



## Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland

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**Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland** Christopher R. Browning  
Christopher R. Browning's shocking account of how a unit of average middle-aged Germans became the cold-blooded murderers of tens of thousands of Jews—now with a new afterword and additional photographs.

*Ordinary Men* is the true story of Reserve Police Battalion 101 of the German Order Police, which was responsible for mass shootings as well as round-ups of Jewish people for deportation to Nazi death camps in Poland in 1942. Browning argues that most of the men of RPB 101 were not fanatical Nazis but, rather, ordinary middle-aged, working-class men who committed these atrocities out of a mixture of motives, including the group dynamics of conformity, deference to authority, role adaptation, and the altering of moral norms to justify their actions. Very quickly three groups emerged within the battalion: a core of eager killers, a plurality who carried out their duties reliably but without initiative, and a small minority who evaded participation in the acts of killing without diminishing the murderous efficiency of the battalion whatsoever.

While this book discusses a specific Reserve Unit during WWII, the general argument Browning makes is that most people succumb to the pressures of a group setting and commit actions they would never do of their own volition.

*Ordinary Men* is a powerful, chilling, and important work with themes and arguments that continue to resonate today.

**“A remarkable—and singularly chilling—glimpse of human behavior...This meticulously researched book...represents a major contribution to the literature of the Holocaust.”—Newsweek**

## Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland Details

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## **From Reader Review Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland for online ebook**

### **Chris says**

I had to read this for a class otherwise I probably wouldn't have picked it up. Holocaust lit is depressing enough and this had its share of horrific tales but it didn't seem to be more than an elongated account on one battalion. It was missing more. Browning starts off with this claim that he is going to analyze and explain why 'ordinary men' become killers and I feel he really failed to do that. Towards the end, he explains several factors that helped many of the men get to that point (wanting promotions, dehumanization, peer pressure) but he still fails to give a real, true reason, which leads me to believe there really isn't one. The Holocaust happened because people are horrible and capable of horrific things. We would like to think that we all have the conscience and willpower to stand up against things like this but from the Holocaust, it seems like that was a small minority. The Afterword was pretty much a personal vendetta back-and-forth going on between Browning and another guy. (Goldhagen? I don't remember his name.) Due to Browning's lack of a real reason, I would tend to agree with other guy's point even though I haven't read it. The Holocaust seems to be a case of 'willing executioners'. However, I can definitely see some of the flaws in other guy's argument that would arise if he is using evidence how Browning claims. You can't just ignore what doesn't fit your hypothesis and pick and choose pieces of quotes to make them fit your side of the story.

I would have been interested to read other guy's account and get both sides of the story, but if Browning's claims about his evidentiary use can be believed, I'm a bit afraid to be dragged into something I know is largely faked. In summation, (lol) we have other books to read for this class so I'll just stick to those for the time being.

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### **Ray says**

A fascinating book on the role of ordinary policemen in the holocaust. Based on testimony given in the 1960s the author draws out the way in which these men approached and dealt with the systematic murder of Jews in Poland.

The police unit was formed from men unsuitable for the regular army, taken from one German city - Hamburg- and represented a cross section of society.

It shows how the men were affected differently by this heinous crime - some became efficient and enthusiastic killers, some refused or avoided the tasks, but most went along with it. The mental toll from repeatedly shooting men, woman and children in the neck at point blank range was debilitating for many.

We see a range of justifications for their acts, mainly to do with duty and not letting down comrades. What we do not see is admission of race hate, as the policemen's testimony could have led to serious punishment. The commander of the unit was hanged in Poland in 1947 (ironically for the murder of 86 Poles not the 90,000 Jews the unit directly or indirectly murdered)

Browning cites post-war academic studies which show that "normal" human beings are capable of great cruelty when placed in positions of power over others. He links this to the actions of police battalion 101, and details the race hate indoctrination prevalent at the time. Dehumanise Jews, communists, gays and gypsies and it becomes easier to kill "the other".

Where this book loses me is the final thirty or so pages, which is a polemic against another academic. Save me from handbags please.

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### **Trish says**

Of all the books on the reading list for my *Ideologies of the Holocaust* class, this one is undoubtedly my favorite.

It's a must read for anyone intrigued by the Holocaust, especially, in the "ordinary men" who carried out Hitler's orders and committed the infamously heinous crimes.

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### **Erik Graff says**

How do normal, law abiding people get into performing abnormal acts of extreme violence? This book takes on that question as regards the members of a German Reserve Police Battalion who participated, often directly, in the murder of over 85,000 Jews, Soviets, Poles and other 'undesirables', many of them women and children, during WWII. Unusually well documented, the activities of these several hundred men are traced from month to month both from the written record and from their own testimonies.

Having grown up in the United States and having seen my country commit invasions and atrocities throughout my life, most overtly by our military, and having had most of my elder relatives tell of their experiences under Nazi occupation during the war, I have grown very sensitive about acting like 'a good Nazi' myself. Of course, I do so in the sense that I pay taxes and generally don't think all that much about the violence and criminality committed in my name. And indeed, I have known plenty of persons, some of them counted as friends, who have voluntarily (!) 'served' the armed forces. Although I do my bit, here and there, to try to stop or at least mitigate such crimes, although I work by reading such books as this to remain conscientious, it is never enough.

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### **Devon says**

Normally the type of history I'd be very interested in reading about. When I read the title and the summary, I was very excited to start the book. It was well-researched. The opinions were well thought out. Historically, it was sound, in my very amateur opinion. However, the writing left much to be desired. It's one thing to write a book that's completely factual and write it in a way that keeps the audience interested. It's another thing to write so poorly that members of the audience who are interested in the topic become completely uninterested in the book itself because it's not well-written. This book could have used a better edit and some more time spent on the actual language. (Believe it or not, it's possible to strike a balance between boring and sensationalized.) I also thought it was childish to devote a whole section at the end of the book to a rebuttal to another book written with the same source material. Sure, that's all well and good for an article in a journal, but as part of the book itself it just seemed more inflammatory and butthurt (excuse my less-than-scholarly language, but it's true) than mature and well-reasoned.

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### **Carol says**

Whenever you heard people ask, "How could someone do something like that?" and the topic is genocide, this book provides the answers. Drawing on psychology, sociology, and lots of direct testimony, Browning explains how the need of individuals to conform to group expectations can result in horrendous acts of evil.

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### **AC says**

A book and approach (the 'functionalist' approach to the Holocaust) with which I am quite out of sympathy. According to this view, adopted also by Broszat and Hans Mommsen, the Holocaust was not planned, but came about almost by accident, as local administrators tried to deal with the excess of refugees, and the like. In my opinion, which is certainly only that of the semi-educated layman, this is complete and utter B.S.

I say that with all due respect to Mr. Browning, of course...

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### **Sweetwilliam says**

This is not an easy read. First, it reads like a scholarly thesis paper that someone wrote for a doctoral thesis. Second, the subject matter is awful and there are no heroes. Having said this, Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* is an integral read for those of us trying to make sense of the Holocaust.

I decided to read Browning's book because I wanted more insight into the psyche of the monsters that were ordered to carry out Hitler's final solution. According to Browning, for the most part, the men of Battalion 101 were just ordinary men. I read the title of the book prior to buying it so I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Browning's analysis is clear: These men were not SS troopers and they had not been subjected to intense indoctrination or any type of brainwashing. There were very few party members. I can only remember Browning mentioning one officer that was a former member of the Hitler youth. I believe that only a few were ever in the SS prior to deployment in Poland. They were certainly not front line troops suffering from any type of combat fatigue. In fact, they hadn't heard a shot fired in anger and there wasn't anything frontline about them. Browning argued that they were the dregs of the Wehrmacht and they were deemed not fit for frontline duty. Most importantly, these men didn't even seem to harbor a grudge against the Jews. With scarce exception, they hardly seemed to enjoy their task.

So why did they do it? According to Browning's interpretation of events, they did it because they were ordered to. They knew this was wrong. The Battalion Commander, Major Trapp, was a decorated combat veteran from WWI. Trapp told the enlisted men that they could be excused if they could not take part in the firing squads and then he went to an office and bawled like a baby. I took some solace that about 14 men and one officer refused to take part in the massacre and that several men refused to continue after taking part in the initial firing squad but at the end of the day, somehow the deed was done.

Future actions were easier to handle in part because the killing grew more routine. Also, the policemen found ways to farm out the killing to others. They recruited Hiwis (foreigners) to do the dirty work. This included Russian prisoners (Trawniki) who would have starved had they not been given the option to serve the Nazis.

Also, the Policemen didn't mind loading the Jews on railcars so that they could be shipped off to a death camp where others could execute them. This was much more preferable than rounding up families and personally killing them. The worst thing was to have to kill innocent people face-to-face.

The author compares and contrasts the massacres committed by the Policemen to other war crimes committed during that period By US units in the Pacific and even later in Vietnam. Browning mentions that some US units in the Pacific had boasted of taking no prisoners and that there were units that collected ears etc. However, Browning makes the point that at the time these men were under duress due to combat fatigue and they had reacted to it. These policemen, on the other hand, hadn't heard a shot fired in anger so the policemen could certainly not use this as a mitigating factor.

I also personally believe that the massacres of the Polish Jews are very different than the massacres of the Chinese citizens of Nanking. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the Japanese perpetrated massacres weren't sanctioned by high command or the Imperial Government. I remember reading Ira Chang's Rape of Nanking and reading one of the commanding General's correspondence that imperial soldiers were acting like Genghis Khan. Iwane Matsui, the commanding General of IJA in China, gave strict orders not to harm Chinese citizens or loot. Ironically, Matsui was a great admirer of China and chastised his officers for what happened in Nanking but ultimately, this did not save him from the hangman's noose. The implementation of the Final Solution in Poland was the exact opposite. The ordinary men of the reserve police battalion were ordered by Himmler at Hitler's wishes to kill all men, women, and children and to shoot infants and the infirm on sight. These policemen certainly would not have carried out these massacres without orders to do so. However, they still did it and this bothers me.

With a minimum of psychobabble, Browning tries to compare the actions of the Policemen with some University studies where students acting as prisoners were given fake shocks. I'm sorry, but some of this was lost on me. I believe it had little relevance to a reserve policemen being asked to blow a hole at point blank range through a defenseless child's neck and getting spattered with their brains at times. To me it was a vain attempt to extrapolate data from a few college snowflakes and apply it to something like the Holocaust. The use of this data almost trivialized the Holocaust to some degree. I believe that these Jews would have preferred to have been shocked a few times or even shipped off to Abu Ghraib to live out the war forming naked pyramids.

Early on in the book there is a letter from a German official trying to run the local economy in the east complaining about the implementation of what later became known as the Final Solution. The official claimed that his skilled workers at several factories either had fled or were shot or were transported to a concentration camp and how none of the remaining workers (including the White Russians) could concentrate on their jobs because family members were carted off. The implementation of the final solution made the local economy collapse at a time when Germany could least afford it. It makes one take a step back for a moment and wonder what could have been accomplished if the Germans would have used their precious resources (rolling stock, manpower etc.) trying to defeat the Russians? The Jews could have been left alone and even recruited to join the war effort. I wonder if we would all be eating sauerkraut and sausage three times a day.

At the end of the day I am still not quite sure why these men went through with carrying out these orders? There were no reprisals if you didn't take part other than peer pressure. Let us not underestimate the power of peer pressure. Would men today do the same thing if ordered? Would I have done what they did if I had been in their shoes? Would I have grabbed a machine gun and started shooting my fellow officers while yelling to the Jews in my best yiddish "run for the hills while I hold them off?" Probably not. I'm no Joan of Arc. I would more likely have done what Papa Trapp did. At best, I would of had the foresight to resign.

As Major Trapp said during the first Jewish action "If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth then have mercy on us Germans." Trapp was later hanged after the war for carrying out revenge killings of Polish gentiles after a partisan action. Even this Trapp tried to mitigate. I believe the hangman's noose may have been good medicine for a man that most likely had lived out a tortured existence knowing what he was ultimately responsible for.

In my review of "Our Crime was Being Jewish" I said that the men and women who perpetrated the Holocaust should be hunted down and tried for these crimes until they take their last breath on earth. Christopher Browning's research indicates all events are not that black and white. You would have to hang several ordinary men that you are probably no better than. Thank God every day that we Americans currently live under a different set of circumstances.

Judging others is never that easy.

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## **Orsodimondo says**

### **I VOLENTEROSI CARNEFICI DI HITLER**

Che cosa spinse i tedeschi comuni a diventare esecutori dell'Olocausto?

Non solo "assassini da tavolino", ma esecutori materiali, gente che dovette *letteralmente immergersi nel sangue delle vittime uccise a bruciapelo*.

### **Il battaglione di polizia 101.**

Browning analizza i verbali degli interrogatori postbellici di 210 uomini che avevano fatto parte del Battaglione 101: 500 poliziotti riservisti (uomini comuni per l'appunto, come dice il titolo della sua ricerca storica), che fra il 13 luglio 1942 e il 5 novembre 1943 assassinarono una per una circa 38.000 persone in Europa orientale, e parteciparono al rastrellamento e alla deportazione a Treblinka di altri 45.000 Ebrei. Poliziotti, operai, commercianti, impiegati, artigiani, 'ordinary people', tutti 'riservisti', furono chiamati a partecipare, a dare il loro contributo diretto al massacro.

Qualcuno si sentì male, qualcuno si rifiutò la prima volta, qualcuno ebbe scrupoli: ma tutti sostanzialmente svolsero il loro compito, e sin dal primo giorno di Polonia, il battaglione 101, protagonista di questo studio, aveva radunato casa per casa e trucidato oltre 1500 ebrei.

Browning indaga, presenta fonti e materiali, introduce ipotesi e interpretazioni diverse, critica e polemizza, sempre lontanissimo dalla retorica, sempre a ciglio asciutto.

### **Arrivo di ebrei deportati ad Auschwitz-Birkenau nel maggio 1944.**

Browning si domanda: che cosa pensavano, mentre partecipavano alla 'soluzione finale'? Come giustificavano il proprio comportamento? Perché obbedirono così efficientemente e prontamente agli ordini? La sua risposta è che un uomo comune può diventare uno spietato macellaio dei propri simili per puro spirito di emulazione e desiderio di carriera. I sentimenti più banali e più apparentemente innocui possono essere i motori della più estrema inumanità, in circostanza adatte. E pochissimi sono coloro che scelgono con coscienza, e rifiutano di obbedire.

**La ricchezza del III Reich, bottino delle SS e dipinti del museo di Berlino, scoperti dalla 90<sup>a</sup> Divisione dell'esercito statunitense, seppelliti in una miniera di sale a Merkers, nella Turingia.**

Il libro di Browning è anche un'accurata ricostruzione documentaria degli eccidi di massa e delle deportazioni avvenute in Europa dell'Est in quel periodo, a opera non soltanto del Battaglione 101, ma anche di altri reparti militari tedeschi. Documenti agghiaccianti - e purtroppo veri.

PS

Nessuno di quelli che si rifiutarono subì pesanti punizioni.

**La "Sala dei Nomi" dello Yad Vashem a Gerusalemme.**

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**Eric\_W says**

And another in our continuing series of depressing books: Christopher Browning examines the motivation of a 500 man police battalion assigned to the rear lines of Germany's Eastern Front. This small group of men was personally responsible for the massacre of over 38,000 Jews and the deportation of some 45,000 more to Treblinka. These were not racial fanatics nor committed Nazis. Their motives were quite ordinary: careerism and peer pressure. Browning's book is based on interviews with the participants collected after the war.

Not everyone blindly followed orders. The battalion's commander ordered that anyone not wishing to participate in the shootings could be excused and about 12 were. For many of the others rationalization became the order of the day. One later testified he killed only children because his partner was shooting the mothers and he did not think it was right that children should grow up without mothers.

The horrifying aspect of this account is how little it took for these men to become transformed psychologically from "normal" people into willing participants. These were not atrocities one has come to expect from war during the heat of battle (Malmedy, My Lai, etc.), rather an institutionalized, bureaucratic government policy. That bureaucracy may be part of the cause. It distances people from their actions. Bureaucrats never saw the hideous result of their actions, seeing only their small paper-shuffling role.

That still does not explain the actions of the men who were doing the actual killing. Women and children were marched up to graves they had been forced to dig and were shot point-blank in the head. The shooters were even instructed on the best location on the neck to shoot in order to save ammunition. Occasionally the killer would be splattered with brain tissue and skull parts.

There was a deliberate process of dehumanization abetted by Nazi racial policies. In fact, the soldiers found it much more difficult to kill German speaking Jews, especially those who had fled Germany. They saw them not as the barbarians they had been told they were killing. Euphemisms, (protective reaction strikes) were common: killing became "actions" and shipping to concentration camps became "resettlements." Responsibility was diffused by deferring to orders from "above" and dividing the tasks into different parts.

There was a perversion of ethical outlook, too. Those few who were revolted by what they were doing and who refused to participate were called cowards. We need to cultivate a society where those who follow individual conscience are the heroes and those who follow the crowd are the cowards.

As an aside, before my Dad died, I was talking to one of the aides in his nursing home who came from

Argentina. We got to talking about my years in Germany and she mentioned her grandfather had emigrated to Argentina from Germany after the war. (Little tiny red flags waving over my head.) I queried if he had been in the German army. Her response was quite unashamedly, yes, he had been in the SS. (Red Banners now waving over my head.) Then she went on to talk about how the victors rewrite history. I decided then I had to visit the men's room.

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### **Tim says**

Christopher Browning, one of the better known Holocaust scholars today, used evidence from the post-war investigations of Police Battalion 101 to create an image of the "ordinary men" who participated in the massacre of Jews in Eastern Europe. By examining testimony, documents, and diary excerpts, he pieces together a chronological history of the unit's participation and involvement in the Nazis' Final Solution.

Even though Browning is writing as a scholar, with the intent of persuading through academic argument, his writing is clear and uncluttered. He approaches the subject with an easy-to-follow framework, providing a balanced look at how the battalion went from routine duties in occupied territories to the violent slaughter of Jewish civilians.

Throughout *Ordinary Men*, Browning provides a window into the daily life of the unit and its purpose in the hierarchy and structure of the Third Reich. The often personal glimpses demonstrate the slow and methodical change in Nazi policy towards Jewish civilians, as the German leadership shifted towards the Final Solution.

It's this tapestry of documentation that pulls together a remarkable look at how the extermination of European Jews occurred: through an evolving policy rather than a pre-determined course. Combined with the personal accounts of battalion members, it is easy to see the slow progression of anti-Jewish doctrine, as well as the frequently unmentioned nuances of its executioners, the most revealing of which — the lack of disciplinary action for those who refused to take part in the massacres and "Jew hunts" -- reveals a great deal about the make-up of the actual perpetrators.

*Afterword: The more recent edition of Ordinary Men has an afterword from Browning dissecting his ongoing debate with Daniel Goldhagen (author of Hitler's Willing Executioners). Personally, I've been surprised at how many people bought into Goldhagen's rather contradictory and ill-conceived thesis, and yet, because of that, Browning decided to add this clear-cut statement about his own conclusions in order to refute Willing Executioners' assertion that Germans are anti-Semitic by their very nature.*

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### **Andrew says**

While Browning's book was apparently a serious academic volley in the world of Holocaust studies, it strikes me as very measured and commonsense. Here, in their own words, are a bunch of people who did what they were told, because that's what they were told to do-- and we can ask why they didn't question it, but speculation is all you'll come up with. Recently, a lovely afternoon in the killing fields of Cambodia and a bus stop in the middle of a pogrom in progress in Myanmar have confirmed that I'm on Browning's side in this debate. Nothing makes monsters, because monsters aren't real, and we all possess the capability to be

absolute shits to each other-- to say otherwise is to deny our responsibility for this very ugly part of our humanity.

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## Mariel says

Jessica Mitford claimed in her book *A Fine Old Conflict* that the racism in her new home Oakland, California was from people who moved there from the Southern states (I guess we kept moving there for those acts of racially led police brutality over the years). No one else would be capable of that. Bitch, please! (Of course, I don't have a photo selection of myself with black people I got on well with as she does. So I MUST be a racist, coming from the American South as I do.) I can't help but think of Mitford, that poster child for hypocrisy, for calling something other than what it is for whatever self serving agenda she felt like preaching. Christopher R. Browning's book *Ordinary Men Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* is a hell of a book and interesting to me for more reasons than one of my messy goodreads reviews (did I mention that is my 600th?) could cover. Paul Bryant's review says that it changed his life. It also changed mine for those reasons of putting into context human nature aspects I can only suspect and never pin down (it's much, much too big). I want to call something for what it is, pretty much. It changes me again when I have to ask myself if I believe in the will of human nature.

You may have heard of author Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. I have, although I've never read one of his pulp(it) tomes. They took the same source information, those interviews for 1960s investigations of war crimes, the same historical texts and came to some important differences. Well, I'd say (without reading Goldhagen's book) that he was looking for an all Germans are anti-Semitic bent to fit everything into. It happened because they were looking for a reason to murder Jews. Hitler just gave them the means. It couldn't have happened to anyone else, anywhere else. Bitch, please! If you want to ignore centuries of history and the present... When someone makes a grab for power like that someone is going to get royally fucked, history says.

Browning's work looks at how "Ordinary Men", middle aged Germans who were not professional killers, who did not roam about the countryside shooting civilians by birth for mirth, became well oiled killing machines for the Nazis. Were they just following orders? Not always, at least not in any immediate way. They weren't held at gun point. I found it interesting that only a dozen opted out when given the choice not to kill. Some followed after, some after killing twenty jews. The breaking point, if there was one, was not the same. Definitely not all. One man who went out of his way to prevent himself and his men from killing the Jews they were transporting would later force twenty old men to undress and then instructed his men to grab bats to beat to death the crawling men. What is in one man, their Captain Trapp, to deliver their orders through his tears to continue to do so? Browning says because one group did so did not mean that another would kill if in their place. It doesn't mean that another wouldn't.

In the back of my mind while reading 'Ordinary Men' I had the thought that these German men felt about the Jews the way that many elsewhere in the world would feel for prison inmates. Their punishment is abstract. They could say to themselves, "Well, they deserved what they got." That's if they thought about them at all. The execution takes place far away. The possibility of innocence, of falling through the cracks for making a mistake (one of the most depressing things, to me, is how many are in prison because they could not afford the court costs. A fucking evil scam! I am overwhelmed with hatred of society when I think about things like that. Complacency and heartless? distraction takes many forms). They hate us for our freedom. Maybe we shouldn't have freedom, then. Maybe someone else is looking out for things for us. It's okay to drop a devastating bomb far away. Sleeeeeep sheeeeep. The only racists are in the American south. It's not bigotry

to hate gays, if you're black. I've heard that one a lot. Pretending something isn't what it is by calling something else in huge bold letters. Evil! Nazis! Just them.

I have no doubt that they were thinking about themselves first of all. The way that they rewrote history in their own minds is important. It also cannot be discounted that the interviews were for legal proceedings and no way were they going to even mention direct culpability or anti-Semitism. As Browning points out, that would make it intent and the intent makes it homicide. How much of a looming threat did the Nazi higher ups have that a different mind set some couple of decades later would change their side stepping of the larger implications (they massacred so many people)? I have an idea in the back of my mind that it is complacency out of selfishness. They killed because they didn't want to think about it. That the men didn't ask to leave when the option was no longer presented to them says a lot to me about going to sleep. The killings were routine and it was all something to get used to. Would they have moved for themselves? I don't even know that. (Ten officers to 8,000 Jews and they didn't revolt? We're just being resettled.)

Would I call them Ordinary Men? It doesn't take an extraordinary man to do what they did. Yet, so many have done what they have, not just in Nazi territory, that I don't know what else to call them. I'd say talking about it to call it anything is better than not talking about it. The ordinary men didn't talk about it, not even when they were talking about it.

Five fucking stars. It is not an ordinary man who will look into the lowest of humankind and not pretend. There was much more I wanted to write here and now my mind is too numb with statistics (600 reviews) that I can't even say anything nice now. People sure can suck. What do I call it, again? (Fascism?)

And I realize I didn't break any new ground here but that's really why I love this so much. It's tangible proof of this darkness. I held it in my hand. Not just numbers.

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### **Tim says**

An account of the atrocities committed by the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 of the German Order police in Poland during WW2. Any book that seeks to go behind the scenes of Nazi killing units faces the problem that the men involved invariably lie about their experience. This is very much the case here, with most of the men claiming after the war that they did their best to help Jews. I think if you're going to begin with the premise of "ordinary men" you need to show these men as ordinary. Provide some detail of their lives before the war, which this book doesn't do. The men in this book are just names. We learn nothing much about them. The most interesting aspect was perhaps the evidence of a prevalent macho culture among the men. As if it wasn't so much racial hatred that provoked the violence as the fear of appearing weak and cowardly to one's comrades. Also, it does debunk the often cited defence of war criminals that they had no choice. Men in this police battalion who refused to shoot unarmed civilians were not punished. But essentially this is a cataloguing of atrocities. The latter part of the book is devoted to a lengthy and somewhat repetitive summary and an argument the author is having with another author. Probably there are 100 pages that make an important contribution to Holocaust literature. The other 200 pages were of considerably less interest for me.

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### **Paul Bryant says**

This is one of the essential books of Holocaust literature. When I read it, some years ago now, it changed me.

It's about a Reserve Police Battalion in Poland. This was a bunch of middle-aged guys who were unfit for military service, so they were given an easier job, which was to shoot Jewish people and bury them in woods (okay, the last bit could be hard, but generally you could get the Jewish people to do all the digging before you shot them).

This was the pre-industrial phase of the Holocaust, before the purpose-built death camps at Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec were opened for business.

Who rounded up these Jewish families from their little villages and marched them into the forests and gunned them down and then came back the next day and drove to a new village and did it all over again, week after week? As I say it wasn't the steely-eyed fanatical SS psychos barking "schnell! schnell!" with the big Alsation dogs at all, it was these middle-aged police reserve guys, your local baker, pharmacist or gardener, just your regular guys. Now some of them found it - well, frankly, a little too disturbing, shooting men women and children in cold blood week after week. So Browning points out that they could ask to be transferred to other duties and that was okay, they'd be transferred, no hard feelings. No problem.

Now Browning was influenced by the famous Stanley Milgram electric-shock experiment. But I was thinking that maybe the conclusions Milgram and later experimenters have come to aren't quite right. I'm not a psychologist so I'm probably wrong, but here goes. Milgram et al have said that the presence of an authority who normalises certain actions which in other contexts would be considered sadistic and criminal explains the actions of the randomly-selected people who applied the fake fatal electric shocks. But considering the grim evidence presented in this book, not to mention many examples from elsewhere (Srebrenitsa, Rwanda, Cambodia, the witch craze of the middle ages), maybe its this : that there are a large number of people in every society who just don't have a moral sense at all. They go along with convention, so you don't notice them, they're not psychopaths, they don't crave power, but if you ask them to shoot a family of seven on a beautiful summer day and bury the bodies in the woods they'll just say okay, but I got to get back by five, my wife will be expecting me.

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