

Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland
By Christopher R. Browning,
Review by Walter Zapotoczny

Christopher Browning describes how the Reserve Police Battalion 101, like the rest of German society, was immersed in a deluge of racist and anti-Semitic propaganda. Browning describes how the Order Police provided indoctrination both in basic training and as an ongoing practice within each unit. Many of the members were not prepared for the killing of Jews. The author examines the reasons some of the police members did not shoot. The physiological effect of isolation, rejection, and ostracism is examined in the context of being assigned to a foreign land with a hostile population. The contradictions imposed by the demands of conscience on the one hand and the norms of the battalion on the other are discussed. *Ordinary Men* provides a graphic portrayal of Police Battalion 101's involvement in the Holocaust. The major focus of the book focuses on reconstruction of the events this group of men participated in. According to Browning, the men of Police Battalion 101 were just that—ordinary. They were five hundred middle-aged, working-class men of German descent. A majority of these men were neither Nazi party members nor members of the S.S. They were also from Hamburg, which was a town that was one of the least occupied Nazi areas of Germany and, thus, were not as exposed to the Nazi regime. These men were not self-selected to be part of the order police, nor were they specially selected because of violent characteristics. These men were plucked from their normal lives, put into squads, and given the mission to kill Jews because they were the only people available for the task. Surprisingly, these ordinary men proved to be completely capable of killing tens of thousands of people. In fact, their capacity to murder was so great, they overwhelmingly surpassed the expectations of even the Nazi leaders.

The members of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 were influenced and conditioned in a general way and filled in particular with a sense of their own superiority and racial kinship. The aspect of Jewish inferiority, peer pressure and sense of duty therefore turned many of the police battalion into murderers. Browning suggests that given the same or similar circumstances, a similar number of ordinary men would experience the same results.

The main sources for this book consist of archival documents and court records of the Holocaust. The specific testimony, court records, investigation records, and prosecution documents of members of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 members are used as sources. Secondary sources include *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* by Nechama Tec, *Unanswered Questions: Nazi Germany and the Genocide of the Jews* by Raul Hillberg, and *Into That Darkness* by Gitta Sereny.

The author's facts and key points are supported by other research I have conducted while writing several articles on the Holocaust. His facts are consistent with information in *Holocaust* by Martin Gilbert, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* by Karl A. Schleunes, *German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939 – 1945* by Colin Heaton, and *Masters of Death* by Richard Rhodes.

In this book, Christopher Browning shows in minute detail the sequence of events and individual reactions that turn ordinary men into killers. His arguments make sense. He makes no unwarranted assumptions. The cause and effect statements made and arguments presented are logical and well developed. *Ordinary Men* by Christopher Browning accounts for the actions of the German Order Police (more specifically the actions of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Poland) and the role they played in the Second World War during the Jewish Holocaust. Police Battalion 101 was composed of veterans from World War One and men too old to be drafted into the regular forces: army, navy, air force.

Originally examining how the Germans organized and carried out the destruction of a widespread Jewish population and where they found the manpower to carry it out, Browning was led to Ludwigsburg near Stuttgart. It was here that he discovered the records of the indictment concerning Reserve Police Battalion 101. The indictment contained extensive verbatim quotations from pretrial interrogations of battalion members and a collection of testimonies. It is from these documents that

author presents his case and develops his thesis. The book is a balanced reporting of actions on the police and offers ideas about why the members did what they did.

A thorough study of a microcosm of murder, all the more powerful because it is written with some effort at empathy and understanding. Browning analyzes the accounts of these men as they were tried 20 years after the events, and he carefully speculates about motives. Overall, Browning exemplifies how truly ordinary the policemen in Battalion 101 were. The book leaves the reader to place him or herself in much the same situation. A systematic pattern continues as the book progresses. Each time Battalion 101 has the assignment of resettlement, the process by which they operate becomes a little more organized and refined. The division of labor among the men becomes more fine-tuned, and the specialization of tasks becomes more efficient. The men have experienced shooting so many Jews that they become experts on how to make the killing as indirect and removed as possible, while remaining efficient. Men are at first in close proximity to their victim, with immediate interaction, but after they become specialized, the men realize that if they just shoot them into mass graves, the Jews become faceless and the men are not as intimately involved with their victims. This allows the men of Battalion 101 to be more efficient killers because the more removed a man was from the killing, the more methodical that man can become when committing murder.

In conclusion, I believe that this book was very informative and compelling because it engulfed the reader in the blatant and mindless actions of Police Battalion 101, and it showed a believable depiction of the atrocities of genocide throughout the Holocaust. The book revealed truths such as these policemen were given many opportunities to get out of killing Jews. However, many did not take the opportunity to walk away and instead committed themselves to becoming specialized experts in the "resettlement" of Jews. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the Holocaust and the reasons why many of these men became killers.

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