attention to these themes as we have.

Just as Browning has chosen for his response a few of the many criticisms of his account that I have offered, for lack of space I too cannot address every point that he raises. For example, I leave untouched the large and complex subject of how to read the data about German antisemitism, except to say that even the work of the authors that Browning discusses can be read differently. Indeed, David Bankier's book² can more plausibly be read to argue the opposite of what Browning asserts. So I confine myself here to clarifying my criticisms—and therefore the differences that separate us—and to responding to Browning's responses.

Let me start by saying that the differences between us are more various than Christopher Browning's response suggests (even though the ones that he discusses are substantial). They can be highlighted by using one central theme as an illustration: the degree of brutality that the members of the battalion inflicted upon the victims, a subject which Browning in his contribution to this volume could touch upon only in passing.

First, there are differences in the *empirical accounts* that we would construct. Although I think that his reconstruction of the battalion's life history is generally admirable—and my appreciation is based on a complete reading of the internally contradictory and, in the end, partial, source material—I do take issue somewhat with his account of what took place. In my view the emphasis is at times misplaced (Naturally, from the existing material, we all choose what to present and, from that what to emphasize. But, it need hardly be said that this does not mean that all readings are equally good. Ultimately, each must be explained and justified.) I think that in his book, Browning generally understates two matters: the degree of brutality of these men—even though I am sure many, upon reading the book, find more than enough—and their general voluntarism in killing.

Second, we have differences on the *evaluation of sources*, which is an exceedingly complex subject that I can but touch on here. There are three points:

First, it is true that Police Battalion 101 contains testimony that is more forthcoming than most of what is contained in many of the records of the Federal Republic's legal investigations. My criticism, by no means ignores this. Contrary to what Browning suggests, I do not lump this testimony with that from the members of other institutions of killing. It should be said, however, that there is honest and revealing testimony in many other cases as well. I do not think that Browning was implying that there was not, yet we should not create such a strong distinction between the testimony of the men of Police Battalion 101 and that of others: some members of each institution are forthcoming and truthful, many are not. We have to think about how we should deal with the individual testimonies of all those who give it, whatever their roles in the events, whatever institutions each was a member of when he or she contributed to mass slaughter.

Second, it needs to be emphasized that lying to minimize physical and cognitive involvement in the mass murder is rampant in perpetrator testimony. There are virtually endless examples, even from the testimony of members of Police Battalion 101. When asked during an interrogation why he had not mentioned a particular killing operation of the battalion, one of its men explained that he kept quiet about it because he thought that others would not mention it.³

If we were to accept the perpetrators' self-exculpatory versions of events, then we would frequently have to believe the following: that in a killing operation in which some company in its entirety is known to have participated, only a few of the men killed (with rifles) thousands of Jews, and only a few more were there giving logistical support. We would have to conclude this because only a few admit to having killed. And because not enough killers were engaged in the particular killing operation to have taken so many lives, we would also have to conclude, contrary to what we know, that few Jews died.

It needs to be acknowledged, as Browning does, that such problems exist in the record. Yet it must also be recognized that these prevarications are systematically and explicably motivated. We, therefore, need to face squarely the problems posed by the misleading testimonies, and to discuss how best to avoid being taken in by them.

The Germans, in focusing on the subject of their own brutality, consistently understate its magnitude. This is obvious. Add up all the testimony of survivors on the one hand and, on the other, what the perpetrators say about brutality—either for the Holocaust as a whole, or for any ghetto or camp—and in the sheer quantity and the quality of the brutality, two very different accounts emerge. Who is to be believed? Yes, the survivors often cannot tell much about the individual perpetrators, as in the case of an itinerant unit such as Police Battalion 101. Yet, they still can convey the atmosphere and the general tenor of the perpetrators' deeds, which can be strikingly different from that created by the perpetrators' self-serving portrayal.

As to Police Battalion 101 itself, take Józefów. The killers themselves concede that, after their roundup of Jews in Józefów, Jewish corpses littered the streets and homes of the ghetto. Yet of the more than 200 battalion men who gave testimony (not all of them were involved in the ghetto roundup), only two confess that they killed during the operation. So we have a *demonstrably gross* underreporting of the individuals' own killing and brutality in Police Battalion 101.

Of course, we should not lightly assume and assert that so much more occurred

than the perpetrators report; but we must be aware that the perpetrators systematically conceal and enormously underreport their brutality, creating a bias in the records available to us. It is therefore crucial to adopt a skeptical stance toward the perpetrators' accounts—especially their accounts of their motivations—and also to use Jewish sources in reconstructing the events.

Third, another general area of difference is over *matters of interpretation*: What is the significance of the brutality? Christopher Browning thinks that it stems from the pressure to get a difficult job done quickly, to undermining, and from the consequent need to be brutal in order to get results. He writes: "The greater the pressure on the German ghetto clearers in terms of manpower, the greater their ferocity and brutality to get the job done."⁴ Brutality, in this view, is a utilitarian response of sorts to objective difficulties. It is functional and pragmatic. No doubt this did occur. But pragmatism cannot be seen as having been the major cause of brutality and cruelty. Once again, Józefów provides a telling example: here the ratio of Germans to Jews was a substantially higher than in Międzyrzec; the city that Browning presents almost as a paradigmatic case of pragmatic brutality. So in Józefów there was less pressure on the perpetrators. Yet the brutality in Józefów was itself enormous. As I pointed out in my review of *Ordinary Men*, even in Międzyrzec, the brutality was clearly not merely or principally pragmatic:

According to survivors—accounts that are entirely absent from this book—the cruelty that day was anything but instrumental. It was wanton, sadistic. At the marketplace the Jews, who had been forced to squat for hours, were "mocked" (*khoy-zek gomacht*) and "kicked." And some of the Germans organized "a game" (*shpil*) of "tossing apples and whoever was struck by the apple was then killed." This sport was continued at the railway station, with empty liquor bottles. "Bottles were tossed over Jewish heads and whoever was struck by a bottle was dragged out of the crowd and beaten murderously amid roaring laughter. Then some of those who were thus mangled (*secharget*) were shot." Afterward the dead were loaded on the train bound for Treblinka, together with the living. Small wonder that in the recollections of the victims—though not in the recollections of the perpetrators, or in this book—these ordinary Germans appeared not as mere murderers . . . but as "two-legged beasts" filled with "bloodthirstiness."⁵

This description highlights the general differences that exist between us in the empirical accounts that we give, in our evaluation and use of sources, and in the way in which we interpret and explain the material.

Let me turn now to the heart of the matter: to say that there were other people—non-Germans—who did do what these Germans did, should not cause us to leap to the conclusion that these Germans were therefore "ordinary men." It may lead us to conclude this, but only after careful investigation.

Sociologically, there is no doubt that almost all of the men of Police Battalion 101 were "ordinary Germans," men of German nationality who were not distinguished by background, personality, or previous political affiliation or behavior as having been unusually likely or fit to be genocidal executioners. But for them to have been ordinary men, then the "German" part of this must have been irrelevant. That would mean that any men (perhaps harboring some "negative racial stereotypes," as Browning terms it in his essay), any men placed in these conditions, in this institu-

tion, would have killed Jews when they knew that they did not have to. It is worth emphasizing that the commander of Police Battalion 101 announced to his men before their first killing operation that they did not have to kill. Some of the men accepted his offer, and the others saw that they were not punished.

If my reading of Browning's book is correct, his explanation for the men's essentially having agreed to be mass executioners is mainly a situational one. The men's conception of the deed, which included the identity of the victims, did not contribute to their voluntarism—namely their willingness to kill—in any significant way. Indeed, the book ends with an explicit statement to this effect in the form of a question: "If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?" Browning does not say: what group of antisemites, or what group of men with "negative racial stereotypes," but rather "what group of men." Circumstances are the cause.

Browning gives a situational explanation. In his essay, it appears to me that he is backtracking a bit, discussing the importance of "negative racial stereotypes." Yet in the book, he gives a situational explanation. These men were reluctant killers who, so to speak, did the best that they could in trying circumstances. They were aware of the futility of refusal—the Jews would have been killed by others anyway—and they felt pressure to live up to their obligations to one another. They did it for their buddies.

To the extent that Browning does believe that "negative racial stereotypes" did play a causal role in producing the deaths of so many men, women, and children, it would be interesting to hear from him an elaboration and specification of what that role was *precisely*. I do not think that he elaborates the content of these negative stereotypes. I would also like to learn how "negative" they indeed were. Some "negatives," it need hardly be said, are more negative than others. Did they believe that Jews were stingy and clannish (to take favorite negative stereotypes of the American social landscape), or that they were a major source of Germany's woes and a major threat to the future well-being of Germany? There are enormous differences among the triad of types of antisemitisms—latent, traditional, or deep-seated—which Browning lists as having been the common property of European societies. The differences matter and need to be explained.

Moreover, I would like to learn whether these beliefs—whatever they were—were artifacts of the pressure of war or (as the book suggests) of "race war," or had they been inculcated in these men as *ordinary members of German society*? If the latter, then we might be back to the proposition that they were ordinary Germans and not ordinary men. After all, types of prejudice (that is, specific prejudices against certain groups), the distribution of such prejudices among a given population, and their salience for individuals and a country as a whole, vary greatly from society to society.

I am not claiming that there is something organic about the prejudice of German or Germans, and I am not maintaining that these were some kind of "specifically German behavioral modes"—which, I hasten to add, was not my formulation, but that of someone else, and I am not quite sure what it would mean. It just seems to me that we cannot ignore the public antisemitic (and, more broadly, as Henry Friedlander reminds us, racist) culture of Germany—which was anything but ordinary. (I should also make clear that, Browning's melding of our views notwithstanding,

standing, I by no means agree with much of Lucy Dawidowicz's formulation. I have never said, and do not hold the view, that the German people were "deranged" by a delusional mass psychosis.")

Now, it was the case that a widespread and politically potent antisemitism characterized not just Germany but also other peoples in other areas of Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe. The Germans were able to find willing, even enthusiastic helpers in many corners of Europe, again, particularly in parts of Eastern Europe. Browning argues that the Ukrainians whom he discusses should be thought of as analogous to the men of Police Battalion 101. Perhaps, I have not studied them intensively, so I cannot speak definitively about them. Yet from the evidence that he has presented in his paper, I am not convinced that these Ukrainians demonstrate that it is indeed "ordinary men" who did and would be willing to do what these Germans did. In fact, it appears that very little is known about them. As Browning himself acknowledges, we also know next to nothing about the Luxembourgers. What we can say is that Ukraine was anything but a region untouched by antisemitism.

We do know, however, that not all ordinary men were willing to do what the men of Police Battalion 101 did, and did with distinction. Had a battalion of ordinary Danes or ordinary Italians somehow found themselves in the Lublin region and received the same orders from their government *with the same opportunity to have exempted themselves*, would they have slaughtered, deported, and hunted down, with the same efficacy and brutality, Jewish men, women, and children, as these ordinary Germans did? This notion not only strains credulity beyond the breaking point but is also falsified by the actual historical record. The Danes saved their Jews, and before that resisted the imposition of antisemitic measures by the Germans. And Italians, even the Italian military (in Croatia), by and large disobeyed Mussolini's orders for the deportation of Jews to what they knew would be death at the Germans' hands.⁶

Thus, what is more *analytically significant* than finding some other group of ordinary people (if indeed they were ordinary in Browning's sense)—be they Ukrainians, Luxembourgers, or French—who helped the Germans deport and kill Jews, is to find those who did not or even would not have. The refusal or the unwillingness of others to do so demonstrates that the Germans were not ordinary men, but that there was something particular about them, which is what must be investigated and specified. That some non-Germans did or might have done the same thing suggests only that we must uncover what they had in common with the men of Police Battalion 101, or recognize that there might be more than one path to becoming party to mass slaughter. After all, there were enormous differences between Germans on the one hand, and on the other Ukrainians (hardly a favored people under Nazism), who worked in German institutions, there were pressures operating on the Ukrainians that did not exist for the Germans, so this may not be such a good comparison after all. Police Battalion 101 is so illuminating, in part, because we know that similar pressures did not exist on its members.

The crucial comparative strategy, therefore, is to establish, first, whether there was something not purely structural about the perpetration of the deed. (That is, did the identities of the perpetrators or of the victims matter in any way?) If it was not purely structural, then we need to investigate and specify what it was that brought the perpetrators, whatever their identities were, to contribute to the Holocaust.

We should also not forget that the Jews were—certainly for the Nazi leadership, and for all those ordinary Germans who shared their outlook—a figmental enemy, a people declared by Nazi fiat to be an enemy, a people who themselves harbored no ill for Germany, had no capacity to harm Germany, had no army or weapons to threaten Germany or even substantially to defend themselves. They were a prostrate people who, because of circumstances, could by and large not even battle for their lives, since they were unable to influence their fate by little more than by begging in vain for their lives.

I find it hard to believe that it was ordinary "men" who slew these fearsome, figmental warriors, including the twelve-year-old-child, whose brains were spattered by a point blank shot onto the sidearm of one of the Germans in Police Battalion 101. The laughter and joking of the man who shot the boy—which led me, in reviewing Browning's book, to use the words "jocularity" and "boyish joy" to describe the attitude of only this one killer—was, however, not an isolated incident. The bespattered German who reports the laughter added, "I have experienced more obscenities (*Schwehereien*) of this kind. . . ." (This episode is, in my view, among the most revealing contained in the testimony of the men of Police Battalion 101. Yet Browning did not include it in his book. This is a case of important presentational differences between us.)

My unwillingness to believe, my conclusion that it was not "ordinary men" who slaughtered this figmental enemy is not born of some naive notion of human goodness, or of some belief in the peculiarity of Germans of the time. After all, many genocides and mass slaughters have occurred in human history and in the twentieth century. I simply do not believe that the evidence supports a universalistic reading of the perpetration of the Holocaust according to which "ordinary" men, that trans-historical, acultural being, would be willing to kill as these men did, simply for the asking.

Let me conclude by pointing out the most general subject that our disagreements raise. Christopher Browning and I have read the same finite body of material, yet we have very different understandings of it. Much of the future scholarship about the Holocaust will turn not on differential access to sources but on the ways in which we read them. If this is so, then we would all benefit from more self-conscious and explicit methodological discussions. Indeed, it seems to me that a greater focus on methodology is imperative.

NOTES

1. See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), chaps. 6–9, 15, for my different interpretation of Police Battalion 101 and of police battalions in general.
2. David Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution: Public Opinion under Nazism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
3. W.Sc., *Investigation of G. et al.*, StA Hamburg 141 Js 128/65, p. 333.

4. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 95.
5. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, "The Evil of Banality," *New Republic*, July 13 and 20, 1992, p. 52.
6. Susan S. Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), writes: "Clearly, the immediate factors favorable to Jewish rescue during the Holocaust must be placed in the context of the customs and traditions of individual countries. The most pertinent tradition, of course, is the existence or absence of anti-Semitism. For many reasons, modern Italy lacked an anti-Semitic tradition (p. 278)." See also Daniel Carpi, "The Rescue of Jews in the Italian Zone of Occupied Croatia," in *Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Second Yad Vashem International Conference*, ed. Yisrael Guran and Efraim Zuroff (Jerusalem: Ahva Cooperative Press, 1977), pp. 465–506.