Source: Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 1992

Note: Christopher Browning is an American historian whose work focuses on Nazi Germany. He is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. This work focuses on Police Battalion 101, one of the Order Police groups organized to assist the military with Nazi expansion and conquest. Police Battalion 101 comprised middle-aged reserve policemen, essentially the city policemen and sheriffs, from working and lower-middle-class families near Hamburg, Germany. They were assigned to Lublin, Poland, and participated in the atrocities of the Holocaust, including mass executions of the Polish and Eastern European people. Browning’s work examines how everyday individuals became killers during this time.

“After explaining the battalion’s murderous assignment, he made an extraordinary offer: any of the older men who did not feel up to that task that lay before them could step out…. Two platoons of the Third Company were to surround the village. The men were explicitly ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were to round up the Jews and take them to the marketplace. Those too sick or frail to walk to the marketplace, as well as infants and anyone offering resistance or attempting to hide, would be shot on the spot. Thereafter, a few men of First Company were to escort the ‘work Jews’ who had been selected at the marketplace, while the rest of First Company was to proceed to the first to form the firing squads. The Jews were to be loaded onto the battalion trucks… and shuttled from the marketplace to the forest….

At Józefów a mere dozen men out of nearly 500 had responded instinctively to Major Trapp’s offer to step forward and excuse themselves from the impending mass murder. Why was the number of men who from the beginning declared themselves unwilling to shoot so small?...

Along with ideological indoctrination, a vital factor… was conformity to the group. The battalion had orders to kill Jews, but each individual did not. Yet 80 to 90 percent of the men proceeded to kill, though almost all of them- at least initially- were horrified and disgusted by what they were doing. To break ranks and step out, to adopt overtly nonconformist behavior, was simply beyond most of the men. It was easier for them to shoot.

Why? First of all, by breaking ranks, nonshooters were leaving the ‘dirty work’ to their comrades. Since the battalion had to shoot even if individuals did not, refusing to shoot constituted refusing one’s share of an unpleasant collective obligation….

This threat of isolation was intensified by the fact that stepping out could also have been seen as a form of moral reproach of one’s comrades: the nonshooter was potentially indicating that he was ‘too good’ to do such things….

Most of those who did not shoot only reaffirmed the ‘macho’ values of the majority…. Coping with the contradictions imposed by the demands of conscience on the one hand and the norms of the battalion on the other led to many tortured attempts at compromise: not shooting infants on the spot but taking them to the assembly point; not shooting on patrol if no ‘go-getter’ was along who might report such squeamishness; bringing Jews to the shooting site and firing but intentionally missing….

Pervasive racism and the resulting exclusion of the Jewish victims from any common ground with the perpetrators made it all the easier for the majority of policemen to conform to the norms of their immediate community (the battalion) and their society at large (Nazi Germany)....

This story of ordinary men is not the story of all men. The reserve policemen faced choices, and most of them committed terrible deeds. But those who killed cannot be absolved by the notion that everyone in the same situation would have done as they did. For even among them, some refused to kill and others stopped killing. Human responsibility is ultimately an individual matter.

At the same time, however, the collective behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101 had deeply disturbing implications. There are many societies afflicted by traditions of racism and caught in the siege mentality of war or threat of war. Everywhere society conditions people to respect and defer to authority, and indeed could scarcely function otherwise. Everywhere people seek career advancement. In every modern society, the complexity of life and the resulting bureaucratization and specialization attentuate the sense of personal responsibility of those implementing official policy. Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behaviors and sets moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?”

Source: Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing FIelds*, 2013

Note: Wendy Lower is an American historian focusing on the Holocaust and WWII. She holds the John K. Roth Chair at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California, and was named the director of the Mgrublian Center for Human Rights in Claremont in 2014. This work focuses on the roles of German women who went east and participated in Nazi expansionist policies. Their experiences were not limited to being witnesses to the crimes; in many cases they became killers themselves. In this way, Lower highlights how preconceived notions of women do not exclude them from being a key part of the atrocities commited by the Nazis in the East.

“All German women were required to work and contribute to the war effort, in paid and unpaid positions. They managed fatherless households, farmily farms, and businesses. They clocked in at factories and modern office buildings. They dominated in the field of agriculture and in the white-collar ‘female’ professions of nursing and secretarial work. Some twenty-five to thirty percent of the teachers in Weimar and Nazi Germany were women. As the Reich’s terror apparatus expanded, new career tracks opened for women, including employment in concentration camps. While the careers and accounts of female camp guards has been scrutinized by journalists and scholars, much less is known about women occupying traditional female roles- women not trained to be cruel- who by chance or design ended up serving the criminal policies of the regime.

Teachers, nurses, secretaries, welfare workers, and wives - these were the women in the eastern territories, where most of the worst crimes of the Reich occurred…. Women in the eastern territories witnessed and committed atrocities in a more open system, and as part of what they saw as a professional opportunity and a liberating experience….

The women featured in this book came from diverse backgrounds and regions… but collectively they form a generational cohort (seventeen to thirty years old). They all came of age with the rise and fall of Hitler….

Among the myths of the postwar period was that of the apolitical woman. After the war many women testified in court or explained in oral histories that they were ‘just’ organizing things in the office or attending to the social aspects of daily life by managing the care or duties of other Germans stationed in the East. They failed to see-or perhaps preferred not to see- how the social became political, and how their seemingly small contribution to everyday operations in the government, military, and Nazi party organizations added up to a genocidal system. Female fascists… were not simply doing ‘women’s work.’ As long as German women are consigned to another sphere or their political influence is minhimized, half the population of a genocidal society is, in the historian Ann Taylor Allen’s words, ‘endowed with innocence of the crimes of the modern state’, and they are placed ‘outside of history itself.’...

Assigning people to criminal categories such as *accomplice* and *perpetrator* does not itself explain how the system worked and how ordinary women witnessed and participated in the Holocaust…. For example, a female chief detective in the Reich Security Main Office directly determined the fates of thousands of children, and did so with the assistance of almost two hundred female agents scattered across the Reich. These female detectives collected evidence of ‘racially degenerate’ youths whom they branded future criminals. They devised a color-coding system in their pursuit of some two-thousand Jewish children, ‘gypsy’ children, and other ‘delinquents’ incarcerated in special internment camps. Such organizational, clerical skills were considered female, and well suited to the modern, bureaucratic approach to ‘fighting crime.’...

Of all the professions, it was nursing that brought the largest number of German women directly into the war and the Nazi genocide, as nurses occupied a variety of traditional and new roles in the developing racial state. They counseled ordinary women about ‘racial hygiene’ and hereditary diseases. In Germany, they participated in selections of the mentally and physically disabled in asylums and escorted these victims to their deaths in gas chambers or administered lethal injections. In the eastern territories, they cared for German soldiers and witnessed the deprivation and murder of Soviet prisoners of war and Jews. They worked in the infirmaries of concentration camps. They consoled German SS policemen and soldiers who recoiled from the experience of shooting victims at close range. They visited ghettos on official healthy inspections, and they visited ghettos privately as well, out of curiousity or a desire to obtain some object or service. They stood on railway platforms while Jewish deportees locked in railway cars begged for help. They were primary witnesses of the Holocaust in Europe, and some committed mass murder as the euthanasia program expanded from Germany into Poland….

As individual women navigated the multiple war zones of the East, and as some became conditioned to do what was considered man’s work, traditional presentations and roles became confused. Nowhere was this mutability more chillingly apparent than in the cases of the SS wives who became perpetrators. These women displayed a capacity to kill while also acting out a combination of roles: plantation mistress; prairie Madonna in apron-covered dress lording over slave laborers; infant-carrying, gun-yielding *Hausfrau*.

Himmler’s SS officers and their wives stationed in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltics enjoyed the freedom of the East, the sense of adventure, the riches of the fertile land, the plunder of items confiscated from the ‘natives,’ and the power of the whip….

In June 1942, Erna Petri… arrived at Grzenda with her three-year-old son…. In the summer of 1943, Erna Petri was returning home from Lviv. She had gone into town to pick up some supplies…. She saw something in the distance. When the carriage drew closer, she saw that it was children crouching along the side of the road, dressed only in shreds of clothing. It occurred to her that ‘these were the children who broke out of the boxcar at the train station Saschkow….’

The children were terrified and hungry. Petri beckoned to them and brought them home. She calmed them and gained their trust by bringing them food from her kitchen. All Jeews who were roaming the countryside were supposed to be captured and shot; she understood that. Horst was not home at the time. She waited, but Horst did not return, so she decided to shoot the six children herself….

Erna Petri told the children to line up facing away from her, in front of the ditch. She held up the pistol about ten centimeters from the first child’s neck and shot the child…. She shot ‘until all of them lay in the gully. None of the children tried to run away since it appeared that they already had been in transit for several days and were totally exhausted.’”