



The Holocaust Educational Trust

Perpetrators

A-Level Extension Tasks

Introduction

The following activity is intended for use with students aged 16 and over, and assumes the form of a source-work exercise. Students should read through the excerpts of expert interviews and respond to the questions with extended essay-style answers. Whilst referring directly to the relevant historian(s) in their response, students should also be encouraged to utilize all resources available to them via the WW2history.com website.

LAURENCE REES: To what extent do you think you can categorise these killers as ‘ordinary men’? [The title of Browning’s famous book about a reserve police battalion involved in the Holocaust].

CHRISTOPHER BROWNING: These people hadn’t volunteered to be part of the hardcore Nazi movement; they are not party activists. They have not been specially selected, they have not been subjected to extraordinary training and indoctrination. They were the people available when people were needed and they come into this in a fairly random way. Now, clearly, not all the people involved would fit that definition. Obviously at the top there is a hardcore of very devoted and convinced Nazis: Hitler, Himmler and Heydrich. Eichmann, for instance, was a full time committed professional Jewish expeller and then Jewish killer, as are the Einsatzgruppen Commanders and so forth. There’s also a group of people that we might refer to as the technocrats: Komler designing the gas chambers at Auschwitz and Albert Speer and industrialists who were using lots of Jewish slave labour, all of whom after the war painted themselves as a-political technocrats [claiming] they were just doing a specialised job and that they weren’t politically plugged in. Turns out, of course, you can be a technocrat and an ideologue at the same time, and that most of them were, in fact, devoted Nazis as well as men who brought their expertise. So there are the specialists and there are the hardcore committed people who are killing because they believed in it as an ideological venture. But that’s not enough to kill six million people; you need police battalions, guards of camps (particularly for the ghettos), and all the people who are supervising the use of Jewish slave labour as foremen in various factories, and all the ways that people were involved. Most of that does not involve the Nazi ideologues, it does not involve people highly indoctrinated, it does not involve people carefully selected, it was whoever was there and available, and those are the ones I would call the ordinary men, and they come and they do the job and there was no special preparation and selection for it.

TASK: How persuasive do you find Browning's arguments? What is so challenging about the notion of "ordinary men"?

LAURENCE REES: Why was the decision made to kill Jewish women and children, and not only men?

OMER BARTOV: Well, I would preface that by saying that having just in the last few years looked at a lot of such cases in small towns in Eastern Galicia, which is now Western Ukraine, and before that Eastern Poland, how things transpire is not so much, it seems, that the Einsatzgruppen and other police units are killing male Jews because they see them in any way as part of an enemy structure, but rather as elites. They kill what they call the intelligentsia and they seem to be killing them because they think then it will be easier to control the rest of the community. Those are people who could be leaders of the community. They kill doctors, they kill lawyers, they kill anyone who has some sort of standing within their own community. The mass killing in many of the communities that I've examined, apart from a few cases, begins only in spring 1942. So there are several mass shootings.

There's an infamous case in an area now called Ivano Frankivsk in the Ukraine where about 10,000 Jews are shot in one day in the cemetery, and that's already in summer 1941. But in many communities the vast majority of the population remains alive until spring of 1942, and then the mass killings begin, first with transportation to the designated extermination facilities and then later on mass killings on the spot. Why do they do it? Or how does one cross that line? Well, that's a question that is terribly difficult to answer. My sense is that the men in charge of that are completely aware that their goal is to do away with Jewish communities, even as they march into the Soviet Union. They are then told to carry that out, and many of them are strongly motivated by an internalised sense that Jews have to be wiped out as the Jews are major enemies of Germany. While you and I can say, well, how can you throw babies out of balconies and smash them, which was happening all over the place, they seem to see that differently. It is something that I cannot come up with a perfect explanation for; there is a brutalisation of these people, clearly, some of them have sadistic inclinations, but many of them are policemen, have worked as policemen before, they've probably helped old ladies cross the street before, and are relatively decent human beings like you and I, but they have become persuaded that the specific population that they are targeting has to be wiped out.

I do not subscribe to the idea that they're only following orders, because there is an immense amount of gratuitous brutality going on there and they are helped by large parts of the local population. One has to remember that in many of those areas German security forces are spread very thin and so you would have 20 policemen in an area in which about 60,000 Jews were killed. These 20 policemen did not do all the killing; they had local militias, local police units, and in the area of Galicia these are Ukrainians who are doing much of the work for them. And so there is an atmosphere, a social atmosphere, around, that there's a group of people that should be hunted down and done away with, however one feels personally about this or that individual.

DAVID CESARANI: The murderous core of the Nazi hierarchy was able to operate so widely, was able to have such a wide influence, was able to find people to operate its murderous policies, large numbers of people, because very significant elements of German society and, indeed, European society, had been brutalised in the short term by the events of First World

War and in the longer term years of economic depression, starvation, civil war and then going back to the experience of the trenches, mass slaughter and callous disregard for human life. But there's another thing to bear in mind. There's a wonderful scene at the beginning of a film by the Taviani Brothers called *Padre Padrone*, which shows Italian peasants slaughtering a pig at the beginning of the Winter and they eviscerate the pig and they use every single bit of this pig to supply them with food and fats and materials through the long winter to come; it's an extremely long drawn out bloody process. And one of my teachers, Richard Overly, said to me if you were a peasant in Europe in the early 20th Century you probably spent a lot of your time killing things, up to your elbows in blood, eating things that were dripping with blood, being surrounded by the detritus of life, not necessarily human life. Who were the lads that went into the armies? Peasants. If you take large numbers of people who come from the countryside, who are used to a pretty rough existence, slaughtering animals certainly. If you put them through brutal experiences when human beings are slaughtered and if you also tell them the lives of certain groups are not worth preserving it's not difficult to get those people then to take human lives on a vast scale. And very often the killers are fairly sort of simple minded uneducated peasants, killing a pig, killing a Jew, Jews are pigs, you kill them.

TASK: Do you agree with Bartov that "a social atmosphere" was responsible for the "brutalisation" of people? Or is Cesarani more accurate that background and experiences were more influential?