

Edited by: Jorge Salazar

Transcript:

David Puder ([00:00:52](#)):

I am joined today with Dr. Christopher Browning. He is a historian and a professor emeritus of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Professor Browning is an internationally recognized expert on the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. He has authored over 75 publications. His most notable work is a book entitled 'Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland.' This seminal text is a remarkable work that meticulously and very detailedly chronicles the extraordinary experiences of ordinary men, shooting 38,000 Jews often point-blank, including women and children, and deporting another 45,000. This book illuminates the full spectrum of the capacity of human behavior, as it relates to areas such as obedience, authority, groupthink, collective influence, and aggression.

Also, joined with me today is Dr. Jeremiah Stokes, a friend and psychotherapist. He's been practicing for 14 years, has a very busy practice, has academic appointments as well, and he takes care of individuals, families, and couples. And so, Dr. Browning, before we jump into some of the psychological causes for these murders, can you outline what you found from reading roughly 30 volumes of court transcripts on police battalion 101?

Christopher Browning ([00:02:39](#)):

Yes, In the late eighties, I was looking through a collection of German court records, reading into trials about atrocities in Poland, and came across the indictment of Reserve Police Battalion 101, which was this rather obscure unit I had never heard of. Upon reading the indictment, it was clear that several things were very unusual.

One, the testimony detailed how on the opening day of the massacre, the first massacre, the commanding officer, Major Wilhelm Trapp, gave the men the option of not taking part if they 'did not feel up to it,' so that no one was coerced that day to shoot. And indeed, that remained in effect, the standing order of the battalion throughout its stay in Poland, that officers could not force men to shoot against their will, so that people could opt out at any time in the years that this battalion was killing people in Poland.

Christopher Browning ([00:03:39](#)):

The second thing was that I was reading graphic descriptions of massacres in detail that I had not seen in court records before. Other trials of killing units had basically been trials of the officers because they didn't have the rosters. They didn't know the rank and file, and the officers lied for one another, whitewashing what had happened. Here were rank and file men describing the absolute horrors of the massacres in a detail that somebody had never seen in any German court testimony before. So, I went to work on the full court records in Hamburg, of which there were 30 volumes of testimony taken from 210 men, most of them rank and file. It was out of that that I could reconstruct the path of the battalion, the chronology of its massacres, and, of course, ultimately try to hazard some explanation of why this unit became such a prolific killing unit, particularly because the composition of the battalion was made up of middle-aged random conscripts.

Christopher Browning ([00:04:47](#)):

This was not an SS unit (Units and commands of the Schutzstaffel); this was not an elite unit. This was a unit that was slapped together in the winter of 1941-1942 from the dregs of the manpower pool: middle-aged men with an average age of 39 and a half years old, and sent to do far behind the lines occupation duty in Poland with no idea and no preparation that they would basically be a killing unit in the Nazi final solution. So, if one was, in effect, looking at what happens, what a regime can do to harness, mobilize, and organize people to be killing those on their behalf that are not part of the ideological elite, not part of the early members of the movement committed to it, but rather the average person pulled off the street. I mean, literally, this was a random selection. Then Reserve Police Battalion 101 would be that test case for historians, made even more important because the major gave them the option not to take part when they did not want to.

Christopher Browning ([00:05:46](#)):

So, we had the test of what the average person would do under the circumstances of not having to but having a voluntary outlet. So, that was why, when I read this, I knew that I had a very special sort of historian's eureka moment. I had found a case study that would be illuminating for much wider movements. The issue of trying to explain why people did what they did led me to take the approach of not solely focus into individual psychology. These were not individual psychopaths. I would have to use the tools of social psychology, looking at the interaction of men in groups. These men did what they did because they were part of a group. They never would have done this on their own as individuals, but as part of a group, they became prolific killers. So, it was through the social psychological concepts that various people had developed in the post-World War II period, particularly a series of social psychologists in the late fifties and sixties, that became, in a sense, my interpretational entree to explain the actions that I had empirically recreated from the historical record based on the interrogations of these 210 men.

David Puder ([00:07:05](#)):

Okay, so they were given the option to kill. They weren't forced. They weren't incredibly brainwashed. They weren't SS men. So, what kind of work did they do before? Were they chosen due to their psychological makeup or not?

Christopher Browning ([00:07:23](#)):

No, I mean, basically at this point in the war, Germany raised the age level of people who would have to do compulsory wartime service, but who were still too old for the army to want to use them. So men in their late thirties and up to their mid-forties could now be drafted. But the organization that drafted them was the reserve police, not the Army. And so they're drafted, they have little training, little ideological indoctrination, and are sent, as I say, to what was considered occupation duty far behind the lines. So, no, the percentage of Nazi party members is not remarkably different than the population. Some of the men joined the SS subsequently; they tried to use this as a stepping stone to a Nazi career. But there are very few, versus none in the SS to begin with, except for some of the officers.

David Puder ([00:08:23](#)):

Okay. So, now they weren't ideologically brainwashed or heavily educated. But how much of that was in the culture, in the media? Like, how much of this anti-Jewish sentiment was just there?

Christopher Browning ([00:08:46](#)):

Yeah, most of these men, I should start with, were people who worked in non-skilled manual labor jobs in the economy. They had no economic deferment; they weren't skilled workers making submarines in Hamburg. They were waiters, truck drivers, warehouse workers, and clerks. Most of them had left school at the age of 14. So we have people who were not highly educated, and, of course, being of average age 38 - 39 and a half, they had gone to school in Weimar, Germany in the twenties. Their schooling was under a democracy, and they were not part of the Hitler Youth, nor were they subjected to the Hitler curricula that were imposed upon schools. They didn't have a cadre of Nazi teachers, which would explain the kind of bubble that younger Germans lived in from 1933 onwards, due to all these socialization mechanisms. They were born and raised during a formative period when they had non-Nazi standards by which to measure the world.

Christopher Browning ([00:09:47](#)):

They had some other reality against which they could measure what was happening. On the other hand, of course, they were also subject to the saturation of the media and so forth with Nazi propaganda about Jews. As one of the men said, 'Antisemitism was in the air we breathe.' That is, the regime's making antisemitism public policy created, in a sense, an atmosphere in which even non-Nazis, in which ordinary people who had been educated and grown up in the twenties, are not going to be unaffected. You can't listen to the news or read the papers every day for 10 years before they go to Poland, consistently pursuing a whole series of anti-Jewish stereotypes, repeating and inventing new accusations against Jews without that filtering in. I mean, this is a kind of osmosis or saturation, I'm sure that takes place. But again, to repeat, that's different than being ideologically committed hardcore Nazis.

Jeremiah Stokes ([00:10:57](#)):

Yeah. And Professor Browning, you know, when I hear you give your introduction regarding these men, and you mentioned the social psychological context that I think needs to be conceptualized when we think about these men, I think that this book teaches us a painful lesson about things like power influence, groupthink, and the susceptibility to evil. I think there are so many vital pieces of information in this text that inform our understanding of human psychology, and I think it's really vital that we grasp the significance of this book. So, I'm curious, from your perspective, tell us about the importance of this book, why you wrote it, and the message that you wanted to send to the world today.

Christopher Browning ([00:11:51](#)):

Yeah, certainly the originality of the book when it first came out in 1992, was that we didn't have a case study of a killing unit. German documents we had from the bureaucracy were preserved, as the bureaucrats kept wonderful documentation. They couldn't destroy all of it. At Nuremberg, we saw just the tip of the iceberg. There were hundreds of thousands of these pages that the government and the middle echelon bureaucrats and officers commanding units produced. But these were not the records of the grassroots, face-to-face killers. Those people don't leave written records, and insofar as they wrote letters, families either burned them or hid them. They didn't read diaries, and there are almost none. So,

they were the key participants in the Holocaust, apart from the policymakers at the top and the middle echelon problem solvers. These are the people who did the actual killing, but they, in contrast to the others, didn't leave behind written records.

Christopher Browning ([00:12:59](#)):

So it's the oral history of the interrogations that allowed us to get into them, have access to them. And as I say, this was a unit unlike other trials, where we had found the roster of the battalion, and we could interrogate the rank and file, which gave a whole new perspective. In contrast to liars, officers lying to cover other lying officers, the mutual alibis that they would provide, the most preposterous kinds of stories they would make up for the court, that had no contradictory witnesses to thwart them. This is what was original about it. Then the question is how to use that material. For me, three people stood out: Milgram's work on what he called 'obedience to authority,' but I thought it should more properly be called 'deference to authority.'

Christopher Browning ([00:13:55](#)):

Because these people, in a sense, are given a choice. The major says the unit has this terrible task to do. The unit is going to have to commit these killings, but the individuals can still opt out. It is people in the unit choosing to defer to the authority of the major, choosing to recognize the authority of the regime and the policy, carrying out that turned them into killers.

Second was role adaptation by Zimbardo experiments, the famous Stanford Prison experiment. The capacity of people to be changed by the role they take on, to be changed by what they are doing and seeing, and how quickly these men, when they put on a uniform, they then become part of a unit. This unit is in Poland. It's an occupation unit. Their only social family is these 500 men. Ostracism, being turned into a pariah in that unit, has a huge social cost that one would not bear as a dissident in Hamburg, where you have your family, you have friends. The isolation that results from being an outsider in an occupation unit in which the surrounding population, of course, are the enemy, and your only support network is this group. So that when you put that uniform on and become part of that unit, the pressure to adapt to the expectations of what a policeman should do and how to be a policeman that fits in with the other policeman becomes, I think, much more intensified than role adaptation if you join a corporation as an office worker or something like that

Christopher Browning ([00:15:39](#)):

And the third was the power of conformity. These are the Solomon Ash experiments that show people, when they're surrounded by everybody else who seems to be going along, will go along too, even if they know themselves that what they're doing is not right or what's being said is not true. But they will opt for conformity and not challenge those around them, rather than take on pariah status and be considered the weird one who doesn't see things and doesn't act the way everybody else around them is acting.

Christopher Browning ([00:16:13](#)):

So, conformity, role adaptation, and deference to authority seemed to me to be concepts or patterns of behavior within groups that we had already seen in psychological experiments, had a powerful ability to shape the behavior of people in groups. As I read through, when I went back to look at the empirical account of this battalion and describing what they did, these seemed to me the most pertinent, these

seemed to me the most illuminating, helping me to understand why they did what I had managed to describe them doing.

David Puder ([00:16:48](#)):

This is probably one of the most difficult books I've read. I remember a couple of pages, and I would get like a stomach ache, almost needing to stop it, but I think it's worth talking about the first day because it seems like that was a very seminal event in these men's group evil dynamic. So, do you want to tell us about that first day specifically?

Christopher Browning ([00:17:20](#)):

Yeah. These men are sent to Poland in late June of 1942, and three weeks later, they're sent off to basically carry out their first massacre. They don't know what they're going to do until early in the morning, they arrive at the village of Józefów in Southern Poland, in the Lublin District. As they get out of their trucks, the major basically assembles them in a kind of semicircle around him, addresses the men, and tells them what's going to happen. This is when he gives his speech. The men describe him as his voice choking, tears streaming down his cheeks. He's physically struggling to control himself. This was a tremendously emotional and conflicting moment for him. As he tells the men, 'We have a task to do, a terrible task I would never ask you to do on my own, but this is the policy of the regime that is telling us to do this.'

Christopher Browning ([00:18:20](#)):

He goes on to then help try to find sort of psychological rationales for the men. Hamburg, of course, had been bombed by the Allies, hadn't yet had the great firestorm of Hamburg for another year, but cities around there had been bombe and in Germany, the bombs are falling on women and children, which, in a sense, is saying they're killing our women and children, we can kill their women and children. The non-combatant rule has been erased by the Allies so you shouldn't feel guilty if we now transgress there as well, knowing the sense that was a kind of common notion that most people, particularly of middle age like that, would bring to the battlefield. He then went on to say, 'The Jews are helping the partisans.' They are part of the enemy.

Christopher Browning ([00:19:11](#)):

This is part of the combat, part of the war. They are the enemy in this war, which endorsed, in a sense, the Nazi view that World War II is a war against the Jews, so, they would see this in combat terms not as the killing of non-combatants, but of an enemy, and then he ends up the speech with his offer for those of you who don't feel up to it you can step out and a small number of men about it. First of all, nobody did initially and then one man did step out and his SS captain, one of the few SS men in the unit began to berate him, but the major took the man under his protection, made clear that he met it, and he would protect them against their officers.

Christopher Browning ([00:19:55](#)):

Then a dozen men stepped out, and they could not take part in what would follow. They then organized the men into three groups: One company would form a cordon around the village; a second company

would go into the ghettoized section of the village where all the Jews were concentrated, round them up, and bring them to the marketplace, and a third company was sent to the woods where they would form the firing squad. The men had no training or experience for this, so the company doctor draws a figure of a human being on the ground and then demonstrates to the men that if they put the bayonet on their rifle and place the bayonet at the top of the spinal column at the neck, you can shoot and give a neck shot that will kill instantly.

Christopher Browning ([00:20:50](#)):

And this is as much training, in a sense, as these men had on how to carry out a massacre. The officers had never done this before, and they organized it in what we, in retrospect, the Nazis would discover was the least efficient, psychologically most taxing way to carry out a massacre. As the trucks carried the men out to the forest, when they disembarked from the trucks, the Jews, they would pair off face-to-face, one-to-one with a man who was going to shoot them, march into the forest, be made to lie on the ground, and then the German policemen would place the gun at their head and fire. Many of them either didn't hear or hadn't paid attention to the instruction, and they had these old World War I large bore rifles. They would put the point of the gun at the back of the skull, not the neck.

Christopher Browning ([00:21:36](#)):

And of course, the head would explode, and they would be covered in the brain matter and the blood of their victims. Their descriptions of what happened when you shot somebody in the head at point-blank range were graphic and horrifying, almost beyond belief. After the people had been concentrated in the town square, the cordon company is brought in and sent to the forest as well, so you have two companies shooting, one company loading the trucks, and this goes on basically from mid-morning until it's dark, until late in the evening. There was no preparation, there's no pits being dug here, there's no preparation to bury the bodies, nobody's collected valuables. It's just a forest filled with dead corpses lying there.

Christopher Browning ([00:22:25](#)):

And when it's done, the major puts them back in the trucks and tells the Polish mayor to go bury the corpses. Then they drive back to the schoolhouse in another town where they were billeted. He offers food; almost no one eats. He opens the liquor cabinet, and people drink like crazy. The descriptions of the men, I mean, I'm not a psychiatrist; I'll use this term in a layman's way, not in a professional way, but they were traumatized. The way in which they speak about this, they were distraught; they were upset. It was incomprehensible to them. This is something they had not been prepared for, warned about, and they could make no sense of it. One of the men told his non-commissioned officer, 'If I had to do that again, I would go crazy.'

Christopher Browning ([00:23:16](#)):

What is one of the most shocking observations of what takes place in weeks and months after, is how quickly what had been an utterly traumatic and upsetting event on the first day becomes utter routine to which they habituate and normalize, and the horror of it quickly recedes. They get used to killing people. The massacre, which was described in incredible detail on the first day, subsequently their descriptions

become more and more blurred. They can't keep one massacre apart from another. I could recreate the dating of the massacres and the itinerary of the battalion only from survivor testimonies.

Christopher Browning ([00:23:58](#)):

People who managed to hide knew the day that their village was liquidated, when their families were killed. These men in this battalion had no idea where they were and what day it was, just that they went from one village to another and either rounded people up, put them on the death trains to Treblinka, which was just about 60 miles to the north, where they were gassed immediately, or shot them on the spot if they were too far from a rail station to march the victims to the train. This was their life from the summer to the fall of 1942. As I say, it became a blur; it became a routine. One doesn't get a sense that for most of them, most of this became increasingly less troubling. Some people did become increasingly troubled; the number of people who took up the major's option increased.

Christopher Browning ([00:24:47](#)):

Then, the pool of people who evaded direct shooting grew. They still participated in the roundups, they still guarded the shooting pits, but they didn't pull the trigger themselves. They would excuse themselves from the firing squads because the major had allowed them to opt out. So, I dubbed this group the 'Evaders.' Then there was a middle group, which didn't seek opportunities to kill but would never refuse when asked. That is, they simply followed whatever the directions were. And scariest of all was a group that turned into eager killers. People that learned to enjoy killing other human beings sought the opportunity to maximize their number of victims. They would come back from the killing fields, sit down to a hearty meal, and joke and laugh about what they had done. People responded to this along a whole spectrum, from evader at one end, to eager killers at the other and probably the largest group in the middle, being what I call the 'compliers,' who simply went along, did not want to challenge what was happening, but didn't seek to maximize what was happening either.

Jeremiah Stokes ([00:26:03](#)):

You mentioned the traumatization of these men, which I think is undoubtedly evident, particularly for any mental health professional who would read this book.

I think that they would be able to spot that instantaneously. I realized, in reading this book, there are a few different lenses through which you can read this book: you could read it through the lens of the killers, or you could read it through the lens of the victims.

I'm curious, have you heard any sort of critique that writing about the men's struggles of killing is giving them some sort of empathy or some sort of emotional response?

Have you heard any criticisms such as that?

Christopher Browning ([00:26:42](#)):

Yes. I mean, of course, the book has encountered a number of critiques, some with more merit than others, and this historian's ethical question of what is the line between recreating the world of the perpetrators with sufficient empathy that can explain why they did what they did without tipping into

sympathy for seeing them as victims of a system. I've always insisted, and the book insists this as well, that these men had human agency. One of the reasons I went into this detail in this case study is because from the beginning, the major gives them the option. This was, at the crux of the book, the issue of choice. This was the case study where choice was explicit; in other killing units, men who dared to say no got away with it.

Christopher Browning ([00:27:33](#)):

But here was a case where the major doesn't put them to a test of courage or experimentation. He makes it clear from the beginning they have this option. So, everything that I described in that book has to be seen through the lens of human choice, and that's why I found this particular case study so key in comparing to study other perpetrators that I did, is everything takes place after the major says: "if you don't feel up to it you can step out", and that no one was coerced, threatened in to take part in the killing. So, for those who say that I am, in a sense excusing the perpetrators, that I'm making them the victims of these anonymous social psychological forces I just simply reject that, the experiments themselves reject that in each of these experiments I talked about, a significant minority does not go along.

Christopher Browning ([00:28:30](#)):

There's about one third of the people in the Milgram experiments who won't do it. They don't go up to the top end of the torture scale, while two-thirds do. It's frightening that two-thirds do, but we do have to remember the one third who say no. In the Zimbardo experiment, of the 12 guards, two were the "good guards" who, when they didn't think anyone was watching, did unmet. You know, they did help mitigate the prisoners' misery. They didn't know they were being captured on camera. They thought they were doing this in secret without any of their fellow guards knowing. But even in that experiment, there were two people who, in a sense, didn't give way to the system. So the experiments themselves say that people have a choice. Some people make the right decision. All too many people make the wrong decision, but we won't understand why they make the wrong decision if we don't study them. I won't study them because this requires an amount of empathy. I think it is to abdicate our responsibility as scholars to do the best we can to know what happened and why it happened in the aftermath.

David Puder ([00:29:41](#)):

I think knowing about the Stanford Prison Experiment, Milgram study, and other conformity studies can potentially equip someone to not just go along. I think that your book has that role. And that's why it's important to me to have you here, speaking to a group of mental health professionals. It's about thinking about how we can equip people to not just succumb to the movements of people, right? The ideologues. I imagine this was incredibly taxing for you psychologically to do this, and I'm curious if you could speak to what it was like studying the Holocaust for most of your adult life, and specifically this book.

Christopher Browning ([00:30:32](#)):

Yes. I mean, I've spent my whole career, over 50 years, researching in these kinds of documents. I, in a sense, try to look at it in the way a physician who operates in the surgery room operates. Basically, in



regular life, I would never cut somebody open, but as a professional equipped to do this under certain circumstances, and I better do it quite dispassionately and not be overcome by emotion. You don't want a weeping surgeon who's operating on you in the operating room. So, I do compartmentalize. I think professionally I have to. I don't want to lose, and I don't think I have lost my sense of moral engagement with the topic I'm studying, but when I am researching and writing, I try to do it as dispassionately and professionally as I can.

Christopher Browning ([00:31:29](#)):

I think Holocaust history has to be written by the same rules of historical research, analysis, and writing as any other part of our history and I have tried to bring to it. Having said that, despite all the kinds of documents that I've read, there are moments when I was in the archive and I would come across a document that was simply something I never encountered before that just kind of took my breath away, and at those moments I would just sort of have to take a pause leave the archive and come back the next day.

David Puder ([00:32:09](#)):

I can hear it in your voice, I can literally hear it in your voice as you talk about that. Which is awful.

Christopher Browning ([00:32:15](#)):

One of those days was when I read in the indictment major Trapp's offer, the point of choice, knowing that everything else that happened, people didn't have to do it, and as you can see, I get..

...

David Puder ([00:32:32](#)):

Yeah

Jeremiah Stokes ([00:32:43](#)):

So deeply connected to that, deeply connected to that piece

David Puder ([00:32:47](#)):

I think it's nice, or it would be nicer to imagine that they were forced to do this, you know? It's like knowing that they were given the choice, and that they chose to do it, most of them, the majority of them.

I'm sure that just messed with your brain.

You didn't expect that. You didn't go into this thinking an ordinary person would be able to do this.

Christopher Browning ([00:33:11](#)):

Yeah, I mean, that certainly, from then on, I knew I had a project I had to do. Writing the book, I could write each chapter sort of day by day. But then, when I sat down to read the whole manuscript for the first time, cover to cover without stopping, at the end, I said, you know, why have I done this? This is too horrible for anybody to read. I didn't know what the fate of the book would be. Would it be so ghastly that simply no one could get through it? Or would it, in fact, manage to do what I'd hoped it would do, which would raise this whole issue and open a new avenue of Holocaust research, which we had not had yet.

David Puder ([00:34:01](#)):

I think on my podcast, I like to do some episodes on psychopathy. I like to do some episodes on forensic stuff because I think a lot of therapists are wired to be highly agreeable. A lot of therapists are wired to be highly empathic. We don't want to imagine that people are capable of doing awful things. So, we may miss some of the signs that a culture, a society, how groups of people are talking about each other, are driving the same historical archetypal evil. I think it is very valuable to talk about it. It's incredibly valuable. In the pre-interview, which wasn't recorded, I asked you, 'Where were the heroes? What percentage of the population of Germany were actively resisting?' And you said...

Christopher Browning ([00:35:15](#)):

Well, basically very few. I mean, you can get people who will be like the evaders that avoid doing the worst of the regime's dirty work, but still, in a sense, enable it because even the men who wouldn't shoot in the battalion were still engaged in the roundup, still engaged in the ghetto clearings, and guarding accordant duty and so forth. So, in Germany, you have a whole spectrum of behavior. You have, of course, the enthusiastic Nazi go-getters and those who are the profiteers of the regime, trying to exploit the openings and benefits it offers to Nazi collaborators. There are people who are the bandwagon Nazis, or find ways to use the system themselves. Then you have those who just keep their heads down and wait for better times. But the number of people who take the risk to engage in active resistance, that is, not just not participating in the regime's rituals and whatever, but trying to, in fact, block them, to obstruct them, is very dangerous.

Christopher Browning ([00:36:26](#)):

¡This is a regime that did not tolerate any kind of significant opposition or dissent and very lonely. There were very few people who shared your view in Germany, and therefore, you're in a sense going very much against the grain of the society around you in a very lonely quest to try to save Germany from Hitler and the Nazis. So, resistance where it occurred is really quite extraordinary. But it is also extremely difficult, extremely dangerous, and unfortunately, therefore relatively rare. Now, we, in terms of, say, people in the killing units, as I say, the men who wouldn't take part, basically are left alone. Even in units without a major like Trapp making an offer, we know that individuals said: 'I won't do that', and no officer wanted a court-martial in which somebody is up there saying: 'I told the major I wouldn't shoot unarmed women and children,' and you're trying to try them for disobedience to orders. They didn't want that in the military justice system.

Christopher Browning ([00:37:39](#)):

Here's your text with improved punctuation:

The line that was drawn was not between saying no, that you could get away with. The line that you couldn't cross was trying to persuade others in the unit to do likewise. Individual abstention, a regime can easily tolerate; concerted, organized opposition it cannot. So, the people who would try to recruit others to not shoot would get immediately arrested and tried, but not for disobeying an order, not for refusing to shoot, but for trying to subvert morale, for trying to demoralize the unit by organizing fellow soldiers or policemen against their officers—basically mutiny. So, there was a space in which individuals could, with relatively little danger, evade. But if you crossed that line into doing anything that was

concerted, anything that was organized with someone else, then the regime came down on you very, very harshly.

Christopher Browning ([00:38:47](#)):

For the people who evaded, moreover, they had strategies to minimize their estrangement from their fellow policemen. Almost everyone who said, 'I won't shoot,' then said, 'I can't do that because I am too weak.' They didn't say, 'I can't do that because shooting unknown civilians is immoral,' or 'I can't do that because we have a criminal regime.' They could evade personally and not take part as long as they didn't challenge their comrades and challenge the regime. And they did that by simply saying, 'I am too weak to do it.' That, of course, had the insidious effect of affirming and legitimizing the killers as the right model, which they could not live up to. It was rhetorically successful in a sense, keeping them from being estranged from their colleagues. They were considered the weaklings but not people who were reproaching their colleagues. And so that was the avenue that the vast majority of evaders followed to exempt themselves from the single worst thing, which was pulling the trigger and killing somebody at point-blank range. That created space to avoid that, but the price of doing that was supporting the other activities of the battalion and basically validating what your comrades were doing who did the killing.

David Puder ([00:40:09](#)):

So, you talk about three groups, and what you exactly just said jumped out to me as well. The group that I would consider more heroic, the ones that were like, 'we don't wanna pull the trigger,' were considered weak. That was kind of how they were able to maintain, maybe be a part of the group but not be ostracized by the group too much, right? It would be too much if they were to say, 'I don't want to do this because this is reprehensible,' but to say, 'I'm too weak,' it's kind of like, 'okay, we're gonna give you a pass.' And it seemed to me, even on that first day, the people that decided to shoot after they killed a couple of people and they were like, 'I can't do this anymore,' it seemed like there wasn't hazing of that person for not being able to continue.

Christopher Browning ([00:41:15](#)):

I mean, basically, the more I get into studying the world of National Socialism, the more I realize it is a truly inverted world. The people who had the courage and moral autonomy to refuse to kill are seen as weaklings, while those who go along and have no control over their own destiny, simply taking orders and following whatever they're told to do, are considered the tough ones. Of course, they're the cowards, and the ones who preserve their moral autonomy are the ones with incredible courage. So, courage and cowardice, toughness and weakness are turned on their head. In terms of the morality of what they were doing, morality is also turned on its head.

One of my colleagues, Thomas Kuna, a historian at Clark University, used the phrase "the morality of immorality." Let me explain with an example: In Serbia, when the Germans invaded Yugoslavia, they carved the country up into its constituent parts and took Serbia as their own occupation zone under a military administration.

Christopher Browning ([00:42:27](#)):

There was an uprising headed mainly by Tito and the Communists, which became very effective. The German response was a massive retaliation. A unit was brought in from the outside to conduct what was going to be called a "punitive expedition." The commander gave the order for this unit to sweep through

a central area in Yugoslavia where everyone, men, women, children, everybody was considered the enemy. They had to punish the entire population for this uprising, erasing again the distinction between non-combatants and combatants, which is at the core of most atrocities in mass murder.

He then wanted to say, as difficult as this may seem, that basically those who succumb to their humanitarian impulses must keep in mind that they are sinning against the lives of their comrades. You had a world in which not shooting women and children was considered a sin, and killing women and children was seen as upholding the morality of protecting the lives of your comrades. To kill was considered moral, while not killing was seen as a sin. This turned on its head the whole notion of morality and "thou shalt not kill." The moral obligation then became, in fact, to kill women and children because they were on the other side.

David Puder ([00:44:19](#)):

When I hear that, I think it's easy for us to only see this happening in Nazi Germany. But this has happened in other cultural societies and times. I see it as well in how often militaries will emphasize dehumanizing stories about the enemies - stories like pedophilia, stories like that - which stir up disgust in the average soldier towards the enemy.

Any comment on that?

Christopher Browning ([00:44:58](#)):

Yes. I mean, this is in war all too common. One event will either be invented or it will be magnified into being the archetype of the entire other people, so that they are dehumanized. One of the most gratifying things about the book is that it's been used at the military academies because it does force people to come to grips with this issue of how you train troops or make them conscious of how easy it is to slip into demonizing and dehumanizing the enemy, and then being able to kill people that you shouldn't be killing. Just recently in the Atlantic, Jeffrey Goldberg (editor of the Atlantic) did an article on General Mark Millie and his encounter with President Trump, trying to explain why Iraqi American soldiers who've been tried for war crimes should not be pardoned and honored. Of course, there was a conversation in which there was no meeting of minds. But then Millie went on to say that he had been given a book by his friend, the former Israeli chief of staff, and it was Christopher Browning's 'Ordinary Men', and he said, 'it's the important book, a tale of moral degeneration.'

I've added commas to separate clauses and make the text clearer for readability.

Christopher Browning ([00:46:34](#)):

So, Milley really got it. I mean, he understood that this is a threat that faces every army. How do you train your men, discipline your men so that you don't have the moral degeneration that so easily can take place once the mechanisms of dehumanization are in place?

David Puder ([00:46:55](#)):

I've worked I've worked at the VA. As a resident, I get to spend a lot of time with patients on the psychiatric unit and often what surprised me the most was they had a rehearsed narrative they would

tell of battles things, flat affect, just tell it as if they were telling it a thousand times, but often they had a story of some demoralizing event -they shot a child- and that demoralizing event that they didn't want to talk about and that continued to harass them in their sleep every night of their life unless they were drunk, so a lot of the guys would just drink every night, and then when they would stop drinking, it would come back, so it was like, the trauma, the demoralization was there. So yeah, I don't know. I'm just resonating with what you're saying.

Christopher Browning ([00:48:01](#)):

Yeah. Well, certainly in terms of battalion, alcohol was usually brought to the killing site. That is, the anesthetist of alcohol was part of the organizing a massacre, and the people in the firing squads would get to have a couple of drinks before they started shooting and more after. So that alcohol was understood to be an important part of the anesthetizing process, the desensitizing process.

I've often been asked: after the war, did these men have post-traumatic stress syndrome? Did they carry this home? And how did they cope with what they had done after the war? As far as I could tell, in the period between the end of the war when Germany was in ruins, and the last year of the war, the huge casualties Germany suffered both on the war fronts and at home was equal to sort of more than all the other casualties in the other five years of the war.

Christopher Browning ([00:48:59](#)):

This was the real bloodbath for Germans themselves when the cost of the war came home to them, that they had inflicted and exported elsewhere up until that point. So they come home, and everybody else had a hard time with the bombs and the Soviet occupation and whatever, and everybody wanted to forget together. So there is no 'what you do in the war, Daddy?' kinds of questions. Everybody didn't want to raise any kind of questions because they all have this issue of complicity with the Nazi regime, and there is a kind of universal amnesia. But then strangely, what occurred to some of the men when they're brought in to be interrogated in the early sixties, would make remarks such as, 'Well, I hadn't thought about this for years, but now that I'm being forced to talk about it, I'm having nightmares.'

Christopher Browning ([00:49:54](#)):

All of us came back. It was deep within the deep freeze, and now it was thawing. Only one of them committed suicide after his first interview, and before his second interview, he jumped out of the second story of his house and killed himself. But others did admit that this was becoming quite disturbing. In general, I would say the overall tenor of the interrogations was not remorse. It was not guilt. It was self-pity. Basically, how they framed their own lives, how they understood their own lives, was a colossal, bad luck story. In 1942, they had the bad luck to be drafted into a unit that was sent to Poland to do terrible, dirty work on behalf of the regime, and they did it. They came home and got no medals or rewards; what they got was a terrible defeat. Then, 20 years later, somebody changed the rules of the game, and having been obedient reserve policemen in the 1940s doing terrible things on behalf of the regime, the new regime was now appalling them into court and trying to find out if there were criminals who should be tried and sent to jail. That was their second huge piece of bad luck. So they have a life of two pieces of colossal, bad luck, poor them. Almost nothing about the victims, no consciousness of the horrible suffering they had inflicted on others, but a great deal of concern for what they themselves had suffered, which they framed as a double bad luck story.

David Puder ([00:51:35](#)):

Yeah. I think it would take me probably less than an hour to get them into the deep shame that they're hiding. Of course, the self-pity as a defense, avoiding responsibility, trying to solicit support, and creating a narrative to make sense of the horrible things they did. But I just imagine there were physical ailments from the chronic stress and from what they had done. I just imagine... because I know Vietnam vets, and I mean, not that we can draw a comparison between these two groups at all, but higher rates of diabetes, higher rates of heart disease, higher rates of a lot of physical things just from being in a war. Right? I mean, it's not unusual, in taking care of a patient at the VA, that they have 15 to 20 things on their problem list. So I'm just curious, like, did any of that come through as you sort of looked at it, and then like any physical stuff that maybe it was the manifestation of the stress?

Christopher Browning ([00:52:56](#)):

Yeah, if it's there, I didn't know enough to pick it up. It may be there in hints, but I don't remember people referring to problems of physical health. And, of course, even if they had, that may not be in the interrogation record. The person who's taking the notes of the conversations is putting down the information that he thinks will be useful for the prosecutors and for a historian. Fortunately, lots of stuff gets put there that may be extraneous to the prosecutor but terribly important to the historian. But what got left out, I don't know. That may be one of the kinds of things that the person who's taking the notes of the interrogation simply doesn't pick up, either, which you would pick up as a trained psychiatrist. I just can't say. There's the case where historians don't have the evidence. There are many questions we have that we would love to have more evidence for, and I would say this is one where I didn't find the evidence. If it's there, I wasn't good enough to pick it up.

Jeremiah Stokes ([00:54:08](#)):

I've made some grammar and punctuation adjustments for clarity:

You know, it's interesting because I think when we go through psychological trauma, the more severe the trauma, the deeper the repression. I think about when you read the reports on the defense. At that point, these men had 20 plus years removed from the traumatic incidents, right? But I do wonder. You had a chapter on an individual named Captain Wolfgang Hoffman, and to me, this kind of does illuminate some of the traumatic symptoms that came up while in duty. It was almost as if he didn't have enough time to repress, so he was sort of in it. But I was curious, can you talk a little bit about what he experienced, his symptomology, and how that sort of guided his leadership?

Christopher Browning ([00:54:58](#)):

Yeah, I think you're certainly right about the power of repression in these men. But Hoffman is one where it was quite overt, not later, but in the field. He is one of the two SS captains in the unit, so he's aspiring to an SS career. He's the commander of the second company. But in the areas where he's sending his men out to kill on the days in which he should be leading them out to the massacres, he gets absolutely debilitating stomach cramps. He's bedridden and can't move, and he's in this unbearable situation where he's ordering others to kill while physically he's incapable of leading them in the field. Of course, for the men, this becomes immediately evident that he's making them do things that he cannot physically do himself. Certainly, what the men described as the absolute regularity of this pattern is that he had, he suffered his terrible stomach cramps only when it came time for killing.

Christopher Browning ([00:56:05](#)):

It wasn't the kind of disease that would be there all the time. It wasn't ulcers. I ran this past several other medical people, and they said, yeah, this is clear evidence of psychosomatic illness, this physical illness being triggered by psychological trauma, and that he simply couldn't will his body to do what he wanted it to do. He wanted to kill, but his body, in a sense, betrayed him. So he has a falling out, first with his men, and secondly, with the major who has a captain on his hands who can't function, so he eventually is sent away. He goes off to the Eastern Front and is made the head of a unit of native auxiliaries that he organizes. In real combat, he becomes a quite effective officer. This man was not a coward in the military sense; he's not afraid to risk his life or fight. But he apparently had some psychological limit where he could not simply shoot innocent people at point-blank range, even though he desperately wanted to and was terribly embarrassed that his body betrayed him.

Jeremiah Stokes ([00:57:23](#)):

I think it's interesting because, in reading about Hoffman prior to the killings, he had this really proud, rigid character. It seemed that he had this temperament that was almost unapproachable and strict. So, for him to have this complete turnaround in his disposition and demeanor, I think it really illuminated the severity of the trauma. There were implications to that as well because, after that happened, his men had a completely different perception of him. He was no longer this strong, military, formidable character; now he's this sort of weakling. So I found that to be really powerful. It's like his body betrayed him in a way.

David Puder ([00:58:08](#)):

I love that line, "His body betrayed him." It's like he wanted to be strong, he wanted to, but then somewhere deep inside of his soul, he couldn't stomach it, literally.

Any other thoughts on that? For me, one of my thoughts was moral injury. There's this idea, moral injury, which is slightly different than PTSD. Moral injury comes up when someone violates their own values or religious experiences. Moral injury can overlap with PTSD, but it's not exactly the same. It doesn't have the same startle response, dissociation, or re-experiencing. It manifests more in avoidance, which we've talked about, self-loathing, depression, anhedonia, lack of pleasure, isolation, guilt, and shame. So I'm curious if you saw more of a moral injury component, maybe if you think back to the things that you read.

Christopher Browning ([00:59:21](#)):

Well, certainly I didn't have the concept when I was writing the book in the early nineties, but subsequently, the whole notion of what we call cognitive dissonance came more into the literature, and that seemed to me very appropriate. I wish I had known that term when I was writing because I would've added that to my list of social psychological tools, in a sense. These men are initially engaged in a conduct that causes the trauma because they know what they're doing is breaking every norm and rule that they've been raised with. But they're part of a unit that's doing it, so they have these dual claims on them. Their own background and normal upbringing has rules about killing, and the unit has its rules about killing, and the two are in conflict. Many of the men cope with that.

Christopher Browning ([01:00:16](#)):

If one of them has to change, if you have to bring what you're doing in sync with what you are willing to accept, and you can't get out of the unit, then you change your initial beliefs and begin to numb yourself

to being sensitive about killing. You create a consistent world in which, as I say, the Nazis invert sin, and not killing is sinful, and killing is coming to the aid of your comrades.

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:00:55](#)):

I'm curious. I think about the dissonance. I think about the cognitive dissonance not only with this particular military personnel, but I think about the idea that all of Nazi Germany from a very early start had this dissonance that they had to deal with, and particularly this group, you know, with this group not being indoctrinated by the Nazi ideology. So they had sort of their own mindset and their own perception. I wonder, is that something that you feel that all of these men really struggled with significantly? Presumably it was.

Christopher Browning ([01:01:33](#)):

I'm not sure if we want to use the word struggle, because it seems as if they almost glide into this without much of a struggle. I mean, I'm sure there was for some, but the ease with which they make this transformation. One of the very rare documents we have is written by one of these men. It's not from police Battalion 101, but police Battalion 105 from the neighboring city of north German origin that went into Lithuania. The photographer of company three in reserve police Battalion 105 wrote letters every week to his wife, and she kept them, preserved them. We have them, so we can trace right through his own letters week by week, the process of degeneration.

Christopher Browning ([01:02:28](#)):

He starts out with the invasion in early July. First of all, even as they first come in, he had been in Norway, which was a very cushy stationing. Now, they're sent to take part in Operation Barbarossa and the invasion of the Soviet Union. On the eve of the invasion, the officers of all the units were instructed to orally give their troops these so-called secret orders, which nobody wanted to have in writing because if somebody was killed and captured, it would provide information to the enemy. But these were the orders about collective retaliation and mass reprisals if people were shot and things about the German conduct of the occupation that were totally in violation of all international laws that existed up to that point.

Christopher Browning ([01:03:25](#)):

And the guy writes when his officer gives this speech, he sort of thinks he's just posing and playing tough guy. He obviously doesn't understand that this is quite literal. Then they go into Lithuania, and he basically says, 'Oh yeah, this is nothing like Oslo.' Here he says, 'The Jews are fair game. They can't buy anything in the stores; they have no future.' He goes on to say, 'Anybody can impress them as kind of servants.' He says, 'So my bunkmate and I have two Jewish servants, 13 and 15 years old. Nowhere can the Jews buy anything, any food to eat. I cannot be so tough; we give them our bread.' That's early August he's writing and describing to his wife what was happening. This is when they make this transition to systematic mass killing. He says, 'Here all the Jews are being shot, men, women, and children.' And then he goes on to say, 'Don't talk about this. Don't show this part of the letter to our daughter.'

Christopher Browning ([01:04:51](#)):



Two things here: One, he's obviously feeling a sense of shame that you don't want. This is something the kids should not hear. Secondly, it's in what I call the anonymous passive. Here, all the Jews are being shot. It's not my unit is killing them. It's not I am killing them, but the Jews are being shot. Now, that formulation appears in all sorts of post-war testimony, the passive voice 'the Jews were killed,' 'the Jews were put into the trains.' But in fact, as a defense mechanism, I realize now that the passive voice was being used even by the people in the field as the killing was taking place. He writes to his wife in the passive voice about what his unit and the Germans around them are actively doing, and then he goes on after the Jews in this area have been killed; they're still facing partisans.

Christopher Browning ([01:05:45](#)):

And he talks about how angry the men are. They're in Lithuanian territory, and the notion that Lithuanians have a right to resist is just unheard of. When they're shot at by the partisans, the men become so angry they want to kill all Russians. Genocidal language. 'When we're ambushed like this, we want to kill all Russians.' He goes on, he is a photographer, and there's a massacre, an execution of captured protesters that took place. And he tells his wife, this is now getting into early fall, 'I missed the execution, it was said to have been fun.' And finally, later, he gets to the point where he says, 'Oh, there was another execution, I got it on my camera, I have it on film.' And then he goes on to say, 'It will be a great souvenir for our children.'

Christopher Browning ([01:06:50](#)):

This is the guy who in July says, 'don't tell our daughter,' and now he is collecting souvenirs for her kids of photographs of massacres. This is the most astonishing line of downward moral degeneration, desensitization. I mean, you'd hardly believe it if you didn't see the letters and actually see that progression of dehumanization and desensitization that takes place."

David Puder ([01:07:20](#)):

Sometimes with clients, I'll ask them, if you had a kid, would you allow this to happen to them? Or if you had a daughter, if you had a son, it's almost like taking it out of the slow acclimatization. Because I'm seeing the cognitive dissonance, you know, but they can't see it anymore. What you're saying is that that person would say, 'oh, absolutely, I would absolutely want my son or daughter to do it.' You know, and that's almost like once they started doing it, their defenses came on more and more to protect themselves from realizing how evil it truly was.

Christopher Browning ([01:08:09](#)):

But it also shows the power of how people can be changed by what they do and see, that participation in this really changes who they are. I mean, the guy who says in early July, 'I give them my bread, I can't be so tough,' is now, within four months, collecting massacre photographs for his kids. So there is a transformation that these men undergo, as I would argue, caused by what they're doing and what they're seeing.

David Puder ([01:08:47](#)):

So, this is another question of mine. It's like we're talking about cognitive dissonance. Was there a cognitive dissonance because they believed so much propaganda regarding the Jews, and they were kind of saturated in that propaganda? So was there really that cognitive dissonance? because I think about cognitive dissonance as like you have a biblical belief, and then you have this belief that I should shoot

and kill innocent people, and it's like, there's the cognitive dissonance. But do you think that they had this cognitive dissonance? because their ideology was so dehumanizing of the Jews.

Christopher Browning ([01:09:33](#)):

Well, certainly given the immediate persecution of Jews when they enter this area and then yet he says, 'I cannot be so tough, I give them my bread.' Obviously, his own ability to identify these people as human beings and human beings need to have food is in cognitive dissonance with what is the reality happening to most of the Jews among whom they're living. Yes, that's a cognitive dissonance, and the degree to which he resolves that by basically dispensing with the sensitivity about Jews being human beings and the occupation. I mean, the people they are killing after August are mostly Russians and Lithuanians now. So it's not just Jews, but anybody in the occupied area that is, quote, 'the enemy,' any sympathy with them, any recognition of their humanity is basically what disappears. So that he doesn't have to say, 'I can't be so tough.' He can be quite tough enough to take pictures at executions and save them for his kids.

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:10:38](#)):

What about the idea, though, that there was so much propaganda and ideological influence around Jews being portrayed as less than humans? They were obviously even depicted as animals in a lot of propaganda. I know that a lot of propaganda had done that. Looking at how that's combined with the capacity for human aggression. Is this what led them to be such vicious predators? You know, that combination of this. I guess looking at the capacity for human aggression is what I'm asking. When I was reading this text, it got me thinking, you know, what are all of our capacities for aggression? And if we have the right influences, can it tap into any of us? Can that level of aggression be externalized? Does that make sense?

Christopher Browning ([01:11:26](#)):

Yes. But I think that has to be set in the context in which these people are operating. For me, one of the things I was trying to explain, not just in this book, but more overall, is that in 1938 with the Kristallnacht riots and the burning of synagogues, the Nazis, in reports and collecting information about public mood, that was not popular. Legal, clean, unemotional persecution of Jews, violent pogroms, mobs, beatings, physical attacks in the streets, violated all sorts of German notions about law and order, and burning synagogues violated notions about the sanctity of houses of worship. The regime realized that this had not been popular. This had put the regime and the population in a sense, in a position of cognitive dissonance, where they would like to support the regime and were willing to accept the regime's claim that Jewish policy was legitimate

Christopher Browning ([01:12:33](#)):

There was a Jewish problem, and it had to be solved, and what they were witnessing with their own eyes was quite shocking. The people who were shocked in 1938 are killing Jews en masse in the Soviet Union in 1941. What I argue is in part because you've just totally reshaped the environment they're in. In 1938, they're at peace; in 1941, they're at war. In 1938, they're at home in Germany; in 1941, they're deep in occupied territory. In 1938, they're facing German Jews who dress like them, speak their own language, are highly cultured as Germans; in 1941, they're facing these very strangely dressed people with long

curls, wearing strange clothes, and speaking Yiddish or Slavic languages. So now it's much easier to dehumanize the Jew: one, in wartime when it's the enemy; two, when the Jews look and speak differently than you do. They're not German neighbors. They're not the people who have been customers in your stores and classmates of your kids. They're these very strange people in the East, which is already an alien territory. They're aliens within an alien territory. They're doubly alien in wartime where they can be seen as the enemy. The Nazi propaganda was very clear: The Jews support the Bolsheviks, the Bolsheviks are behind the Soviet regime or the war with the Soviet regime in the Red Army, so the connection from the Red Army to the Bolshevik to the Jew is a straight line, and that is at the core of much of the propaganda that the men are being fed.

Christopher Browning ([01:14:23](#)):

So, Barbarossa opens up the possibility of not only a general war of destruction but a war of destruction that includes a racial war against the Jews, and it is part of the package. So when you can package killing Jews as part of war and part of what distinctly happens in these alien, unbarbarized, uncivilized areas to the east, where the enemy doesn't value human life, how can you value human life? You can package this whole thing in a penumbra that just makes killing people and killing Jews normal. You can normalize it.

David Puder ([01:15:08](#)):

What I know in Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, there were severe restrictions on freedom of speech, and I'm curious if you see that as a progression of restricting freedom of speech, instituting more and more propaganda, and dehumanizing a group of people as kind of like a pathway.

Christopher Browning ([01:15:30](#)):

Oh, certainly. I mean, when Hitler comes to power when he is appointed chancellor on January 30th, the very first thing he does within a week is go to Hindenberg and ask Denberg to use his emergency powers in the Constitution to suspend the rights of free speech, free press, and freedom of assembly.

Christopher Browning ([01:15:51](#)):

Then we will have an election. And of course, the Nazis running an election in which your opposition has no free speech, press, or assembly would mean that it isn't a free election. Even in that election, the Nazis only got 44% of the vote, even in an election without free expression, they could not get to 50%. But of course, over time most historians think that by 36-37, with the recovery of the economy, the rejection of Airside Treaty, the national economic successes, Hitler would've won overwhelmingly in the election if it had been held, he didn't need to rig elections by then, but he didn't need to have elections much less rig them. But in 33 the Nazis are not at the beginning of their rule, are not capable of, even in a coerced election getting 50% of the vote. But as you say, over time, when you can saturate virtually every media from the schoolroom to the newspapers, to the radio to the movie screen, and there's only one message allowed, it's pretty hard to keep a different frame of reference to transcend the frame of reference that the regime is providing as to what's going on. So I call that: 'living inside the Nazi bubble.'

Christopher Browning ([01:17:18](#)):

How do you get outside that? And for the men of 101, they were old enough to have a different reference, they could remember in their own experience, back to the twenties. Younger Germans raised

in the Hitler Youth and Hitler School curricula with Nazi teachers, what other reference point do they have? How do you sort out a system of values and whatever against which you measure the Nazi regime and find it wanting? The Nazis create the reference points by which they're measured, and these people have no other, if they're truly raised in the Nazi bubble, they have basically no other reference points beyond that.

David Puder ([01:17:57](#)):

Yeah. I was also thinking, the mind-blowing aspect to me was, you have basically 200 men that killed 80,000 people, and I was thinking like, why didn't masses of Jewish people rebel? But then I was thinking, well, the Germans took away their guns, and so, do you think that was also a part of it? Is like making owning guns illegal, it just made it easier for this atrocity to happen?

Christopher Browning ([01:18:33](#)):

I'm very reluctant to reference this because it's one of the right-wing claims, 'No guns, no Holocaust.' So let me frame it this way. First of all, gun control in Germany became stronger in the early twenties when the right-wing carried out over 350 political assassinations in the four years after World War I. I mean, in the United States, we have some violence, but Germany in the early twenties was saturated with gun violence. Yes, there were gun laws attempting to address this. Nonetheless, guns were not remotely as widely accessible as they are in the United States now. But I'll put it as bluntly as I can: In 1939, the Germans defeated Poland, which had one of the largest armies in Europe. In a month, in June 1940, they overran and defeated France, which had the largest land army in Europe, and defeated them in five weeks.

Christopher Browning ([01:19:36](#)):

The notion that Grandma Rumanstein in her old people's home, if she'd only had a Derringer in her purse, or if Mosha the tailor had only had his hunting rifle, that they would've stopped the Nazi regime in its tracks, and the Holocaust would not have happened, strikes me as one of the most absurd historical fantasies one could possibly imagine. The Nazis overran all of Europe, every army there, and the idea that a few citizens, if only they had a gun in their closet, could have prevented this is just ridiculous. I cannot emphasize that enough. It's not a rational point for discussion. In Poland, they occupied the country, had a monopoly of force, and took control village by village, ghetto by ghetto, always bringing superior force to the point of operation.

Christopher Browning ([01:20:38](#)):

And that the main alternative for Jews was certainly not to try to get a pistol on the black market or something like that, but to either hide or run. If you didn't, then you were caught and either killed or sent off on a train to the gas chamber. But the point at which attempts were then made to collect guns in the Warsaw ghetto becomes the main clear one. Once the vast bulk of the population had already been deported in the summer and fall of '42, the resistance takes over the ghetto inside. There's a sense of revolution inside the ghetto that overthrows the Jewish Council and the Jewish police take control of the ghetto, and they desperately try to get guns. Of course, it's very difficult because no country in Europe had guns floating around in the hundreds of millions like we do in the United States.

Christopher Browning ([01:21:33](#)):

And basically, they could arm themselves with a few guns, but very few. And still then, needless to say, the Nazis that invaded the ghetto were fully armed, equipped with modern firearms, and the ghetto fighters had a few pistols and a couple of machine guns. It was not at all going to ever be an equal contest of civilians against a military force, whatever the collection of private weapons the civilian force had tried to gather. But it really is the ability of the Nazis to take each place one by one, bringing day by day. They're the ones that schedule the day of the ghetto clearing. They're the ones that schedule the massacre, and they know when they have to bring superior forces to bear at that point.

Christopher Browning ([01:22:24](#)):

The Jews, of course, are left in the dark. They aren't informed when these stays are coming, and the rational response is to dig hiding places in bunkers and try to time your escape to the forest. But even in the forest, you have partisans and others that don't want Jews there, attracting the Germans. They don't want to share the forest and limited resources with Jewish refugees who have fled there. So the forest is not safe either. It's a situation of such asymmetrical power that Jews had nothing but bad options to choose from. There is no good option that any of them could have chosen because they are the powerless group in an environment where there's both no support from the surrounding population and overwhelming power in the hands of the Germans.

David Puder ([01:23:19](#)):

Yeah, I think there's a couple of things that come to my mind. One is the organized taking over of power, taking over multiple lanes of power, grouping people together. What would it be today? It would be like drones, right? So we'd be fighting with guns versus drones probably, or something. So it would be like maybe an even more unequal battle. But yeah, I'm just curious because I feel like you have been co-opted. I've seen several, like when you search your name, more right-leaning people have quoted your book quite a bit, but it seems like you are not deferential to that.

Christopher Browning ([01:24:05](#)):

You know, I welcome everybody to read my book. I only hope that those who have cited it actually read it because too often it's cited by people who haven't actually read the book and haven't really come to grips with the arguments that it's making. But I welcome everyone to buy it and to read it.

David Puder ([01:24:24](#)):

Okay, so here's the question. What are some mischaracterizations of the book?

Christopher Browning ([01:24:35](#)):

Yeah, I think there are two. One is the, 'if only they had guns, this wouldn't have happened'. If, you know, 'no gun control, no Holocaust', which, as I've said, I think is so ahistorical and out of touch with reality. The second is to look at the book and see it as the model of what a government, a deep state, if we can use that term, wants to mobilize ordinary people to eliminate their targeted group. This is how easy it is to do; this is the danger they imminently face. And, of course, it's basically the Nazis are transferred to being, in a sense, the deep state of the United States, and the Jews are now those who are opposed to it, who are going to be the victims if they don't bring about an end to the current evil regime.

David Puder ([01:25:35](#)):

Yeah. And one of my thoughts is that I think there's, throughout the world, different people groups dehumanize other people groups, which I think we can across the board say, we should be very careful to use dehumanizing language. Whether you're on the right or the left, when we see it happen, we should identify in our minds, 'Oh, this is dehumanizing language.' I don't care if I agree with this group that they're dehumanizing or not. Like, do we really want to dehumanize them? I don't know, would you agree with that sentiment?

Christopher Browning ([01:26:06](#)):

Well, certainly, that's been a political tool for ages. The Nazis did not invent dehumanizing your opposition, denigrating them, delegitimizing them. This has been part of political discourse, I'm afraid, for centuries. It becomes expressly dangerous, well, it's always potentially dangerous. It becomes really dangerous when you have a regime that is not just doing it for rhetoric, but, in fact, is taking it literally as well and intends to act upon it.

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:26:47](#)):

I also think that when reading this book, it's important for us to analyze modern-day society and consider the potential for something like this to happen again. It's a lesson from this book. I'm curious if you, as the author of this book, see situations or groups in current-day society where there might be a propensity for something similar to unfold. Maybe not at the same magnitude as Nazi Germany, but are there situations in contemporary society where you think, 'We better be prepared for this.' Does this ever create a sense of anxiety or concern for you right now?

Christopher Browning ([01:27:33](#)):

Oh, well, certainly when one looks at the rhetoric of Russia versus the Ukraine, in which the Ukrainians are characterized as Nazis, and of course in Soviet memory, World War II is the great patriotic war. The Nazis are the arch symbol of all evil, which is not hard to say because in many ways they were. But to take the fact that in the 1940s when the Nazis came to the Ukraine, given how many Ukrainians had perished in the thirties under Stalinist policies of mass starvation, needs to say they were Ukrainians who welcomed the Nazis as liberators, not realizing they didn't come to liberate but they came to take the black soil for themselves. So the Nazis had no trouble creating auxiliary militias of Ukrainians who became the trigger-pullers of the Holocaust.

Christopher Browning ([01:28:30](#)):

Many of the Jews in the Ukraine were shot by Ukrainians under German command. So for Putin to invoke Ukrainians as Nazis hearkens back to World War II. What it admits, of course, is that since then, the Ukraine has democratized and Russia has not. The real reason Putin is invading the Ukraine is that after 2014, throughout the Putin psycho fans and his running on a path of democratization, which threatens to create an example that Putin can't stand as a neighbor because it would expose the dictatorship and the hollowness of his own regime. But the way to dehumanize Ukrainian Democrats is to label all Ukrainians as Nazis, invoking the fact that some Ukrainians indeed were Nazi collaborators 80

years ago. So we see that process of dehumanization and labeling in the Russian invasion of the Ukraine quite clearly.

David Puder ([01:29:38](#)):

I'm gonna jump back to kind of like what your psychological, sort of what you, what you came to as like, this is something that we should look at specifically you looked at the prison, the Stanford Prison Experiment, and your understanding of police Battalion 101. How are they similar and how are they different in your mind?

Christopher Browning ([01:30:04](#)):

Well, similarity in the sense what Zimbardo was testing that if you, if you randomly selected people and you put one group in and prison guard uniforms and empowered them and charge them with controlling their prisoner population that in effect they broke into three groups. There was one group that were the inventive cruelty, the ones who used this chance to exercise power to invent and think of all sorts of ways to torment and make the lives of their prisoners miserable, because this made them more docile and more controllable. There was a middle group that simply looked at the rule book and went by the rules, this is what prison guards are supposed to do. This is our, what we were assigned to do. We'll follow the book. And then there were the two "good guards" who, when they didn't think anybody else was looking and were picked up on hidden camera, did small favors, small acts of mitigation to make the prisoners somewhat less miserable.

Christopher Browning ([01:31:11](#)):

So it certainly, to me, both one confirmed that spectrum that I had come up with 101, that this collection of role-playing prison guards fell into, as well. So that certainly was a similarity. And I think we can see, in terms of the, what I called some of the men in, in battalion 101, 'eager killers', there were several of the men who became 'eager prison guards', the guy with the glasses and the feeling he actually got high in what he was doing, he obviously got a sense of exhilaration in fulfilling this role.

David Puder ([01:31:55](#)):

Jeremiah, what's that quote you had from that guy?

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:31:58](#)):

Yeah, so one of the sadistically oriented guards, this was his quote, He said: 'I ran my own little experiment to see how far I could go, to see how degrading I could be before people objected.' And so that got me thinking about some of the eager killers too, and I think these are obviously the folks that do have, you know, the psychopathological traits. I think if with any subgroup of the population, they're gonna be there, and I think that this gentleman represented that; he was really getting joy and pleasure out of being sadistic.

David Puder ([01:32:34](#)):

The crazy thing about this is they did psychological testing before, and they tried to exclude people like this. The other crazy thing is we're not talking about 2% of the police battalion. Like psychopathy runs about 2% for men in the population, 1-2%, and so, I don't think it's pure psychopathy. It's almost like... I don't know. The percentage far exceeds what we would expect for just psychopaths.

Christopher Browning ([01:33:06](#)):

I usually don't use the word sadist for the eager killers, because I think in fact, the eager killers were far more than than number of people we would clinically define as sadist, as you say, they were in the bar experiment, they were tried to screen these people out, they were given various psychological tests to not include predictable sadist and nonetheless, the situation produced people who became eager guards, just as the situation produced, people who became eager killers that afterwards returned to quite normal lives. The people who were eager killers were not, as far as we know, particularly cruel people in Germany before 1942 or particularly cruel afternd it's that almost Jekyll and Hyde quality where in the situation they found themselves in they become this very different set of behaviors that are clearly in lar in a significant part produced by situation and not by I think particular or abnormal psychological traits.

Christopher Browning ([01:34:25](#)):

Sorting out the individual psychology and the susceptibility situation, and the degree to which you will go to the extreme in that situation, that's more in your camp than mine. I don't have the training to quite sort that out, nor do I think we probably have the evidence from these interrogations to sort that out either.

David Puder ([01:34:48](#)):

I think his quote of 'I ran my own little experiment' there was something about that that struck me as psychopathic, right? And often, if you're a psychopath, you're taking a personality test, you're not gonna often give the truth, right? You're gonna try to act normal. But there's one other thing I was thinking about, and this is the commonality that I saw between police battalion 101, and both Milgram's experiment, which I wanna get to a little bit more, and the Stanford prison experiment. In these experiments, the people that they're drawing into the experiment have been enculturated in our society to science, trust the researcher, trust this high institution where this research is taking place, this research has value. It's very important. And so there's this kind of enculturation, right? Especially if you've gone through college, and most of these are college students, Stanford students. Whereas in the police battalion, there's this enculturation to go with what the authority says, go with what the government says, like, these are your people, this is your tribe... Is that a commonality that you thought was important?

Christopher Browning ([01:36:00](#)):

Oh, yes. I mean, certainly the fact that this is situated as a unit in occupied territory in wartime, 'go with your tribe,' is a very strong kind of pressure on these men. The major himself says, you know, 'I would never ask you to do this, this is not personal, but this is the regime that has assigned us this task.' So the task comes from above. What you're doing is not out of your own personal volition. It doesn't say something about you as a person. This is government policy, so you can unload the responsibility. In effect, Major Trapp is unloading his own responsibility on the regime and allowing the men to do so likewise. That you remain yourself, this is somebody else's moral decision, and if you do it, you're not doing it because you're a bad person.

David Puder ([01:37:02](#)):

I think, I think that was a Freudian slip.



David Puder ([01:37:04](#)):

To Milgram's experiment. How was Milgram's experiment adding to your understanding of the police battalion?

Christopher Browning ([01:37:13](#)):

Yeah, they're, they're in a sense it's...

David Puder ([01:37:18](#)):

And maybe we should just remind our audience, this was the experiment where you have a researcher who's telling someone, "Hey, we're gonna shock this person in the other room. It's gonna be escalating. We're gonna start low," and then the experimenter listens to an actor (they don't know they're an actor) who's being shocked progressively; their yells get louder until they go silent, and only 30% stopped and didn't want to do it, right? Which is like a small percentage.

Christopher Browning ([01:37:50](#)):

Yeah, and so you have, again, the bulk of the people deferring to the authority of the scientist in his white lab coat and his clipboard, symbolizing, as you put it, the legitimacy and authority of science. So, again, the responsibility for what's happening is on that distant authority; you're just the cog in the machine. So the attempt to transfer responsibility. Milgram did try to emphasize that these people in the experiment were basically not acting with their own moral authority but transferring it, displacing it onto the outside, to the scientists with the clipboard. Trapp, in his speech, was trying to create, I think, that same mechanism. Now, when Milgram talked about the experiment afterwards, he thought the deference to authority was very key.

Christopher Browning ([01:38:57](#)):

But he also noted that men would cite conformity in their post-experiment interviews, and he thought citing conformity was a way of copping out, placing responsibility elsewhere. But he thought men cited that conformity was a part. But it's long before... I don't remember the exact formulation, but basically, he thought that conformity was probably a bigger part than the men admitted to. They preferred to shift responsibility in their explanation, and they simply went along with the group. In a sense, that conformity was a bigger factor than the men themselves would admit to because it wasn't as exonerating. In my interviews that I looked at, the interrogations, conformity is cited much more than any other factor.

Christopher Browning ([01:40:01](#)):

So if conformity is the hidden iceberg, and I have that much citation of the power of conformance and the desire not to be the outsider in the unit, to be part of the unit, then by Milgram's arguments, it was even bigger than what the men confessed to, and it was already, in their case, the major factor that they cite. So in terms of the balance in Milgram's post-experiment, most of the men tried to cite authority for what they did in the battalion. Insofar as they commented, the majority cited conformity as the most powerful group pressure that they faced.

David Puder ([01:40:46](#)):

It's so stark to see that conformity is so powerful, right? It's eye-opening. I'm curious, do you think someone listening to this, learning about the power of conformity, like, is that enough to make them conform less when going against moral principles or going against their conscience, or going against the laws of human nature, their conception of morality?

Christopher Browning ([01:41:25](#)):

The real answer is... I don't know, I hope.

David Puder ([01:41:28](#)):

This is the scientist in you. Okay. But you hope Yeah, I like that. Yeah.

Christopher Browning ([01:41:31](#)):

My aspiration is that the book will help change consciousness, that people will be more aware, and certainly, if it influences people who will be in command situations and people who are training people in military units and police units, this will have an effect. The book was used by people who were involved in police reform and police training in New Orleans. So it has been used in police training; it's been used in military training. I'm hoping there is at least some ripple effect there. The person who did this in New Orleans told me she gave the book to this group that she was working with, and when they came back, she asked somebody what did they think of the book? And they said, "Well, it's a very good book, but what does Poland have to do with us?"

Christopher Browning ([01:42:23](#)):

He couldn't make the connection.

Christopher Browning ([01:42:27](#)):

So he didn't quite understand why the book had been assigned. Hopefully, the discussion that followed would change that, but his immediate reaction was, "Well, this was a good book, but what does Poland have to do with us?" He didn't somehow see this as immediately relevant to his position as a policeman.

David Puder ([01:42:47](#)):

Jeremiah, maybe I'll ask you a question now. Imagine you're with a patient. How might you use this information to help a patient? Or maybe you see them conforming in a way that's against their own internal moral compass, so to speak?

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:43:06](#)):

I think that's a great question. I think if I had a patient who was struggling with this, I would have a couple of different models. You know, just learning about this work reminds me of the work of Viktor Frankl and logotherapy. Viktor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor turned psychiatrist, and one of Frankl's findings, while he was in a concentration camp with his whole family being killed, was that we are meaning-making entities; we make meaning out of all of our experiences. So the first thing that I think I would do with a patient is I would have them construct their sense of meaning about what was happening externally. After that, I would then encourage them to potentially determine if there's some cognitive dissonance going on. So let's say that there are some ideological, political, or cultural beliefs that are happening systemically on a macro level.

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:44:02](#)):

I would encourage them to find some sort of individualistic view that may differ from that collective power, and I would really encourage them to wrestle with that. So, let's say that like 80% of them agrees with the social forces around them, but maybe they have that like 20% that says something otherwise. I would encourage them to lean into that 20% because I think that 20% represents their autonomy. It reminds me of the evading killers; there was something very special about these guys who refused to do the killing, and I think they did some deep introspective work. They had to wrestle with this. So that's what I would have my patient do. I would have them wrestle with it, and I would have them acquire data. I would say, "Hey, look, what's the best thing to do here? What's the most appropriate thing to do here based on the meaning that you've constructed and your deliberation between the dissonance in your mind and what's most effective for the world around you?"

David Puder ([01:45:05](#)):

Dr. Browning, how is it listening to a therapist pontificate on what they would do?

Christopher Browning ([01:45:09](#)):

Oh, very interesting. Let me go back to the sort of tripartite division and this issue of the so-called "good people" or the ones who managed to not take part. I had based that, of course, upon reading the interrogations of the men. And some of the criticism was, well, how could the battalion have continued to function if you had had that many evaders? Was this possible? And I've certainly found other cases where we can do a headcount, and it is possible that a significant portion of the men cannot participate, and the efficiency of the killing unit is not impaired. But the other one is that, in a sense, a bookend study based on the post-war interrogations of the perpetrators.

Christopher Browning ([01:46:02](#)):

And I did a kind of bookend study of a test based on survivor testimonies of a collection of slave labor camps in central Poland in the small industrial town of Starachowice. And there I had 292 different people who gave one or more testimonies. And since one of the criticisms of "Ordinary Men" was, well, it's all based on the Germans, and the German testimonies are mendacious, how can I make, you know, real conclusions based on corrupted evidence, and that I'm being suckered by the corrupted evidence. But when one looks at a different set of evidence of people who were in constant contact with German perpetrators, which are prisoners in a labor camp where they and the people who are running it are face-to-face in contact for close to two years, what do they say about German perpetrators?

Christopher Browning ([01:47:03](#)):

What was their take on this? And remember, survival depends upon them reading Germans well. If you're in a camp run by Germans, if you don't know the difference between one German and another, if you don't know how to negotiate between the different German groups and you treat them as a monolith, you're not going to survive. And what emerges from studying the language of the testimonies, the way they referred to different Germans, was that they broke down into three groups: One group, "dangerous Germans." When they came into the camp, dead Jews, you know, was the result, they killed people. And when they came, you fled, you hid, you got out of their way. You avoided the dangerous Germans because the dangerous Germans were gratuitous killers. A second group were the "corrupt Germans." These are people you could negotiate with, these are people you could bribe.

Christopher Browning ([01:48:00](#)):

These are people that, in a sense, even with the weapons of the weak, you could have some kind of negotiated arrangement in terms of making the Germans have a self-interest in the survival of the Jewish workers to produce better and so forth. If they would improve the rations of the workers, if they improved the medicine of the workers, if they would keep the dangerous Germans sort of out of the way or give warning when the SS was coming to inspect because it was in their interest, they would profit.

Christopher Browning ([01:48:40](#)):

From preserving their Jewish workers. And then there was a small group they referred to as the "decent Germans," and this was a very small number of people who, if you were really in trouble, you could go to, and they would treat you as a human being. They would shelter, if you were too sick to work the shift, you didn't leave. They didn't shoot the sick Jews who were too sick to work. They would hide a sick Jew or give them some kind of task that they could do that wasn't taxing. They would allow their prisoners to do things that other work foremen and so forth wouldn't do. But a small number of decent Germans with whom you could find some kind of refuge when things were really dangerous.

Christopher Browning ([01:49:25](#)):

So, this is the testimony of the survivors. This is not corrupted self-interested German testimonies. But I came up with an effect, the same kind of tripartite division, or not the same division, but a tripartite division of how Germans broke down in the eyes of the prisoners in terms of how they had to approach each of these groups. Of course, very differently because survival depended upon knowing which Germans were the decent Germans, which Germans were the dangerous Germans and which Germans were the corrupt Germans. Because you had to approach each of those in a very different way.

David Puder ([01:50:05](#)):

Yeah, I think we all want to imagine we're going to be part of the decent Germans, or even better, like that rare Schindler from Schindler's List, or like the kind of the exception, right? With like the one in a million type of thing. And I think my hope from you guys listening to this is that you take away that there is a strong drive for conformity. We can abdicate our responsibility by thinking of the person that is in charge as holding the responsibility rather than considering our own moral ground, our own moral footing. Are there any other big takeaways, Jeremiah, you're taking away? And then Christopher, I'll give you the last sort of reflections as we wrap this thing up.

Jeremiah Stokes ([01:51:03](#)):

Yeah. I just think, you know, as mental health professionals, I think we're, we're living in a world where we're seeing elements of this and I think that it's vital as therapists that we're mindful of this with our patients when they come into the office and that this is just a reality in our world and obviously we're not at the point where these men more an ordinary men, but I think we just need to be really mindful that there's a lot of group think, there's a lot of bias, there's a lot of polarization, and I think people get sucked into that, and I just really want to encourage critical thinking for ourselves as therapists mental health professionals, and for patients.

David Puder ([01:51:44](#)):

Any final thoughts, Dr. Browning?

Christopher Browning ([01:51:48](#)):

Yes. I mean, I think one of the lessons of the book is, of course, that a regime that wants to commit mass murder does not fail to do so for a lack of executioners. Whatever problems they face, the bottleneck is not being unable to find people to pull the trigger or to conduct face-to-face killing with their victims. That this is a potential that modern states have. So the best line of defense is to make sure we don't have regimes that want to commit mass murder. Therefore, it's utterly essential to promote democratic regimes that are committed to human rights, dedicated to the principles of human value and human life. And that if you have a president that is, or not a president, if you have someone who is promising retribution, that should be taken seriously. That when you have someone running for power who is promising retribution, that is a sign that ought to be a red flag to any person who cherishes democracy.

David Puder ([01:52:59](#)):

That's good. Yeah. Well, I appreciate you coming on. This has been epic. I feel like this was a piece of history, recording this with you, having you long-form talk about this monumental, historical, brutally honest, and very brutal. But hopefully, we can take away some things that can change the course of history. So, thank you for coming on, and yeah, we'll leave it there for today.

Speaker 5 ([01:53:31](#)):

Thank you.