History 468: Lecture 16

Lecture begins with a video montage.

[Professor Ray Sun]: Welcome back to our class on Nazi Germany. Today we are going to finish our study of the Holocaust from a slightly different perspective. That is we are going to be looking at the perpetrators of the Holocaust, at some of the men who did the killings which we have been studying. We are fortunate today to have a guest scholar to guide us through this subject. Professor Christopher Browning is Professor of History at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

He is recognized as one of the leading international authorities on the Holocaust and is the author of numerous articles in scholarly journals and a number of books which include The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office, Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution, and most recently The Path to Genocide. Today we are going to be basing our discussion mostly on a book Professor Browning wrote which came out first in late 1991. It is entitled Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland. I would like to turn it over now to Professor Browning.

[Professor Christopher Browning]: Thank you very much. Since most of you have, or hopefully all of you have read the book since you are doing your paper on it by Wednesday, I would like to talk a little bit about two things. One what led me to write the book in the first place, and secondly what reactions I have had to the book afterwards, and then open it up to questions that you may have.

I began my work in the Holocaust in fact studying not killers in the field but what I call, the “desk murderers.” The people, who sat in the offices of Berlin or elsewhere that never saw a Jew, never touched a Jew, never beat a Jew, and certainly never killed a Jew in a direct sense, but drafted telegrams, designed programs, wrote memos, compiled lists, and scheduled trains. All the kinds of things that were absolutely essential in order to deliver the victims to the executioners but going through their documents, studying these people one was still dealing with a group that was at a distance from the actual killing. It is only more gradually in a sense that I came to work more and more closely with what I would call the grassroots killers themselves. The people that are involved in the actual killing process who are confronting the victims, confronting the people that they are killing.

I came to this particular battalion, to this particular topic somewhat indirectly. I was in fact working in Germany at a placed called The Central Agency for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes. This is the central agency in Germany for launching investigations. They found after the war, after 1953 when the allies turned over all further prosecutions of Nazi crimes to the new German government that they didn’t know how to go about it. Obviously the local District Attorneys had no way of knowing that the person down the street may have been a notorious death camp commander. These people didn’t call attention to themselves needless to say. And by the late
1950’s the German government realized that they were going have to deal with this in a more systematic manner.

So they created a central investigatory agency, and that agency in turn created teams of lawyers and historians to look into and investigate what they called the major crime complexes. So that one team was assigned to investigate Auschwitz, one team Treblinka; there were teams for each of the Einsatzgruppen, teams for each of the major SS and police headquarters in the occupied territories. There job was to find what documentation still existed, find witnesses, investigate those, interrogate them, create a trail they could gradually widen until they had recreated in a sense the events that had taken place, and then ask the simple questions: who had committed criminal actions? Were those people still alive? If so, where did those people live in Germany? And then deliver the docket to the local district attorney who was then to carry the case further.

I went to the central investigative agency in a suburb of Stuttgart a place called Ludwigsburg because I wanted to know more about what had happened in Poland. In Poland, we knew about the major ghettos particular Warsaw and Lodz which were two of the largest ghettos in Europe, but the stories of the Jews of Poland in the small towns, and the countryside, even the medium sized cities had really never been written.

In fact, half the victims of the Holocaust are Polish Jews. Some 3 million Polish Jews perished during the Holocaust, and more astonishingly the bulk of those were killed in a very short 11 month period from basically mid March of 1942 to mid February of 1943. An 11 month period that in fact that coincided with the second major German offensive, the opening of the second campaign in the Soviet Union and ending with Stalingrad debacle in February of ’43.

But in short, the murder of the bulk of Polish Jewry took place exactly at the time when German military fortunes hung in the balance. So one question that struck me was: where in the world did they get the manpower to kill millions of people when Germany’s fate was being decided on the eastern front? How did the blitzkrieg against Polish Jewry correlate historically to this desperate “winner take all” military campaign in the Soviet Union in 1942 to early 1943? How could they organize the murder of so many people in such a short space of time in Poland? So I went to Germany to look through all the records relating to Poland, all the trials that had taken place, and in particular what was interesting to me was the investigatory team that had dealt with the SS and police headquarters in the city of Lublin.

For the man in charge there, a man named Globocnik, was a man who was in charge of coordinating the Final Solution in Poland. The team that was investigating the SS and police in Lublin talked to lots of people. They also investigated even people like truck drivers. In fact, the truck drivers of the motor pool are a very good source because they take people to different actions, and indeed several of the truck drivers they interrogated said, “Well indeed we drove SS people from Lublin to various killing actions. But by the way, there was also this police battalion that we took around on a number of occasions.” They couldn’t remember the number of it, but
they could remember that it was unusual. It was a unit from Homburg, and a unit in which the men adored their commander. It was a unit in which the relationship between the commander and his men was extraordinarily close and that this was to an extent that was so unusual that virtually everyone who was in contact with this battalion remembered that feature about it.

So the investigators then had the question of looking for this battalion. They could find the number of the battalion fairly easily. It was a battalion reserve police battalion 101. They then talked to a few more names that they could track down, enough to indicate that indeed this was a killing unit, a unit that had been involved in a number of massacres and ghetto clearing actions around Lublin.

So they went to Homburg and in Homburg what they found was a roster of the entire battalion. This is very rare. We don’t have a roster of a killing unit from the Soviet Union. We know the commanders of the Einsatzgruppen, these SS mobile firing squads that went into Russia, but we don’t know who the rank and file were, and so this was a real windfall to find a surviving roster of the entire unit. In particular a unit from a reserve police battalion where most of the men had returned to the city of their origin. This was a city mobilized in Homburg also people from nearby cities like Raymond in the north German, North Sea area. So that it was possible to track down many of the former members after the war they had returned to their homes. The upshot was that the investigators were able, in the end, to interrogate 210 men from a unit of under 500 men in the 1960’s. These interrogations took place between 1962 and 1967.

This was a remarkable event for subsequent historians when they finally found the documentation because it provided a density of testimony; it provided a look at the killing actions not just from the perspective of the officers who routinely lied to cover one another in virtually all of the post war trials in Germany, and it allowed a chance because so many of these men were from the same units the same actions for a very conscientious and efficient investigative team to compare testimonies and to bring people together who had conflicting testimonies and to ask them to reconcile their stories, to get their stories straight. The result was they left behind over 30 volumes of testimony from these 210 men that basically sat in the archives of the court house in Homburg from the late ‘60’s until the late 1980’s.

I was looking through all the kinds of cases from Poland I could find and I came across the indictment from this battalion and it immediately grabbed my attention for two reasons. The first was the unprecedented offer that the commander makes at the beginning of the very first shooting action. I had studied many units and many court records but never had I seen a case where the commanding officer explicitly offers to his men before the first shooting that anyone who does not feel up to it can step out. A clear case that the men were not coerced, or threatened, or forced to do what they did. That they did not act out of fear of dire consequences if they did not – they weren’t being forced to do this, that they had a way out.
The second item in the indictment that attracted my attention was the nature of the quotes of testimony that were included. Now I had read a great deal of testimony from many court records and as I say most of it was a case of officers covering for fellow officers. That they were filled with apologetics, filled with excuses, filled with denials, filled with distortions, and to read them was to read something that had very little ring of truth in it most of the time. It was transparently apologetic, transparently fabricated. But here people were giving statements that describe in vivid detail personal experiences that had seared into their memories that simply had a very different ring to it. And my gut reaction, my instinctive reaction to this was there is something here that I have never seen before in nearly 20 years of Holocaust research this is something I must look into further.

So I applied to get into the court records at Homburg. After considerable red tape and delay, I was finally given access and I was allowed basically to go through all of these 30 plus volumes of testimony that formed the basis for writing the book, *Ordinary Men*. That book is of course a case study of a particular unit to look at wider issues through concentrating on the experiences of a single battalion. Some of the questions that can be answered we can deal with in a bit.

When the book was finished and published, I was very anxious to know of course what the reaction would be. Any author that writes a book is interested to know how it will play in Peoria how people will react to it. I would say of course for the most part I was terribly gratified. For the most part, the reaction to the book was very positive. Most of the reviews were very favorable. But there were two kinds of critical reactions. Two areas that some people at least said the book was deficient or flawed and I would like share those with you so that you have not only what I said in the book but how other people responded to it. One reaction to the book was to question its methodology.

The methodology was questioned in two parts. A.) that I had relied almost overwhelmingly on the testimony of the policemen. I was dealing with testimony that could not be believed. That the credibly of these men was severely in question. That it was taken for granted that post war German testimony would be filled with exculpatory, distorted memories sometimes conscious sometimes unconscious, but that here was a source that had to be tainted by its very nature had to be used with much greater caution than I had used it. That descriptions particularly of which the men talk about their own inner reactions to the killings particularly in the initial massacre where I accepted the testimony of the men that the bulk of the battalion came back quite traumatized, that they were bitter, they were resentful, they were angry, they were upset at what they had been asked to do.

And some people had a great deal of trouble buying that portrayal of the killers particularly in view of the stereotype of highly indoctrinated fanatically anti Semitic SS men as the core of carrying out Nazi racial policy, and they had said I had simply accepted excuses and a twisted version in which these men just even if subconsciously even if only to live with themselves had
rewritten their own memories, reshaped their own memories of what had happened in an earlier period.

The second line of criticism with the methodology of the book was the criticism that I had no Jewish sources. I had looked at what the policemen remembered. I had not gone and interviewed or looked at the testimonies or surviving accounts of Jews who had been victims of this battalion. That if I had consulted Polish sources from the villages where the battalion operated or consulted the accounts of Jewish survivors my portrayal of these German policemen would have been very different that I would have seen them for the brutal sadists and wild men that they were. And that my portrayal of them—the implication was in a sense was too empathetic that I had come too close to trying to put myself in the place of the policemen without also putting myself in the place of the victim and letting the victims’ voices be heard and that this resulted in my being duped by the testimony again of believing too much of what the German policemen in the ‘60’s were saying about their activities in the 1940’s. That is one area of major criticism of the book.

The second line of criticism was in the area of interpretation and here one could focus above all on the title of the book. The book I called *Ordinary Men* and obviously I was coming to a fairly universalistic conclusion that the behavior of these men in that particular situation could be generalized that it told us something about human nature in general. That what particular German policemen did to particular Polish Jews in a particular town in Poland said something about humanity in general, about the human condition, about the fragility, we might say, of moral autonomy, of the ability of men to resist peer pressure to not to conform and that kind of thing.

And there were some people that did not like this and they said the title of the book ought not to have been *Ordinary Men* but should have been Ordinary Germans that this was an example of German political culture, it was an example of German anti-Semitism, that this was something that indeed ordinary Germans could do but it was not something that people from other countries, other cultures, other upbringings would have engaged in, and that it was wrong to generalize the book in that way. Along with that of course was a feeling that I had in terms of downplaying the German peculiarity I had also downplayed anti-Semitism as a motive. One should have seen this basically as a case in which ideologically charged, ideologically motivated Germans afflicted with a fairly pervasive anti-Semitism had denied their true motives in their later accounts but that I as historian should have seen through this and should have pierced the veil of their fabrications and written a book that focused much more on the particular motivation of these men and not tried to generalize it in the way that I did. Interestingly enough it was difficult to predict who would have reacted in this way.

The year after the book came out I went to Israel for a month to do research and to attend a conference at Yad Vashem. Yad Vashem is the major museum and research center for the Holocaust in Israel in Jerusalem. And one morning at Yad Vashem we had what amounted to a colloquium. People on the staff at Yad Vashem as well as faculty from nearby Hebrew
University came to discuss the book and the participants were really split pretty much down the middle, half and half and there was no clear division by age, or by their Israeli politics – left or right wing- that in fact the people attending split in utterly unpredictable ways and there was no correlation that I could find in terms of generational or political alliances or anything of that sort. So the reaction to my generalizing I would hesitate to put a simple explanation on it as I say it resulted in fairly unpredictable divisions at least even among my Israeli colleagues with whom I was discussing the book.

Since then, there have been a number of occasions on which I have in a sense debated the conclusions of the book or been asked to present my defenses against those criticisms. There are two things that have come to my attention since then that I point to which certainly would have been in the book or played up with greater attention in the book if I had known them earlier.

Since my book came out, in fact almost simultaneously with my book, was a book that was produced by a sociologist, a woman named, Nechama Tec, who is at University of Connecticut and she wrote a book on a man named, Oswald Rufeisen. Oswald Rufeisen was a Polish Jew. He was in eastern Poland. Part of what we would now in fact call White Russia or Belarus and he was able to pass in this White Russian area as a Pol and was in fact hired by the local German police, reserve police, very much like the men in my battalion, middle age conscripts, to be the translator.

So here was this 19 or 20 year old Jew, passing as a Pol, eating at the table of the German Policemen, to the right hand of the captain who almost took him over as a kind of adoptive son. It was almost an Iropa scenario in which the police captain, very fond of this young man, and brings him in. that this man lived at the police headquarters eating his meals with the policemen for a long period of time.

Eventually when he learned of the imminent of the liquidation of the nearby ghetto he spread the word to the ghetto to warn people to leave. Some of them took the warning others did not. And one of the people he tried to rescue by warning denounced him and he was uncovered and he then was questioned by the police captain. He admitted what he had done but the police captain in a sense let him escape and he managed to escape and even survive the war.

In Nechama Tec’s book, he talks- there is a whole chapter on his experiences in this police station. And what was stunning about it here was a Jewish witness, not just the German police 20 years later, but a Jewish witness who saw things close up and his description of that unit was strikingly similar to my portrayal of my police battalion based on the German testimony. In this unit, Rufeisen said three of the thirteen police did not participate in the killing of Jews that they assumed it was their right not to participate no one dared to try and force them. That few of the men in his unit indeed where as he put it, “beasts in human form,” that were utterly sadistic and brutal but most of the men even those that went and engaged in killing actions didn’t like to talk about it. They viewed it as unclean as something they were ashamed of, dirty. They liked to talk
about their actions against partisans that was heroic, and military, and macho but they did not like to talk about or discuss the massacre of innocent women and children and that became a kind of taboo subject. In a sense the dynamic within the battalion, the reaction of the policemen to what they had done was very similar to what I had portrayed in reserve police battalion 101 based upon very different kinds of testimony. So here indeed we did have Jewish testimony from the inside that was very similar to the post war testimony of the perpetrators themselves.

Another item that came to my attention involved a Ludwigsburg police. Some of you may have noted though probably not because it is mentioned only obscurely in the book that in addition to being a unit comprised primarily of men from Hamburg and others drafted from nearby Bremen and Wilhelmshaven and few from the city of Rendsburg and Schleswig the battalion was also filled out with a small contingent of Ludwigsburg police before it left for Poland in 1942. Ludwigsburg had been conquered by Germany in 1940 and next to the Third Reich its young men were now subject to the draft because it was part of the Third Reich and that here we have a possibility which historians usually only dream of, of a kind of controlled experiment. Most of the time of course historians have to kind of speculate about what if because they can’t go back like scientist and rerun the experiment with one control variable altered but here we have a case of non Germans in the same unit involved in the same actions and the issue what do they do.

The young Ludwigsburg policemen were somewhat different than their German comrades in the sense they were half the age of the middle aged German policemen. That in Ludwigsburg there was a Duke guard, the Duke of Ludwigsburg had a palace guard of young men, 19-20 years old, who would serve a tour of duty as part of the Duke’s guard and then they would have preferred consideration for employment in Ludwigsburg civil service. This is important because we are dealing here obviously not with Nazi collaborators out of ideological conviction we are not dealing with a kind of resentful underclass that is going to gravitate towards a chance for power. We are talking about a very respectful element of Ludwigsburg society that when the Germans come they take over this Duke guard and they march down to the train station in Ludwigsburg and sent off to Germany in to training in Weimar and then a small group of them are sent to this reserve police battalion in Homburg in 1942 before it is sent out to Poland.

I learned all about this background from a man who had been in Ludwigsburg during the war. He was an American history professor who had dual citizenship- a Ludwigsburg mother. He had been an older teenager in Ludwigsburg in early the 1940’s. He remember standing watching as the parade of the Duke guard was marched down to the train station with the Duke at their lead taking them off to say goodbye to him before he was exchanged and allowed to return back to the United States.

In any case, the testimony of the police says almost nothing of these Ludwigsburgers. They are not asked and this is not followed up by the interrogator. He is interested in German criminals that he can bring charges against. He isn’t a historian interested in following this unique case of a
small group of Ludwigsburgers in the battalion. So the result is only when men simply incidentally volunteered information does any of that come to the fore.

As best we can tell this is the story of the Ludwigsburgers. That they were in the platoon of the Lieutenant who before the first action says he cannot order his men to shoot unarmed women and children that he will have to be given a different assignment and that he is sent off as the escort to take the work Jews away before the shooting begins and part of that escort are the Ludwigsburgers. So they are not at the first massacre at Yousef.

As you remember, or hopefully you remember in the book, the lieutenant there after goes to Major Trapp, the commander, and says unless you personally order me to I will not take any actions against Jews give me another assignment, leave me out. And in fact it is tacitly arranged that orders involving Jewish actions will go to headquarters to this man’s first sergeant who will lead the platoon and the Lieutenant will simply be left at home.

The first sergeant comes to him and says, “Lieutenant are you coming with us today?” And the Lieutenant knows that if the orders have gone to the first sergeant it is a Jewish action and he is saying, “No thank you. I am staying home.” And that is it. Lieutenant gets to stay home but his Ludwigsburgers do not and in fact the first sergeant is described by others in the battalion as a 110% Nazi, a real go getter, one of the really zealous, non commissioned officers that helps make the killings so efficient. And in fact, the Ludwigsburgers are involved in all the actions of the company. One testimony in fact goes even further and says the company captain was very anxious to have the Ludwigsburgers along on all actions and then he goes on to say why.

They were young men. You must remember that most of the men in this unit are 39, 40, and 41 years old. If you are a commanding officer, do you want young, fit 19 year olds or do you want pot belly 40 year old Homburg dock workers chasing around the forest and rounding people up? The fact was the Ludwigsburgers become in effect the shock troops of the battalion the preferred young, fit people that can be used for the more difficult tasks. So, that while we have not specific testimony about the Ludwigsburgers involved in killing actions the surrounding testimony is fairly clear that they did what all the others in the battalions did and even more were involved at a more intensive rate because the captain preferred to use them because of the physical advantage of their youth. So that we have in fact a case in which we have a cross cultural comparison.

That the Ludwigsburgers in the unit in the same situation as their German colleagues indeed behave in the same way, they are involved in the same killing actions, which makes very dubious I would say, poses very serious questions to the notion that my book should be renamed Ordinary Germans that it warns us that any comfort we might take that only Germans do that, but this book says nothing to us, we don’t have to see ourselves in the mirror when we look at reserve police battalion 101 that that kind of seeking of comfort and distance from these events is really I think quite untenable.
I would close at that and open things up for questions that you have either about what I have just said or matters of the book that you have read. Yes.

[Student]: First of all I find your book very hard to put down it is well written and easy reading. There seems that there was two parts to the transition of the killing. There was the emotional distancing of the men but at the same time there was the emotional hardening. They were becoming hardened killers. So not only was it becoming easier for them to kill it was also being made easier. Being given the argument of the hardened killers how do you think that the emotional distancing effects the revisionist or the recounts as the critics say? And also were any of these men, do they all complete this project or did some of them drop out in the middle? Are all these accounts from people who had finished the project and then looked back years later?

[Professor Christopher Browning]: I’m going to answer the second part first. The testimony is of men from a 1942 roster so the people interrogated between 1962 and 1967 were all men that were in the unit in Poland in the summer and fall of 1942. By the fall of ’43, when the unit is engaged in its last major action, the great Erntefest massacres of the labor camps I think there has been a fair amount of turnover and we have fewer testimonies because a lot of men had been sent off to do guard duty in Lublin or had been returned to Germany or something of that sort. So the bulk of the testimony are from people who were there from that crucial period of July to November of 1942 before the battalion begins to have men siphoned off and sent elsewhere and before they begin to get reinforcements from Berlin. It becomes less and less a Homburg unit as time passes, but the key testimony are people that are there in that important first months after the unit is sent to Poland.

The distinctions between as you say distancing and hardening is I think a good one. The distancing comes from bringing in the specialist shooters that allowed them to watch the shooting but not to take part or even more easy for the men is of course the roundup to put them on the trains and you send them 60 miles away to Treblinka and they don’t even have to see the gassing much less take part in the actual shooting.

They don’t explicitly say, “That was much easier for me,” but one can see in the testimony the tone in which they talk about it though even in one case it is actually spoken that way. That one of the men recalls that the officers comes back and says, “Oh thank goodness the Hevees are here today we have it easy today.” This is what one man recounts in effect of how they themselves did in fact talk about it that it would be much easier when the auxiliaries are brought in from the Triabniki camp that will do the shooting for them though they are of course guarding the Jews and forcing them into the shooting pits.

But what does come through is they sometimes talk about well I was merely in accordant that day as if somehow trapping the Jews so someone else can kill them, I’m not really involved so they certainly sought to distance themselves psychologically and found it possible to distance themselves psychologically if we look at the language they use and it seems to be in that
language they really reveal how they could subdivide the task and subdivide their sense of participation even if they were virtually had a front row seat to watch the killing or involved in these terrible roundups and this brutal driving of people onto the trains. After the actual point blank range killings that seems in relationship easier and they speak of it in a much more nonchalant way.

The issue of hardening there again some people have questioned my interpretation that they initially were quite upset and quite distraught and they say I am suckering to their excuses and that this is their way of trying to make themselves look better. My own feeling is this is not true. One because some of the men who use that language that initially these people were upset, angry were men who were back at the barracks who see these people come back and describe them that weren’t even in the action that don’t have to make an excuse. And these were the cooks and whatever that were still at the barracks that describe these people coming back their uniforms saturated in blood they have been out for virtually 21 hours by then without a meal and they come back covered with blood and gore and they describe the mood of the men in these terms. So it is not just the people who were doing the killing that use this vocabulary but also the witnesses who saw these men return to the barracks later that night.

All of that language disappears from the later testimony. And the accounts of the killing become less and less vivid. The first day massacre these people describe in extraordinary detail they can remember the first person they killed, describe the person vividly. Later they can’t even remember which ghetto came first and which action and it all becomes a blur. I interpret that as meaning these people became very harden and became very numb to what they were doing. Anything we do repetitively obviously it loses its shock value or distinctness and my interpretation is that it lost its shock value too. And that that loss of shock mean in fact numbness, means callousness, means hardening that they got used to what they were doing. They don’t come up and say, “Oh I got used to it.” But the way in which they talk leads me to conclude that they did get used to and got used to it fairly quickly. Does that answer what you are? Yes.

[Student]: Criticisms of the title of the book, Ordinary Men, this is probably more of a statement and I would like your response. It seems to me it is almost a cop out of someone who criticize the title of the book in the sense that they are trying to get out of what really is human nature. I mean would you call the persecution of Native Americans – taking the land, or the persecution of African Americans- bringing them from Africa making them work as slaves, putting Japanese Americans in camps during World War II would you just call us ordinary Americans? Do you see where I am coming from?

[Professor Christopher Browning]: I certainly see where you are coming from. I’m not sure if my critics see where you are coming from. What I think what they have done is in a sense jump from point a to b. A.) certain policies of the German government were very distinct. American slavery and American treatment of Native Indians was different in significant ways from what the
Germans did to Gypsies and Jews. They were both terrible but they were different. We can make distinctions. My argument was the actual human behavior and the adaptation of human nature at the grassroots level is the same. What is the difference between chaining people in a slave ship and having 50% of them die in the passage, or running into a Native American village and massacring women and children, and shooting Jews in Poland? We are talking about a human being adapting to murder.

I think because the first, the German policies, we can distinguish as a set group of government policies that have an identity of their own that is argued makes the Holocaust unique. Well lots of events in history are unique. They then argue the Holocaust is uniquely unique, it is unique in ways other things are not unique and that is where I hesitate to go. But I think they see my book as eroding that position. If in fact, the killers are not unique it is subtracting from the uniqueness of the event and this is where I think I meet the emotional resistance that they see this as an attempt to homogenize the Holocaust to make it simply one more atrocity like many others. They wouldn’t deny many others but they would say the Holocaust is a uniquely unique event and my generalizing, universalizing about the behavior of grassroots perpetrators is felt by them to subtract from that. There is an emotional issue here not just an intellectual one, but I agree with what you said. Yes.

[Student]: You mentioned in your book that there was a girl that came from the Josetrol,

[Professor Christopher Browning]: Gossef.

[Student]: Okay. She came out and she was bleeding from the head and I think it was Major Trapp that said, “You shall remain alive.” Do you have any follow up testimony on what happened to that girl? Was she later killed?

[Professor Christopher Browning]: I have no idea. Only one person described that with Trapp himself and another referred to the girl but did not associate it with Trapp. As I recall from the testimony. But nobody makes any follow up to that all. What it means is that they don’t shoot her on the spot; they let her go back to the village, what happened there after I haven’t the slightest idea so I can’t answer that question.

[Student]: I also had another question. I am going to ask you to say, “what if.” If there had only been one shooting actions, and there hadn’t been those repetitive ones, how do you feel the German reserve police battalion would have acted if they would have had only that one experience. Do you feel they would have gone out and shot again without their officers telling them to? Do you think they would have done it of their own accord?

[Professor Christopher Browning]: I mean the unit is told as a unit it must do it. Individuals by taking the onus onto themselves of being weak and leaving the dirty work to their comrades can excuse themselves, but it is not as if they were just left to themselves to shoot. They are told this is the assignment of the unit as Trapp says these orders come from the highest authority. So that
it is, the men aren’t in effect spontaneously doing this. My own feeling is after the first shooting
the men were bitter, resentful, they certainly didn’t see this as a pleasurable experience. As one
of the men says to his ‘noncoms’ if I had to do that again, I think I would go crazy. It was a very
traumatic experience, and they attempted to repress it. As one other man said it became taboo,
we didn’t talk about this, and if they had not been sent to kill again, I think they would have
buried that day very deep that it would have been a day in which crazy order came, things got
messed up, and something terrible happened and they would have collectively pretended that it
had never occurred, and that in a sense would have been the end of it.

Not unlike my guess is the experience of many Americans in Viet Nam who experienced
incidents of atrocity that were not ordered by their commanders but came out of a situation and
they in a sense fled from it in their own memories as best they could. I am not sure if I am
getting at what you are asking. That is the best of a ‘what if scenario’ as I think I can give. Yes.

[Student]: With is the current popularity of movies like Schindler’s List and American Holocaust
Museum in Washington D.C. Many educators are now saying that we should be teaching the
Holocaust at the lower levels of our education system. As an educator yourself, do you feel this
is a good idea to start teaching the Holocaust as part of a seventh or eighth grade educational….

[Professor Christopher Browning]: In my own state, a survivor group put before the legislature a
bill to mandate the teaching of the Holocaust and they asked me to come and testify. And I said I
wasn’t conformable with that. I would be glad to support the recommendation that Holocaust be
included in curriculum but I did want to force anyone to teach it who didn’t want to teach it. My
own feeling is they wouldn’t teach it well. And it would be worst to have something taught badly
than not teach at all and I just don’t believe in dividing up the curriculum into interest group
representations. Let’s all fight out who gets how many class periods between 7th grade and 12th
grade. I am really uncomfortable with treating a curriculum in that way. I think curriculum has
to be look at in a much wider picture and not seen as territory to be divided up. So I said I would
be happy to recommend it.

What I have been much more involved in is Holocaust teaching on the college level. There is an
organization called Holocaust education foundation. The purpose of which is to identify different
faculty in different campuses that would like to teach a course on the Holocaust but don’t feel
confident, they haven’t been prepared for it, or they meet resistance from administration because
of the startup course costs of a new course, and what we will do is provide start up costs in terms
of say library materials, or even buy release time so the person has has time to prepare a new
course or to go off to summer school or a study trip so that it can get into the curriculum.

Here we are dealing with something that is doubly voluntary. One that the faculty wants to do it
and two the students want to sign up for it. My feeling is that it ought to be made available
widely. I think it is an event that ought not to be absent from college curricula as I think it had
been certainly up until the ‘70’s now it is becoming more prominent. But certainly in my early
career you could have looked at college catalogs all over the United States and only a handful of places would there ever have been a course offering on the Holocaust. I am more comfortable with that. I am more comfortable with making it available, supporting its availability at the college level, I support teachers who want to do it at the high school level who because they want to do it are prepared to do it sensitively and carefully. I would be very reluctant to mandate it done at that level because mandating teachers who are not prepared to do it, are reluctant to do it is I think not productive. Yes.

[Student]: I have a question here regarding this book here the Holocaust in here it stated that you see no clear evidence that Hitler was planning a genocide all along. In Mein Kampf, Hitler says that the way he speaks about the Jews and all is that he really was going to get rid of the Jews and he even said that he was doing the lord’s work. How come you see it that he didn’t have a clear…?

[Professor Christopher Browning]: I think we have…I think it is in part a question of definition. My own feeling is the following. I will present the following scenario to you. Hitler is obsessed about the Jews. Hitler is a deep believing, true believing anti Semite. His whole ideology indeed revolves around a racial interpretation of history that he sees history as a struggle between races that this involves Germanic races, Slavic races, whatever else, it is a struggle for territory that in this racial hierarchy the Jews are virtually a sub human group beneath all the other because they are a people without land, that they live as parasites on others, that they infiltrate other societies both biologically – mixing blood, and ideologically- spreading subversive ideas such as Christianity is a Jewish subversion you know brotherhood of man turn the other cheek. That’s not Nazi. Liberalism is a Jewish conspiracy; Marxism is a Jewish conspiracy, solidarity of the working class and all of this. Anything that tried to teach equality and brotherhood was of course inimical to his own view of the German race is superior and must struggle and beat up on everybody else and take the land they need. To say that that in turn means he had from the beginning a notion that he was going to kill all the Jews is where I part company.

There is in Hitler’s mind a Jewish question, a Jewish problem; he is determined to solve it. He speaks in the early period about a total removal of the Jews. My own view is that he means he is going to drive them all out of Germany. The early Hitler solution is ethnic cleansing, and in fact ethnic cleansings remains the Hitler solution up until the summer of 1941.

It is when ethnic cleansing doesn’t work anymore that he then makes that leap to total and systematic genocide of all Jews within the German grasp down to the last man, woman, and child. If he had had that idea earlier, he had months and months to implement it. He is in control of the bulk of European Jewry, 2 million Polish Jews in the German zone from ’39-’41. They are ghettoized but there is no systematic mass murder.

If his plan was to murder the Jews, why doesn’t he begin murdering Polish Jews in a systematic and total way? Why does this not come about until the summer and fall of 1941? So my feeling
is we must understand a determination to solve the Jewish question. That I agree absolutely to say that he envisages total and systematic liquation in the form of Auschwitz from the 1920’s on. There I would say the evidence does not support it, but we have to make a distinction between solving the Jewish question one way or another, which is he is determined to do, and the final solution which I say emerges, involves in his mind in ’41.

[Professor Ray Sun]: I think we have time for one more questions here.

[Student]: I have a question when reading the book there are a lot of areas like a lot of names you refer to where you either made up a name or…and I am trying to understand why you did this because there is no mention of this in the book.

[Professor Christopher Browning]: Okay the pseudonyms are a requirement from German law in order to get access to the records. Germany has very strict privacy laws and that witnesses who testified who were not indicted, no convicted, their names cannot be bandied about in public so that the agreement I had to draw up was and submit it to them, and sign it, and pledge to keep it was that except for names that were generally known (I don’t have to have a pseudonym for Henry Himmler) but for names that are not public knowledge that I find in those records that I would use the real first name and the first letter of the real last name and then invent a pseudonyms when it is in the text.

In the footnotes you will see I just simply use, Henrick L., and that is the first name and the first initial of the last name. I don’t bother with the pseudonyms. When it is in the text, I think that is very awkward and it makes it read very badly so I invited a pseudonym to put in there simply so the text reads easily. I wasn’t happy with it. I would have much preferred to be able to use all the real names but to me it was a price worth paying to get into the records, to be able to use these records, it doesn’t affect the overall interpretation even if it is not perfect, even it is a minor blemish on the overall authenticity of the work.

[Professor Ray Sun]: One more very quick one.

[Student]: The age seems very significant here. Here we have a middle aged police battalion many of them married with children. I would make the assumption that right off hand that it would be more difficult for middle aged, married men with children to shoot Jewish families than it would be for younger men, half their age who had never had the experience of having children. I would make that assumption right off the bat. I wonder what significance that, do you think that would hold up? Do you think that is a valid…?

[Professor Christopher Browning]: One of the reasons I was intrigued, or this battalion seemed an important case to do is because it tested the age question. That here are men not raised under the Hitler youth, here are men who already family, they had children as you say and yet given even wider latitude not to take part, so many of them did.
So my first reaction was, “Well this shows that these things in fact don’t bind us so much.” Later, however, thinking about it, when I went back and actually looked at some of the testimony again, one area of the book if I had to write it over again where I would rewrite it was a section where I say the men’s reaction to what happened was above all that it was so gory that it wasn’t so much an ethical reaction as they couldn’t articulate an ethical reaction—what the men said was it was so bloody, it was so terrible when they were explaining why they had dropped out or just how they had felt about it, some of the testimony when I looked back and went over again in fact exactly what they say when they asked to be let out was, “I can’t do this. I have got children.”

So for some of the men indeed when they looked at the victims, they were able to make that association. Those are not subhumans. Those are children like my children. I can’t do this. Not many but in fact a few of them did at least in the 1960’s claim that is how they phrased their request to be let out in 1942, and I hadn’t picked that up the first time around. I think you are right. I think that is important.

[Student]: Ludwigsburg men would prefer it by the shooting details.

[Professor Christopher Browning]: They didn’t say explicitly shooting detail. They preferred for actions to go out and simply be there.

[Professor Ray Sun]: I think we will have to close it up now. Thank you very much Professor Browning that was a very illuminating talk and I think our whole class got much more out of your book.

Class applause

Video Credits