ORDINARY ORGANIZATIONS

WHY NORMAL MEN CARRIED OUT THE HOLOCAUST

STEFAN KÜHL

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the Holocaust*

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Introduction

In light of the horror of the Holocaust, it is easy to understand the desire for simple answers. It would be something of a relief to believe that the ghetto liquidations, mass shootings, and gassings in the extermination camps took place because the perpetrators had been seduced by Adolf Hitler, or because they belonged to a particularly brutal breed of people, or because they were all eliminationist anti-semites and their hatred of Jews was so deeply rooted in their German culture that it was almost inevitable they would become "Hitler's willing executioners."

This type of personalization assigns responsibility to just a few, while absolving the rest. Personalization means that people are identified on the basis of specific biological, medical, or cultural characteristics and branded as being pathological, criminal, or strange. The actions attributed to such people are thus "personalized out of existence" for anyone who believes these characteristics do not apply to them. According to this explanation – which is reassuring at first glance – it was fanatical Nazis, sick sadists, or particularly driven eliminationist antisemites who bore responsibility for the genocide. If you do not consider yourself a member of one of these groups, you can sit back and take comfort in the thought that you would have acted very differently.[1]

But there are limits to the personalization of responsibility. There is no doubt that National Socialism was embraced by much of the German population, or that some people in the police forces and concentration camps saw their job as an opportunity to act on their deep-seated sadism, or that there were fervent antisemites in Germany who actively promoted the "eradication" of the Jewish population. What is surprising, though, is that many people who took part in the mass

killings never displayed any such murderous behavior or inclinations either before or after World War II.

This book revolves around one of the most fiercely debated questions in Holocaust research: why "ordinary men" – and, in many cases, "ordinary women" – were willing to humiliate, torment, and murder hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of men, women, and children.[2] I want to propose a decidedly sociological answer to this question by taking existing insights from historical, political, philosophical, and social psychological research and bringing them together in a comprehensive explanatory approach with the help of sociological systems theory.[3]

The challenge is to present an analysis that is informed by sociology but applicable to the wider discussion of the Holocaust. The explanations found in sociological systems theory in particular are often so abstract that other disciplines – such as history, political science, philosophy, and psychology – understandably no longer even bother with them, much less take inspiration from them. When sociologists attempt to explain the Holocaust by throwing around concepts such as binary encoding, autopoietic reproduction, or self-referential closure, they may distinguish themselves as ambitious theorists among a sub-subgroup of fellow sociologists specializing in a particular theory, but scholars in other disciplines will, for good reason, simply ignore what they see as unnecessarily complicated approaches.[4]

Readers can rest assured that this book not only refrains from presenting the fundamentals of systems theory in a way that might intimidate non-sociologists, it also illustrates its sociological reflections using a concrete example: Hamburg Reserve Police Battalion 101, the most thoroughly researched "killing unit" of the Nazi state.[5] Precisely because it seems as though everything has already been said about this police battalion, and because the discussion of the battalion has been so contentious, the strengths of a sociological approach – as a complement to, and often in contrast with, existing explanatory models in Holocaust research – should become clear.

Beyond the controversy between "ordinary men" and "ordinary Germans"

Reserve Police Battalion 101 has attracted so much attention from researchers because its members were remarkably "ordinary." Most of the policemen conscripted in Hamburg were family men who had held civilian jobs as dockhands, barbers, tradesmen, or sales-

men before they were stationed in Poland as police reservists. Only a minority of the just over 500 battalion members had stood out as dedicated Nazis or SS men before their assignment in Poland.[6]

The controversial debate surrounding this police battalion revolves around the specific sense in which these men were "ordinary."[7] To summarize the debate in a single question: were they "ordinary men" or "ordinary Germans"? Unsuspecting readers may be surprised by this opposition, because it seems obvious that, between 1933 and 1945, most if not all of the police in Hamburg were both "men" and "Germans." But the emphasis on one word or the other is what makes all the difference in the debate.

Emphasizing the word "men" implies that, in principle, any male person would have been capable of killing Jews if they had found themselves in the same situation as the members of the police battalion. According to Christopher Browning in particular, a number of conditions had to be met for these "ordinary men" to become "murderers": "wartime brutalization," explicit "racism," "segmentation and routinization of the task," "careerism" especially among the leadership, "obedience to orders, deference to authority," as well as "ideological indoctrination, and conformity." Added to this was "a distinct corps mentality," "considerable peer pressure," and "excessive drinking combined with progressive desensitization towards acts of violence in any form."[8] Behind this bundle of mobilizing factors, we ultimately find a moderate *structuralist approach* which highlights the rather limited scope of action on the part of individuals in the coercive apparatus of the Nazi state.[9]

Emphasizing the word "German" does not rule out the idea that brutalization, peer pressure, or deference to authority might have played a role. In fact, it has been argued that these factors were especially important to the non-German participants in the Holocaust, such as the non-Jewish Ukrainians, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians who were recruited as auxiliary troops in the occupied territories. These aspects cannot be completely ignored when it comes to the German police, SS members, or Wehrmacht soldiers either, but such factors are thought to have been secondary at best when it came to the actions of the Germans. According to Daniel Goldhagen in particular, "ordinary Germans" had a long history of a type of antisemitism which focused on extermination and ultimately led them to conclude that "the Jews *ought to die*." Goldhagen said "the perpetrators" drew on their own deeply culturally rooted "convictions and morality," which drove them to believe that the mass extermination of the Jews was justified. This explanation is ultimately a radical

version of a *voluntaristic approach* in Holocaust research, which highlights the perpetrators' own motivations. In brief, the suggestion here is that the Germans "did not *want* to say 'no'" to the Holocaust; in fact, many of them actually wanted to say "yes" to the murder of the European Jews.[10]

From a sociological perspective, both explanatory approaches are unsatisfying. The voluntaristic approach, which explains the Germans' actions based on their deep-seated eliminationist antisemitism, assumes a simplistic correspondence between the goals of the police ("extermination of the European Jews") and the motives of the organization's members ("eliminationist antisemitism").[11] But this explanation falls short as soon as we look at the involvement of non-German auxiliaries, the "foot soldiers of extermination."[12] The advantage of a structuralist approach, which takes a variety of factors into account, is that you can't go wrong with a whole host of explanations at your disposal. But this is also the disadvantage. In this case, different motives are strung together in a type of staid, factor-based scholarship, but the various aspects are not explained, weighted, or – even more critically – placed in relation to one another.[13] This approach assumes that a fundamentally antisemitic attitude, wartime brutalization, careerism, deference to authority, a corps mentality, and peer pressure all played a role in the Holocaust, but how all these aspects relate to each other remains unclear.[14]

The general opinion among historical scholars is that the controversy between "ordinary men" and "ordinary Germans" did not have the makings of a major debate. Goldhagen's monocausal explanation of "eliminationist antisemitism" was thought to have been too theoretically and empirically feeble to mobilize sufficient support from other researchers.[15] What the "Goldhagen phenomenon" – or perhaps the "Goldhagen tragedy" – amounted to was that very few historians thought it was worth discussing his theory in detail, but they were forced into just such a discussion by the "fantastic popular success" of the book and its "favorable reception by some noted intellectuals" such as Jürgen Habermas.[16] Ultimately, however, the historians who predicted that Holocaust researchers would not gear themselves toward Goldhagen's book appear to have been right.[17] The scholarly debate was over before it had even really begun – but the basic question of why hundreds of thousands of men and women willingly participated in the Holocaust has still not been answered.

Attempts at a sociological explanation of the Holocaust

When analyzing the Holocaust, a distinction has to be made between two fundamental questions. The first is how the decision (or decisions, to be more precise) came about to systematically kill the European Jews. Was there one central decision, a master plan by the Nazi leadership that was gradually implemented when the war started, or can the Holocaust be traced back to the competing initiatives of Nazi authorities in Berlin and especially in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe?[18] The second question is how the "ordinary Germans" or "ordinary men" were persuaded to carry out ghetto clearances, mass shootings, and deportations to the extermination camps once the Holocaust was under way. In the words of Herbert A. Simon, the first question concerns the programming decision that was made to commit genocide, while the second concerns the programmed decision-making through which the genocide was carried out in a series of individual decisions.[19] These two questions are related, of course: program decisions made at the top of an organization are only efficacious if they are operatively implemented, and the very act of making program decisions encompasses the possibility of implementing them. Analytically, however, the two questions can be separated.[20]

This book is concerned with the second question, namely, how "ordinary men" or "ordinary Germans" came to murder tens of thousands of Jews.[21] A sociological analysis inspired by systems theory cannot claim to offer a fundamentally new explanation for the actions of "ordinary men" or "ordinary Germans." On the contrary: historical, political, philosophical, and social psychological research has already produced a number of convincing approaches to explain individual aspects, such as the role of antisemitism, peer pressure, opportunities for enrichment, mechanisms of coercion, or brutalization. But by taking a sociological perspective, these approaches can be systematically placed in relation to one another and particularized in terms of their relevance to the actions of ordinary men in the Holocaust.

It may come as a surprise to hear that a sociological approach – and, moreover, a systems theory approach – could help clarify one of the key questions in Holocaust research. After all, in the debate about Reserve Police Battalion 101, the word "sociologist" was used primarily as an insult by each side to discredit the other. The representatives of a voluntaristic approach à la Goldhagen complained

that their critics were using "sociologistic accounts" to obfuscate the police officers' responsibility for the mass shootings.[22] And vice versa: Goldhagen's critics alleged that he was blinded by sociologisms. For instance, Mariam Niroumand accused Goldhagen of producing a kind of "pulp fiction in sociological camouflage," and Paul Johnson decried Goldhagen's use of "sociobabble" in place of serious analysis.[23] The irony is that none of the scholars who were criticized in this way were actually sociologists, none of them worked systematically with sociological theories, and none of them used even a rudimentary sociological conceptual framework.[24]

Admittedly, sociologists themselves played a part in turning "sociological" into an insult in Holocaust research, because, with very few exceptions, they made no contributions of their own to debates about the Holocaust.[25] They were notably absent from the controversy about the "banality of evil" sparked by Hannah Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In the historians' debate in Germany about the uniqueness of the Holocaust, a sociologist played a key role in the form of Jürgen Habermas, but his comments revealed that he had participated in the debate more as an intellectual interested in the future of the Federal Republic of Germany than as a sociologist.[26] And the discussion of how ordinary German men could become mass murderers took place between historians, political scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, theologians, and social psychologists, but, again, hardly any sociologists.[27] For decades, sociologists – to summarize Zygmunt Bauman – gave the impression of collectively closing their eyes to debates about the Holocaust.[28]

As an academic discipline, sociology certainly needs to systematically determine why National Socialism was largely ignored in sociological analyses after World War II.[29] But such sociological self-reflection is not as critical, in my opinion, as engaging with other academic disciplines and exploring specific research questions to see which new insights can be gained from a sociological perspective. By proposing a theory of "ordinary organizations" in this book, I hope to show how the actions of "ordinary men" and "ordinary Germans" during the Holocaust can be explained sociologically.

The perpetration of the Holocaust by means of state organizations of force

The point of departure for my theory of "ordinary organizations" is the observation that more than 99 percent of all killings of Jews

were carried out by members of *state organizations of force*.[30] State organizations of force include, for example, armies, militias, or police, which use the threat of force, or force itself, in order to implement state decisions. They differ from *non-state organizations of force*, such as groups of thugs, terrorist organizations, or marauding bands of mercenaries, in that they can justify their actions by claiming to enforce demands that have been legitimized by the state.[31]

There is no doubt that many forms of violence against Jews during the Nazi era were not organized by the state. We need look no further than the acts of violence during the boycotts of Jewish businesses shortly after the Nazis took power in 1933, the public shaming of Jewish and non-Jewish citizens for supposed "race defilement," and the destruction of synagogues, businesses, and homes during the pogroms of November 1938. There was a line of continuity here – one that has been insufficiently researched and must not be underestimated – running from attacks by antisemitic groups against Jews in the Weimar Republic, to violent acts by nongovernmental Nazi organizations during the Nazi era which were frequently tolerated, and sometimes even supported, by the state.[32]

However, the mass executions of Jews and deportations to the extermination camps were not – and this is the key difference – private initiatives on the part of antisemitic interest groups. Instead, they were part of a state program to annihilate the Jews of Europe.[33] "Ordinary men" and "ordinary women" began to participate in the killing of Jews as soon as they became members of state organizations and were ordered to play their part in the annihilation program – and nearly all of them stopped again as soon as they left these killing organizations. In any case, as far as we know, very few former members of the *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police, the regular uniformed police), employees of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service, or SD), or Wehrmacht soldiers continued to take part in the shooting of religious or ethnic minorities in the context of private initiatives after they had left their respective organizations.

The simple realization that the Holocaust was a killing campaign based largely on state organizations is hardly an original insight. After all, even at first glance it is clear that the majority of Jews were killed not in the context of wild, "unorganized" antisemitic pogroms, but rather by members of state organizations of force who were implementing the policies of the Nazi regime.[34] Raul Hilberg, whose comprehensive overview of the destruction of the European Jews is still considered a key reference in Holocaust research, has explained in great detail how Jews were registered by state registration offices

in the German Reich and occupied territories, transported to the East by the Reich railway, tormented in the ghettos by police battalions, and killed in mass shootings or extermination camps by SS and police units or non-German auxiliaries.[35]

Beyond the view of organizations as machines

When it comes to analyzing the organizational framework for these activities, however, researchers – particularly the few sociologists who have chimed in on the discussion of the Holocaust – have worked with a nearly caricatural view of organizations that can ultimately be traced back to Max Weber.[36] Under the influence of Weber's description of the machine-like "bureaucratic mechanism," with its "precision," "speed," "unambiguity," "knowledge of the files," "continuity," "discretion," "unity," "strict subordination," and "reduction of friction," the Holocaust has been construed as a product of the use of "bureaucratic mechanisms" that were suited to killing people on a massive scale. According to this interpretation, the Holocaust involved the implementation of concepts such as the "optimal use of resources" and a "diligent and professional approach." As a result of the division of labor, the *Schreibtischtäter* (literally, "desk perpetrators") would have perceived the victims solely as a "depersonalized" entity, a "column of numbers."[37]

This machine-like understanding of organizations is embedded in an explanation that interprets the Holocaust as a phenomenon of modernity.[38] As this interpretation has it, the Enlightenment was the source of the "deadly combination" of cold calculation and bureaucratic machinery that gave rise to the "monster of modernity." In its efforts to achieve perfection through organizations, the Holocaust, according to Zygmunt Bauman, was a "code of modernity," a "legitimate resident in the house of modernity." Bauman said the goal of modernity was a "better," "more efficient," "more beautiful" world, and the mass murder of the Jews was an attempt to realize this ideal.[39]

Ultimately, this view of organizations is what led Hannah Arendt to fail so spectacularly in her character study of Adolf Eichmann. With Max Weber's understanding of organizations, the Holocaust can only be explained as a "bureaucratically planned" and "industrially executed" "administrative mass murder."[40] As Martin Heidegger said shortly after World War II, the Holocaust is regarded primarily as the "fabrication of corpses," as "hundreds of thousands" being "unobtrusively liquidated."[41] The Holocaust has thus come to be seen as

an instance of an "entire people" being "obliterated without a trace" in "death factories," in the words of Wolfgang Sofsky. The "death factory" is presented as an "apparatus that functioned smoothly," where people were murdered "at a high capacity and speed" – even though we know from sociological studies of car and aircraft factories that a "smoothly functioning apparatus" is pure management fiction.[42] From this perspective, the only possible synonym for the Holocaust is "Auschwitz" – not the frequently improvised mass shootings, the sometimes chaotic ghetto liquidations, or the first mass killings in the Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka extermination camps, which were plagued by planning problems.[43]

By basing their explanations on a simplified understanding of organizations, Holocaust researchers inherited all the problems that were characteristic of Weberian organizational research: overemphasizing the goal-oriented rationality of organizations, disregarding the fact that organizations frequently have conflicting goals, underestimating the contradictions in the orientation of people's actions, ignoring "bottom-up" initiative, and neglecting the importance of the "sousveillance of superiors" which gives subordinates significant influence over the decisions made by top-level personnel.[44]

This insufficiently complex view of the organizations involved in the Holocaust – in which every single member, almost to the top of the organization, seems to be merely a cog in the machine – has made it easy to reject explanations that focus on organizations. Such a simplified view has been justifiably criticized for portraying people as nothing more than "puppet-like actors," "pawns," or "soulless technocrats." It leaves the impression that we are dealing solely with "obedient and submissive executors of an ideology," "unfeeling command automatons," or "dispassionate desk murderers." Critics say this "denies the moral agency and assent of the perpetrators," leading us to assume that "they were compelled to act by forces external to them."[45]

Though most of the rival parties neither mentioned nor even noticed it, Holocaust research became the arena for a debate about organizations that had already taken place in a more general form decades earlier. When psychologists, business economists, and sociologists began to take an interest in the phenomenon of the organization in the late nineteenth century, the dominant image was one in which people were of interest solely in terms of how they fit into a machine-like structure. According to the structuralist assumption prevalent at the time, you merely had to establish an efficient network of rules and chains of command, then identify the people

best suited to each position in the network and lure them in with attractive compensation.[46]

As a critical response to this reduction of personnel to a pure "fulfillment function" in a more or less rational organization, another concept emerged, one that was shaped by a voluntaristic view of humanity and considered the human factor to be crucial in understanding organizations. The sociologically naive belief here was that organizations are made up of people, so their success or failure must depend exclusively on the composition of their personnel.[47] The result was a fairly unproductive confrontation between researchers who, on account of their view of organizations as machines, paid little heed to the importance of personnel, and researchers who tried to explain organizational phenomena solely through the motivations of an organization's personnel. Representatives of the former position – as Niklas Luhmann argued – tended to underestimate the importance of the people in an organization, while representatives of the latter tended to overestimate it.[48]

Neither structuralism nor voluntarism

The sociological theory of "ordinary organizations" presented here – and I cannot emphasize this point enough – has nothing to do with the oversimplified image of organizations as machines, nor does it fall back on a purely voluntaristic explanation for the actions of people in organizations. One of the strengths of sociological systems theory is that it does not pit an approach geared toward structures against an approach geared toward people, as is frequently assumed. Instead – and this is the key point – it views people as structural features of social systems such as organizations, small groups, protest movements, or families. Even non-sociologists can immediately grasp the fact that the certainty of expectations in small groups, protest movements, and families – as well as organizations – is based not only on roles but also on an understanding of the different ways in which people act.[49]

By adopting this perspective, organizational sociology that is informed by systems theory can help overcome the opposition between the "structuralist approach" and the "voluntaristic approach" in Holocaust research.[50] We can then view the actions of the members of the Order Police and Security Police as more than merely actions in the context of a very precisely defined formal membership role (as Hannah Arendt saw it), and we can also explain why these people

took the initiative in killing Jews, actively contributed to refining the processes for deportation and killing, frequently carried out shootings at the limits of what was tolerated by the organization, and often committed atrocities enthusiastically.[51]

As I will show, it was their membership in organizations that made ordinary German men willing to follow up on what was, for many, a latent antisemitism by actively taking part in deportations, ghetto clearances, and mass shootings (chapter 1). This does not mean, however, that the members of organizations functioned like cogs in a machine – and this is what sets my explanatory approach apart from those in the tradition of Hannah Arendt. On the contrary: not all the deployed policemen necessarily identified with the goal of annihilating Europe's Jews, but even those who simply let the antisemitic indoctrination wash over them played a part in making the killing of Jews appear to be a police duty that had to be carried out (chapter 2). Even the policemen who declared that they could not take part in killing Jews, and thus evaded the demands of their coercive organization, blamed their noncompliance on their own weakness, illness, or conscience – meaning that the killing program could continue unimpeded (chapter 3). In many cases, the expectation that someone would participate in ghetto clearances, deportations, or shootings was not enforced by the hierarchy; it was just what the men expected of each other (chapter 4). These comradeship expectations were strengthened by the fact that the operations offered opportunities for personal enrichment at the expense of the Jews, something that went against the rules of the organizations (chapter 5). The high degree of brutality, which often exceeded what was officially permitted or functionally necessary for the task, made it easier for the battalion members to kill their victims (chapter 6). It was, therefore, the deviations, reinterpretations, and personal initiative of the organization members that made it possible for the Holocaust to be carried out.[52]

A sociologically informed study must do more than merely recount the possible motives of the police battalion members, however. This alone would not offer any obvious value over existing studies. Instead, such a study must illuminate the mechanism that prompted people with different motives to participate in mass killings. The political convictions, frequently changing motives, and behavioral nuances of the organization members were certainly not irrelevant – something that was overlooked by Hannah Arendt. However – and this is where Daniel Goldhagen got it wrong – the Holocaust was not carried out solely, or even largely, by people whose convictions aligned with one of their organization's goals, in this case: the

destruction of the European Jews. In fact, the participants differed greatly in their motives, their willingness to kill, and their reaction to the killing operations. The fact that they ultimately acted uniformly and effectively nonetheless can only be understood – as Christopher Browning failed to see – by viewing their actions from a central perspective: the generalization of motives for membership in organizations (chapter 7).

The use of violence can only be formally expected by state organizations of force if it takes place within a legal framework. The policemen who were instructed by the organizations active in World War II to participate in the mass shooting of women, men, and children, or to kill sick people, the elderly, and infants during ghetto clearances, or to immediately kill anyone captured during a "Jew hunt," could not be sure whether these orders fell within the bounds of legality at the time. During the ghetto clearances, deportations, and shootings, the men acted in a way that aligned with the horizon of expectations typical of the police. As a result, their understanding of what was considered legal was continually validated through their actions (chapter 8).

It is crucial to stress that the Holocaust cannot be explained solely in terms of behavior within organizations. But without a solid understanding of organizations, any explanation of why "ordinary men" or "ordinary Germans" took part in the Holocaust will remain incomplete. Holocaust researchers have come to the distressing realization that it was not necessary to develop special programs for the killing operations, or to create special communication channels, or to recruit special personnel for the killings in order to persuade organization members to participate in the genocide. Just as the members of the state organizations were ordinary people, the organizations through which the mass killings were planned and carried out had the hallmarks of ordinary organizations (chapter 9).

The challenges of a sociology of the Holocaust

This book is challenging for sociologists in that it takes an unconventional approach to its topic. The question of how "ordinary men" or "ordinary Germans" came to murder tens of thousands of Jews is a pressing one in Holocaust research. But for sociologists interested in social structures in the tradition of Émile Durkheim, it is unusual to approach this question by looking at the motivations of individuals.[53] Whenever sociologists have chimed in on the discussion of the

Holocaust, they have rooted their explanatory approaches in abstract social theory (as did Theodor W. Adorno and Norbert Elias), or they have used the Holocaust as a basis for exploring different national response patterns to National Socialism, or they have compared the Holocaust to other genocides.[54] It may therefore come as a surprise to see the focus shifted to the creation of a willingness to kill and thus to the day-to-day implementation of the killing programs.[55]

The challenge is all the greater because this book does not opt for the level of abstraction usually employed by theory-oriented sociologists. "No names of places or people" – this was Niklas Luhmann's famous requirement for sociological analyses claiming to take a generalized approach. In principle, sociologists are not interested in a single war, and certainly not in a single battle, but rather in the social theory of violent conflicts.[56] It is not the individual genocide that is interesting to sociologists but rather the generalized theory of the mass killing of civilians based on the ethnic or religious characteristics attributed to them. This book goes against this basic sociological principle, and names names: of places where massacres took place, of the Nazi organizations that were involved in them, and of the people who participated in these massacres as the members of such organizations.[57]

Even though I do not claim to present a comprehensive history of the Hamburg police battalion, each chapter in this book opens with an account of this organizational unit (based on new sources, in some cases), and the theses of the individual chapters are illustrated with references to these accounts, which are contrasted or supplemented with references to other Nazi organizations where applicable. Using the well-researched example of Police Battalion 101 to illustrate my deliberations should make it possible for readers to grasp and verify the plausibility of my arguments and view my theories in relation to approaches from other disciplines. This does not mean that I have relinquished any claim to sociological generalization. On the contrary, my book uses this specific case study to reveal general insights into how "ordinary men" and "ordinary women" were integrated into organizations.

For non-sociologists, the book probably poses even greater challenges, however. As a scientific discipline, sociology does not approach the Holocaust from a moral perspective. It seems self-evident to us today that the execution of thousands of Jewish Poles constituted mass murder, meaning that the "killers" were automatically "perpetrators" in both a moral and legal sense who should have been, or should be, prosecuted as mass murderers.[58] But this self-evident

categorization of violent acts from a modern perspective makes it more difficult to reconstruct the prevailing rules of legitimacy and, more precisely, of legality of the relevant organizations at the time. In a sociological analysis, it is necessary to strive for the most neutralizing choice of words possible. For example, only by first referring to "mass killings" instead of "mass murders" is it possible to imagine how, depending on the perspective and point in time, mass killings can obviously appear to be mass murders – or not.[59]

What makes the challenge even greater is that sociologists typically reconstruct the rationalities that underlie events.[60] Some Holocaust researchers take the view that the deportations, mass shootings, and killings in the extermination camps simply cannot be explained.[61] This touches on a sociologically relevant aspect as well, namely, that many acts of violence cannot be fully understood from the perspective of rationalities, or even motives, due to the dynamics of conflict inherent in them.[62] But even when we pay more heed to the internal dynamics of processes of violence, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the participants in such processes often persistently attribute rationalities to themselves and others.[63] From a sociological standpoint, however – and this is what makes sociology as a scientific discipline so suspect for many non-sociologists – there is no systematic reason why the Holocaust cannot be reconstructed in exactly the same way as the development of atomic energy, the emergence of new regimes of factory work, or the genesis of universal human rights.

This challenge is further intensified by the fact that the question of how "ordinary men" or "ordinary Germans" could be persuaded to participate in the Holocaust shifts the focus away from the victims. This conflicts with a growing demand for the Holocaust not to be explained or recounted from a perspective that focuses on the perpetrators (much less from the perspective *of* the perpetrators) but rather from a perspective that focuses on (or, better yet, from the perspective *of*) the Jewish victims.[64] This may be compatible with the demand occasionally heard in the field of the sociology of violence that "thick descriptions" be used to make the "torment of the victims" visible.[65] But when it comes to a sociological approach, the moralistic debate as to whether a "perpetrator perspective" should be replaced by a "victim perspective," or whether we need a "theory of suffering" instead of a "theory of the deed," is irrelevant.

Whether or to what extent forms of violence must be analyzed with a view to the perpetrators or the victims depends on the subject being analyzed. For a sociological analysis of ghettos, concentration camps, or extermination camps, the perspective of the victims has to be taken

into account because – as suggested by sociological studies of prisons and psychiatric hospitals – this type of analysis requires that we look at the interaction between the members of the state organizations of force and the inhabitants of the ghettos or the prisoners in the concentration and extermination camps.[66] By contrast, a perspective that focuses on the victims – or, indeed, the perspective *of* the victims – plays a subordinate role when it comes to understanding the actions of the men of Police Battalion 101. This is not because we want to close our eyes to the suffering of the victims – who could do that, after all? – but because, in this case, the victims' perspective does little to help us explain what happened.[67] It is certainly important to precisely reconstruct the acts of violence, particularly during the deportations and shootings, as mutually observed processes of "suffering" and the "infliction of suffering," but these processes were generally so short-lived that the battalion members only had to take the suffering of their actual victims into account to a limited extent.

On the terminology of a sociology of the Holocaust

Part of taking a sociological approach involves choosing one's own terminology and dealing carefully with terms used during and after the Nazi period. Nazi language was often full of euphemisms.[68] With the term "*Volksgemeinschaft*" ("people's community"), Nazi propagandists wanted to suggest that their racial policy was approved by the vast majority of the population. The plan to kill well over ten million Jews in Europe was downplayed as the "final solution" to the "Jewish question." Transports to the extermination camps were called "evacuations," "cleansing," or "resettlements," while on-the-spot shootings – which sometimes took place because rail transport to an extermination camp was not possible – were referred to as "local resettlement," "pacification operations," or "executive measures." "*Aktionen*" ("operations") were time-limited programs such as the killing of mentally handicapped and mentally ill individuals ("Aktion T4"), or the killing of all Jews in the German-administered Polish territory known as the General Government ("Aktion Reinhard").[69] In a scholarly analysis, it is not possible to entirely avoid using the terminology cultivated by the Nazis. However, whenever such terms are used in this book, they always appear in quotation marks to indicate that they are Nazi jargon.

Second, it is important to be aware that when individuals were referred to as Jews or non-Jews, this was not always the way such

individuals would have described themselves; in many cases, they were descriptions imposed on others by the Nazis. In the Nuremberg Race Laws, the Nazis declared that having "three grandparents of Jewish descent" made a person a "full Jew," even if that person did not practice the Jewish faith. If someone was a member of a Jewish religious community, however, it was enough to have just two Jewish grandparents to be declared a "full Jew." The Nazis developed their own version of arithmetic, according to which people could be identified not only as "full Jews" but also as "half Jews," "three-quarter Jews," "five-eighth Jews," or even "thirty-secondth Jews."[70] Since the extermination policies of the Nazi state were based on the Nazis' own definition of Jews, this book adopts their designation. It must be noted, however, that many of the people whom the Nazis ghettoized, deported, and killed as Jews would not have described themselves as Jews.[71]

Third, a distinction was made by the Nazis (and can sometimes even be found in the research literature) between groups of "Germans," "Ukrainians," or "Poles" who were defined nationally and groups of Jews who were defined on a religious (and frequently ethnic) basis. The contrast between what was "German," "Polish," or "Ukrainian" and what was "Jewish" was just one component of a fundamentally antisemitic attitude that had become entrenched as far back as the nineteenth century and was subsequently declared to be a state ideology by the Nazis. For members of the Jewish faith who had fought on the side of the German Empire in World War I, it was a slap in the face when the Nazis made a distinction between a national identity and a religious one. Through continuous repetition, this distinction gained such a degree of plausibility that it characterized the use of language even after 1945.[72] But ever since the emergence of nation-states, "Jews" – just like the members of other religious communities – had always also been Poles, Romanians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Latvians, or Germans. Though there had been repeated attempts to loosen this connection through the way in which people referred to themselves or were referred to by others, Jews were first systematically robbed of their national identities through the policies of the Nazis. In contrast to the use of language by the Nazis, we should actually always speak of Jewish Poles or Jewish Germans and non-Jewish Poles or non-Jewish Germans. This more analytically precise usage works well when we refer to the "non-Jewish Germans" who were responsible for ghettoizing, deporting, and killing Jews, but it gets more complicated when it comes to the specification of "Jewish Germans," "Jewish Hungarians," or "Jewish Poles." It is true that

the victims of Police Battalion 101 were primarily Jewish Poles, but on account of the population displacement initiated by the Nazis after the start of World War II, the ghettos of the General Government held Jews from all over Europe. Therefore, for the sake of linguistic simplification, I will occasionally refer to "Jews" as distinct from "Poles" or "Germans" despite the imprecision – but as often as possible I will make a more precise distinction between "non-Jewish Germans" and "Jewish Germans" or "non-Jewish Poles" and "Jewish Poles."[73]

— 1 —

Beyond "Ordinary Men" and "Ordinary Germans"

I doubt whether even in a thousand years people will understand Hitler, Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka better than we do now. Will they have a better historical perspective? On the contrary, posterity may understand it even less than we do. Who can analyse the motives and the interests behind the enormities of Auschwitz? . . . We are confronted here by a huge and ominous mystery of the degeneration of the human character that will forever baffle and terrify mankind.

Isaac Deutscher[1]

The village of Józefów in the southern part of the Polish district of Lublin has become a symbol of the Holocaust in recent years. Unlike the extermination camps of Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau, Józefów is significant not so much on account of the scale of the extermination or the perfidiousness of a genocide planned and carried out on the basis of a division of labor. Instead, Józefów has come to symbolize how easily "ordinary men" – in this case, older reserve policemen who had been transferred from Hamburg to the German-occupied General Government – could be deployed to shoot Jewish men, women, and children at close range.

The victims of the massacre in Józefów included Jews who were long-term residents of the village who had been unable to escape across the border into the Soviet Union when Poland was occupied by German troops in 1939, as well as Jews who had been deported from the so-called Warthegau territory to Józefów in March 1941 as part of the Nazis' resettlement plans. The Nazi regime had decided to incorporate a large part of occupied Poland – including the annexed Warthegau in the north – into the German Reich and force the Jewish and non-Jewish Poles living there to resettle in the General Government, which was under German administration. Before the

massacre that was carried out by members of the Hamburg police battalion, there were around 2,000 Jews living in Józefów, including those who had been deported from Konin in the Warthegau. Even after some of them managed to flee across the Polish-Soviet border in 1939, Jewish Poles still made up a good half of the village's population.[2]

When Heinrich Himmler ordered Odilo Globocnik, the SS and Police Leader in the district of Lublin, to initiate measures to kill the Jews in occupied Poland, the Jewish Poles in Józefów became a target for the German occupying forces. As early as May 1942 there were numerous arrests and shootings in Józefów involving the German police, Gestapo officers, and railway police who had been stationed in the district.[3] In July 1942, Globocnik issued instructions through his staff to Police Battalion 101 that the Jews of Józefów were either to be shot immediately or – if they could be put to work for the Nazi administration – concentrated in labor camps.

Although the written orders and official reports pertaining to the massacre were destroyed at the end of the war, the course of the massacre itself is largely clear thanks to investigative work carried out by the Hamburg state prosecutor's office in the 1960s.[4] On the evening of July 12, 1942, battalion commander Major Wilhelm Trapp summoned his officers and explained to them that the battalion had been ordered to "cleanse" Józefów of Jews. During the "operation," the male and female Jews who were "able to work" were to be "separated out and taken to a labor camp," while the "rest of the Jews" – the sick, the elderly, and children – were to be "shot on the spot." The policemen were awoken shortly after midnight, and every available unit of the battalion – 500 men – advanced on Józefów. They arrived between 4 and 5 a.m. in personnel carriers.

At the rendezvous point outside the village, the battalion commander assembled the squads and explained their mission: they were to surround the village, drive the Jews out of their homes at gunpoint, and take them to an assembly point on the market square. After the able-bodied men had been separated out, everyone else was to be taken to a nearby forest and shot. If the search teams who were clearing the houses came across people who could not be transported (such as the elderly, the sick, toddlers, or infants) or if they encountered people who resisted "resettlement," these people were to be killed on the spot.

In accordance with these instructions, all the Jewish inhabitants of Józefów who could be caught were rounded up in the market square. Of this group, around 100 laborers – mostly men – were singled out

and taken to Lublin by a platoon of the battalion. The remaining Jews in the market square were driven to the forest in groups of 30 or 40 in the battalion's personnel carriers. Then a policeman would lead each of them deeper into the forest, force them to lie face down on the ground, and execute them with a shot to the back of the neck. According to a note from the Hamburg state prosecutor, noncommissioned officers and medics "went down the rows of victims" and gave any Jews who were still alive "so-called mercy shots." The execution of the 1,300–1,500 Jews took more than 12 hours and stretched into the late afternoon.[5]

This first mass shooting in Józefów, in which almost the entire battalion participated, was followed by a number of other shootings in places such as Łomazy, Serokomla, Talczyn, and Łuków. These were usually carried out not by the whole battalion but by individual companies or platoons.[6] Because the Nazi regime felt that such mass executions were a burden on the policemen, the command staff of the SS and Police Leader in Lublin ultimately decreed that the Jewish inhabitants of the district should instead be deported to the Treblinka, Sobibór, or Bełżec extermination camps if possible and gassed there.[7]

As reconstructed by the Hamburg state prosecutor's office, the deportations that were carried out by the police battalion with the help of local police units nearly always followed the same pattern:

> First, the Jewish settlement was surrounded by members of the Protection Police, the gendarmerie, or foreign auxiliary units. Then the Jews were ordered to leave their houses and make their way to certain assembly points. Detachments of the Security Police or Protection Police then searched the houses for anyone left behind. All those who were found, particularly those who were unable to walk – namely, old men, babies, and sick people – were shot on the spot.

After the able-bodied people had been singled out, everyone else was forced to walk to a train station. Anyone who collapsed from exhaustion during what was usually a kilometers-long march to the station was shot by members of the police battalion and left on the side of the road. The German Order Police often crammed so many Jews into the freight cars "that the doors could hardly be closed, and they were transported on what were often days-long journeys, without water or food, to be gassed in one of the extermination camps." "Because the transports were overcrowded," according to the state prosecutor's reconstruction of the events, many of the occupants of the freight cars died on their journey to the extermination camps.[8]

For two years, Police Battalion 101 was repeatedly involved in

ghetto clearances, deportations, and mass shootings. In some of these killing operations, the unit was directly responsible for the shootings. In others, such as Operation Harvest Festival in the Majdanek and Poniatowa camps, during which more than 30,000 Jews were killed in November 1943, the police battalion's main task was to cordon off the site (at least according to statements made by battalion members).[9] Sometimes hundreds of Jews were shot, and often thousands, but in many cases – such as during what the police themselves referred to as "Jew hunts" – the killings involved only small groups of Jewish men, women, and children who had either been captured by chance or denounced by Polish civilians.[10]

After World War II, the Hamburg state prosecutor's office was able to prove that between June 1942 and November 1943 – the period in which the reserve police battalion was stationed in the district of Lublin in the General Government – members of the battalion were directly involved in the killing of 38,000 Jews and the deportation of 45,000 Jews to extermination camps.[11] In January 1942, before Police Battalion 101 arrived in the district, there were an estimated 320,000 Jews living in Lublin. In January 1946, four years later, there were fewer than 5,000 Jews in Lublin Voivodeship, formerly the district of Lublin.[12] The battalion was instrumental in the near total obliteration of the Polish Jews in the district of Lublin.

What drove policemen, SS men, Wehrmacht soldiers, and civil servants to participate in the ghetto liquidations, deportations to extermination camps, and mass shootings that took the lives of six million European Jews within just a few years?[13] Why did people who seemed to be entirely normal at first (and often second) glance take part in the atrocities?[14]

1.1   The failure of easy answers

For decades, Holocaust researchers have been occupied by the question of what prompted policemen, SS men, and Wehrmacht soldiers, but also members of the German civil service, firemen, and the managers of local savings banks, to participate in the ghetto liquidations and mass shootings.[15] Hamburg Reserve Police Battalion 101 is of particular interest to researchers because attempts to explain the battalion members' actions seem to push the usual explanatory approaches to their limits.

Division of labor

"Human extermination facility": this phrase from Rudolf Höss, former commandant of Auschwitz, shaped our understanding of the Holocaust for a long time. Like "death factory," the term suggests that a principle of modern organizations was brought to bear in the perpetration of the Holocaust – namely, the division of labor. This implies that those who worked on the "conveyor belt of extermination" frequently did not know exactly what they were involved in. From this perspective, the railway officials who arranged for the smooth transportation of Jews to Bełżec, Sobibór, or Treblinka, or the police officers who took part in the clearance of the ghettos in Warsaw, Łódź, or Lublin, were often not capable of recognizing the actual purpose of these activities: the extermination of all European Jews. While this "machinery of extermination" did have a few designers and operators, the majority of the participants, according to this view, were merely "small cogs" in the machine.

The accounts of the activities of Hamburg Reserve Police Battalion 101 that have come down to us from Jewish survivors, representatives of the Polish government, and even the policemen themselves reveal the absurdity of the notion of "machine-like extermination."[16] There are reports of point-blank shots to the back of the neck, of the victims' brain matter spraying the shooters in the face, of children who were shot in their mothers' arms, and of severely wounded victims who were buried alive. This had nothing to do with organized, factory-like killing; instead, as Bernd-A. Rusinek says, it was more like "manual drudgery." A significant proportion of the killings were carried out by the police in very "traditional," nearly "archaic ways."[17]

The operations of the reserve police battalion reveal the high level of coordination between the ghettoization of Jews, the deportations to extermination camps, and the mass shootings before, during, and after the deportations. Ghettoization was an important prerequisite for efficiently transporting Jews to the extermination camps. If transportation to an extermination camp was not possible because the train station was too far away, the railroad line had been disrupted, or there weren't enough train cars available, the Jewish women, men, and children would be executed in a mass shooting and then hastily buried in pits that had been dug in advance.

There is no doubt that the liquidation of the ghettos, the deportations, and the mass shootings of Jews were organized on the basis of a division of labor. Some policemen searched houses, some accompanied Jews to the execution sites, and some cordoned off the area and