

Their Situation Led Their Actions: How Situationism Explains the Common Perpetrators' Actions During the Holocaust

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To many, the actions of the perpetrators during the Holocaust seem completely incomprehensible unless one views all the actors as 'evil'. After all, how could a normal, decent person willingly kill a multitude of people solely because of their ethnicity, nationality, or religion? The idea of situationism helps explain how this could happen. Situationism is the idea that social forces "larger than ourselves determine our mental life and our actions".¹ This is not to say that they play the only role, but for most people they are the determining factor. The situational factors that came into play within the Nazi system that made it easier for the Holocaust and massacres in the east to occur would include antisemitism, a linking of Jews with their ideological adversary (communism), deindividuation, the use of violent imagery, rewards for violent behaviour and punishments for non-compliance, and the authoritative power from which the orders to kill originated.

The first thing that must be proven is that those men who did the killings were not extraordinary in any way. The Order Police, who were in charge of deportations and murders in towns and villages in the east, were generally a little older than the

¹ Phillip Zimbardo, "Situational Sources of Evil – Part II," *The Situationist*, 23 February 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/02/23/situational-sources-of-evil-part-ii/>>

average soldier and were almost halfway comprised of by reservists.² Most of these men had families and were not fanatical Nazis so, on the whole, they did not seem to be “ a very promising group from which to recruit mass murderers”.³ There was no real selection process for those guarding the victims and doing the killing, and those who did were very commonly not party members. Concentration camp guards were not specially chosen, trained, or fervent Nazis.⁴ The Wehrmacht itself, which planned and carried out the murders of Jews, gypsies, and communists in Serbia,⁵ had no strict policies for having to be a party member or being particularly prone to violent actions. In fact, the only three groups which carried out killings that did have requirements or a selection process were the SS, the Einsatzgruppen, and the Trawniki. The Trawniki, who were used by the SS for ghetto clearing, were Ukrainian, Latvian, and Lithuanian POWs who were screened on the basis of their anti-communist sentiment.⁶ If an individual was deemed to be enough of an anti-communist he could be selected. However, it must be noted that antisemitism and violence were not one of the measures used for selection. The SS, which was in charge of the concentration camps as well as organizing and carrying out some massacres, did have rigorous selection methods, though these requirements did lessen as the war went on. They required that no recruit have been convicted of a criminal act, that they meet certain racial standards, as well as possessing the qualities of loyalty, obedience, courage, truthfulness, honesty, comrade-

² Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 182.

³ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 48.

⁴ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 337.

⁵ Wolfram Wette, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 103.

⁶ Browning, *Ordinary*, 52.

⁷ Elie A. Cohen, trans. M.H. Braaksma, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp* (London: Free Association Books, 1988), 225-6.

ship, responsibility, industry, and abstention.⁷ However, once again there seems to be no requirement for fanatical antisemitism or penchant for violence. The SS men actually used for massacres were drawn mostly from rear-support or replacement divisions which left the fittest men for front line duty.⁸ The SS men used to guard the concentration camps also faced little, if any, type of selection process as there was a "continual exchange of personnel between field units of Waffen SS and concentration camp service".⁹ The SS also made up around half of the Einsatzgruppen,¹⁰ a special unit devoted almost exclusively to massacring civilian populations. The SS in the Einsatzgruppen had been court-martialed and were given the choice of either joining "special commando units" or fulfilling their sentence normally.¹¹ The Einsatzgruppen was one of the only units where many of the men within the unit could be said to have had anti-social tendencies, though it is a difficult claim to make as the severity of the crimes for which they were court-martialed is unknown. Though the rank and file of the Einsatzgruppen might have been suspect, Himmler preferred that their leaders be highly educated.¹² Even the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolph Hoess, avoided watching corporal punishment because he did not like the violence involved.¹³ It must be stressed that all these men were ordinary human beings.¹⁴ It was the situation of the war and the regime they were under that led them to act as they did.

It should also be noted that most men who were involved

⁸ George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War 1939-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹² Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 122.

¹³ Rudolph Hoess, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1961), 69.

¹⁴ Browning, *Ordinary*, xx.; Norman G. Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (New York: Henry Hold & Co., 1998), 98.

in killing units performed their duties. When the 101 Police Battalion was given orders to massacre a group of Jews for the first time only 12 out of 500 men declined to take part.¹⁵ What makes this even more surprising is the fact that their commander, Major Trapp, offered them a way out when he said that what they would have to do was a "frightfully unpleasant task... [that was] not to his liking, [and] highly regrettable... [and that] older men who did not feel up to the task could step out".¹⁶ In later actions, when the opportunity to opt-out was not explicitly given, those who did not shoot fell to only two people, and both men did it by slinking away and hiding.¹⁷ Many of the group complained about their job but few got themselves out.¹⁸ To determine why the men followed their orders almost universally, even though the orders ran counter to their own emotions,¹⁹ one must look at their situation.

Of course, not all guards and perpetrators are created equal. Amongst the perpetrators there were sadists. Some members of the order police in Lodz purposefully set their watches ahead so that they could beat Polish civilians for breaking curfew.²⁰ Many guards at concentration camps also took pleasure in prisoners bullying and injuring other prisoners.²¹ However, these are the minority. At the Auschwitz trial it was determined that not more than five to ten percent of guards were sadists.²² Once the war ended and the Nazi apparatus was dismantled many perpetrators, and their spouses, realized the crimes they had committed as shown in their high divorce rate after the war.²³ It is these men, these regular men, who were "turned evil" by their situation.

To more easily be able to kill large groups of people one

¹⁵ Browning, *Ordinary*, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²¹ Hoess, *Commandant*, 128.

²² Finkelstein and Birn, *Nation*, 67.

²³ *Ibid.*, 112.

must first separate oneself from them. The easiest way to do this is to create a group to which one's people feel allegiance, an "ingroup", and isolate the enemy from that group by relegating them to another, an "outgroup", or 'other'. The Nazis were able to accomplish this with the Germans (ingroup) and the Jews and other 'subhumans' (outgroup). . Creating these groups, and allegiances to them is actually remarkably easy. One experiment that shows how simple this can be done, and how people are naturally drawn to creating distinctions, was done by Henri Tajfel:

He asked boys to guess how many dots were shown on a speckled slide and subsequently announced they were over- or underestimators. Next the boys distributed points (that were exchangeable for money) amongst each other. They tended to give more to those who were the same 'type' as themselves. They had spent mere minutes as a member of this transparently meaningless ingroup, and yet were already showing favoritism!²⁴

Another way to create group bias is to provide a prize or goal that only one group can have. This was shown in Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment. In this experiment the researchers took two groups of middle class 11-year-old boys with no prior disciplinary problems and had them go to a summer camp. For the first week the week the groups did not see each other. On the second week they met each when they were forced to share sports fields and the cafeteria. The groups began to call each other names and taunt each other. It was decided by the counselors that they should have a four day games tournament with a cash prize given to the winning team. After that the name calling escalated into fist fights and cabin raids. After the final game the losing group

²⁴ Alex Gunz, "The Doubled Edged Passion," *In Mind*, 20 October 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://www.in-mind.org/issue-4/the-double-edged-passion.html>>

raided the winning groups cabin and stole their prizes.²⁵ After only two weeks groups of strangers were stealing and fighting each other because they were part of one designated group or the other. The reason they did these things was because they “knew” that their group was good and the other group was bad: “In-group members tend to make internal (dispositional) attributions to positive in-group behavior and negative out-group behavior, as well as external (situational) attributions to negative in-group behavior and positive out-group behavior”.²⁶ The need to find a scapegoat, or other, normally occurs, according to anthropologist Thomas J. Schoeneman, “closely after social turmoil. The need to find a scapegoat peaked in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries when churches fell under siege from science and monarchs, they peaked in Massachusetts when Puritan influence there came under intense fire, and they peaked in Washington when China and the USSR loomed as threats”.²⁷ This can also be seen, in a more direct parallel to the Holocaust, with the Turks when, only a few years after the Sultan was deposed, the Turkish leaders asserted need to destroy Armenians as a way of revitalizing empire and curing their people.²⁸ At the time of the Holocaust Germany had been undergoing radical social changes for years. All this change led to insecurity for the general population which led to the population being more susceptible to propaganda, ethnocentric self-glorification, self-protection of in-group, and aggression directed towards scapegoats of out-group.²⁹

The ultimate goal for the German ingroup was to win the

²⁵ John Hanson and Michael McCann, “March Madness,” *The Situationist*, 27 March 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/03/27/march-madness/>>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gunz, “Double”.

²⁸ Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1986), 489.

²⁹ G.M. Gilbert, *The Psychology of Dictatorship: Based on an Examination of the Leaders of Nazi Germany* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1950), 270.

'competition of the races'³⁰ by freeing the Aryan race from all impure races through segregation, deprivation of education, exclusion from all but menial occupations, and finally with decimation.³¹ The other goal for the ingroup was the complete destruction of communism. What the propaganda was able to do was to link these two 'evils', that of the Jew and that of communism, to make them into a single outgroup. This was not a difficult task as diaries show that many in the military linked Bolsheviks with Jews.³² This link between Jews and Bolshevism continued to be hammered home through the propaganda and speeches by the Nazi party. For the SS and Einsatzgruppen many of their orders specifically linked Jews with Bolshevism.³³ In 1939 the Wehrmacht was issued booklets which explicitly stated the National Socialist world view which included this link.³⁴ This link between the two grew so strong that by 1941 'Jewish Bolshevism' had "assumed a life of its own that drastically diminished the military's ability to perceive reality".³⁵ Another link made was to create the Bolshevik as sub-human whether they were Jewish or not. In a message that was to be read to the men it was written that "[t]he goal is to wipe out the species of subhuman Red represented by the rulers in Moscow".³⁶ The point of all this creation of the outgroup was to create "a psychological distance between German soldiers and enemies through continual degradation and dehumanization of the latter in order to make killing easier".³⁷ What is most interesting, however, is that the world view created by this torrent of propaganda was so great that the average German's norms were so shaped into

³⁰ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 460.

³¹ Gilbert, *Nazi*, 292.

³² Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁵ Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 248.

³⁶ Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 98-99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

the Nazi view that, for the Order Police, they did not need to be given overly antisemitic teachings and pamphlets until after the first massacres.³⁸ It was just taken for granted that Jews were a threat to the system and the ingroup and that a protection of this threat,³⁹ or not getting rid of this threat, was akin to murdering your own blood.⁴⁰ This way of thinking became so ubiquitous that Hoess referred to having emotions against killing Jews as a “betrayal against the fuhrer”.⁴¹

One thing that made the killings easier was that there was a pervasive form of antisemitism in both the military and amongst the general German population. This is not to say that antisemitism caused the killings, as per the 'Goldhagen Theory',⁴² but it certainly was a factor that helped it. There had been a “legacy of German antisemitism” that allowed for the more extreme form propagated by Nazism to gain ground.⁴³ It was so great in the military that Gustav Noske admitted before German National Assembly in 1919 that there was a great antisemitic feeling in the armed forces.⁴⁴ This led to the fact that there was very little outcry when the Nuremberg Laws were put in place. If anything, these laws strengthened the belief that Jews deserved their fate as sub-humans.⁴⁵ Once the racist system was put in place and codified in law it became very easy for people to justify it. People will rationalize the status quo, whatever that may be, and see it as good, fair, legitimate, and desirable.⁴⁶ It was not just the laws and system put

³⁸ Browning, *Ordinary*, 177-182.

³⁹ Cohen, *Human*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴¹ Hoess, *Commandant*, 174.

⁴² Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 9.

⁴³ Finkelstein and Birn, *Nation*, 14.

⁴⁴ Wette, *Wehremacht*, 47.

⁴⁵ Harbour Fraser Hodder, “Fortune’s Favour: The Lucky Effect,” *Harvard Magazine*, March 2003, 28 November 2007 <<http://harvardmagazine.com/2007/03/the-lucky-effect.html>>

⁴⁶ Aaron C. Kay, John T. Jost et al, “Panglossian Ideology in the Service of System Justification: How Complementary Stereotypes Help Us to Rationalize Inequality,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 30 (2007), 305.

in place that helped the antisemitism to flourish, however. The propaganda element also played a large role in determining people's thoughts. Many civilians admitted that when they saw a Jew on the street they did not think of him as a person "but as a Jew"⁴⁷ and that the "category of human was not applicable".⁴⁸ The population was unable to see the Jew rationally because people's brains are not wired to do that. Once people associate themselves with a political ideology or system, in this instance many people associated themselves with Hitler himself as seen through his popularity, then any instance which seemed to contradict the image of 'Hitler doing good' was willed away in their brains. People regularly do this as in Dr. Drew Westen's experiment where he has avowed Republicans and Democrats read statements that contradict their respective party's platforms:

Confronted with the unwelcome contradictions, each subject's network of neurons associated with distress and regulating emotions (the right frontal lobe, the insula and amygdala) lit up. But soon the subjects found ways to deny that there was any significant contradiction, and calm returned. "The neural circuits charged with regulation of emotional states seemed to recruit beliefs" — even false ones — that would eliminate the distress each subject was experiencing, he writes. Meanwhile, the reasoning centers of the brain... were quiet. What's more, the neural circuits responsible for positive emotions turned on as soon as the subject found a way to resolve the contradictions — reinforcing the faulty reasoning. Dr. [Drew] Westen summed it up: people think with the gut.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 124.

⁴⁸ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 280.

⁴⁹ Patricia Cohen, "Counselling Democrats to Go For the Gut," *New York Times*, 10 July 2007, 29 November 2007 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/10/arts/10west.html?](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/10/arts/10west.html?ex=1341720000&en=b102202a7cd936ab&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss)

[ex=1341720000&en=b102202a7cd936ab&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/10/arts/10west.html?ex=1341720000&en=b102202a7cd936ab&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss)>

The Waffen SS had this idea in mind when they trained their officer corps. "The educational goal was not to make the officer-candidate capable of exercising a rationally controlled critical faculty, but rather to make him *identify* with the ideology".⁵⁰

The propaganda machine became so effective that, using the stereotype that Jews shirked from work as an example, some Germans, upon arriving in Poland, were surprised at finding Jews who did manual labour.⁵¹ This sort of propaganda was also used in the armed forces as when General Hans Rottiger, who commanded panzer troops in the east, spoke to his men and declared that the "struggle against bandits that we were waging had at its ultimate aim the exploitation of the military for the purpose of ruthlessly exterminating Jewry and other unwanted elements".⁵² That propaganda could be used that contained such specific wording towards extermination is not a surprise when one views the increasingly antisemitic stances of the German people during that time. For example, when Germans would give up their seats to Jews on a streetcar in 1941 they were met with approval, however by 1942 the same action was met with jeers.⁵³ That being said, the antisemitism in Germany did not lead to many, if any, popular assaults on Jews.⁵⁴ However, the amount of effort put in to teaching that this was an ideological and racial war against a 'subhuman' enemy led to a, based on letters and diaries, "surprisingly large number of servicemen adopt[ing] the complete National Socialist view of the world,⁵⁵ including the 'ethnic community'".⁵⁶ The antisemitic propaganda, coupled with the an-

⁵⁰ Bernd Wegner, trans. Ronald Webster, *The Waffen-SS: Organization, Ideology and Function* (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 173.

⁵¹ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 285.

⁵² Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 206.

⁵³ Finkelstein and Birn, *Nation*, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁵ Stein, *Waffen*, 272.

⁵⁶ Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 181.

tisemitism already present in Germany, did help prime the men to be able to more easily kill innocent civilians.

Even if one was not racist to begin with it quickly became difficult to escape it. There have been two psychological tests done recently to prove how easy it is to become biased. Using the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which is a test that measures differences in time between how long it takes a person to associate positive words with certain cultures or races and negative words with others, it was shown that “[o]nly 7 percent of white college students at University of Wisconsin and Northwestern University showed no racial bias. When shown images to create bias (Chinese characters linked with negative images) only those who showed no racial bias seemed unaffected by the classical conditioning test”.⁵⁷ In another test two races were made up. Subjects were told about an individual from each race. One individual had 12 positive traits and four negative ones, the other individual was the exact opposite. When asked about the races the two people came from the subjects expressed no explicit bias in what they said, however they did express a bias through the IAT. After a few days the subjects were asked about the two races again and this time they expressed both implicit as well as explicit biases.⁵⁸ Without positive actors to ward off negative stereotypes, of which there were few if any regarding the Jews in Germany,⁵⁹ it becomes almost impossible to stay unbiased.

Another process used to make the killings easier was “deindividuation”. This is the process of removing those aspects which separate an individual from a group. In the case of the

⁵⁷ Robert Livingston, “New Study Discovers Why Few People Are Devoid of Racial Bias,” *EurekaAlert!* 24 September 2007, 28 November 2007 <http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2007-09/afps-nsd092407.php>

⁵⁸ Brian Nosek and Kate Ranganath, “Judging One by the Actions of Another,” *The Situationist* 16 October 2007, 28 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/10/16/judging-one-by-the-actions-of-another-eventually/>>

⁵⁹ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 442.

armed forces and Einsatzgruppen this was giving them each uniforms, removing them from their family and loved ones (though this was also a military necessity), and creating an “unquestioning obedience to military [which caused] many people to lose sense of individual responsibility and personal guilt”.⁶⁰ This sense of deindividuation empirically creates more violent reactions. In a Milgram-like experiment, having subjects shock a stranger based on the instructions from a 'teacher', “‘deindividuated’ women delivered twice as much shock to victims as comparison women did”.⁶¹ In terms of real-world evidence anthropologist R.J. Watson found that when societies changed the appearance of their warriors before going to war there was an 80 percent chance that they would brutalize their victims, whereas in societies that did not change their warriors appearance there was only a ten percent chance that their victims would be brutalized.⁶² The deindividuation of perpetrators helped them to be more brutal and careless with regards to human life.

The deindividuation was not limited to just the perpetrators, however. Jewish men and women would have their hair shaved and be stripped of their clothes before massacres and upon entering concentration camps. Eventually numbers would be tattooed onto their arms upon entering work camps thereby removing the need to have names. Rudolph Hoess, the commandant at Auschwitz, admits that they were to not think of their charges as men but as 'Russians' or 'kanakas'.⁶³ Being referred to as 'Russian' in this instance is telling as Hoess admits that the Russians were given so little food that they would kill each other to steal food or even kill each other so as to be able to cannibalize the victim.⁶⁴ So,

⁶⁰ Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 158-9.

⁶¹ John Hanson and Michael McCann, “Deindividuation and Seung Hui Cho,” *The Situationist* 21 June 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/06/21/deindividuation-and-seung-hui-cho/>>

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Hoess, *Commandant*, 84.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 136-7

in his mind and in the minds of many other Germans, to be Russian was to be without humanity.

Attacking a group outside of their own also provided an outlet for personal frustration.⁶⁵ It has been shown that when suffering from lower levels of self-esteem than normal, that the more one attacks an ethnic other than one's own, whether attacking physically, verbally, or economically, the more one's levels of self-esteem raise back to their normal levels.⁶⁶ The group to attack was made abundantly clear through ideology as well as practically. For those frustrated with the war effort, or being away from loved ones, or from having to actually fight, attacking Jews made oneself feel much better.

Being primed with hostile images and violent words made it easier for the perpetrators to commit their acts. In another Milgram-like experiment run by Charles Carver it was found that the subjects would administer longer shocks when primed with hostile words.⁶⁷ As shown earlier, the Wehrmacht, SS, and Einsatzgruppen were all inundated with propaganda denoting the hostile nature of their enemies and of the Jews. The Order Police also usually had hostile or violent statements before entering into an "engagement" against civilians. Before their first massacre Major Trapp reminded his men of the "bombs falling on women and children in Germany".⁶⁸ Major Weis, of Police Battalion 309, told his men that it was a "war against Jews and Bolsheviks... proceed ruthlessly against Jews".⁶⁹ In the concentration camps the guards, and supervisors, were repeatedly ordered to treat the prisoners roughly.⁷⁰ As soon as guards began to treat their prisoners roughly

⁶⁵ Gilbert, *Psychology*, 288.

⁶⁶ Gunz, "Double".

⁶⁷ "The (Unconscious) Situation of Our Consciousness—Part I," *The Situationist* 15 November 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/11/15/the-unconscious-situation-of-our-consciousness-part-i/>>

⁶⁸ Browning, *Ordinary*, 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁰ Hoess, *Commandant*, 84.

other guards could easily soon follow their examples and adjust to the environment.⁷¹ Once the first violence was perpetrated by someone each subsequent violent action became easier and more natural.

Violence also begets other violence. The process of venting, that is using violence to release anger, actually makes people resort to violent actions more often out of frustration. This 'venting' of frustration actually makes people twice as aggressive as those who do not vent.⁷² The reason this happens is because "previous experience in a situation can make some neural connections stronger than others, tipping the scales in favor of a previously performed action".⁷³ Many people showed shock and horror at their actions after their first killings. Rudolph Hoess and Adolf Eichmann both 'shuddered' and 'trembled' after seeing their first gassing victims.⁷⁴ Many units involved in killing civilians had strong reactions such as these, however, all their reactions are very similar to those soldiers who have just been involved in combat for the first time.⁷⁵ Hoess admitted that he thought the orders to kill the Soviet political commissars made it easier to kill the civilian Jews.⁷⁶ For the men in the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS killing civilians was just another extension of their normal duties as soldiers. For the Order Police and the concentration camp guards their killing of civilians was, for most of them, their first taste of 'battle'. However, they soon became habituated to their duties. For the Order Police it became less like killing and more like the

⁷¹ Cohen, *Human*, 231.

⁷² I would recommend watching *Penn & Teller: Bullshit – Anger Management* to learn more about this.

⁷³ "The Situation of Reason," *The Situationist*, 9 November 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/11/09/the-situation-of-reason/>>

⁷⁴ Hoess, *Commandant*, 21; Jochen von Lang ed., trans. Ralph Manheim, *Eichman Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Police* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1983), 76.

⁷⁵ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 221.

⁷⁶ Hoess, *Commandant*, 163.

drudgery of a job that some found distasteful.⁷⁷ For those in the concentration camps it was a similar experience. Though they tended to delegate many of the tasks they still became conditioned to the factory-like atmosphere of killing that the concentration camps engendered.⁷⁸ Delegating the tasks made their work as killers easier on the minds of those involved.

In the concentration camps many of the tasks were delegated to prisoners. The prisoners were in charge of moving the gassed bodies to the crematoriums, as well as in charge of maintaining discipline over the other prisoners. The order police also tried to distance themselves from the tasks. They would give the worst tasks to the Trawniki⁷⁹ and many Order Police would drink before engaging in the killing of civilians.⁸⁰ The only complaints the Order Police had with giving the tasks to the Trawniki was not that they were killing the civilians, but that they took so much joy from it.⁸¹ The reason for this is that the more remote one is from the killing the easier it would be. In Stanley Milgram's shock experiment he found that the way to induce full complicity in performing the maximum amount of shock was to have the subject not pull the lever themselves, but to give the order to someone else to pull the lever.⁸²

The greatest reason for why an ordinary person could turn into a killer would be in their situation. The situation, in this case, is the "behavioral context that has the power, through its reward and normative functions, to give meaning and identity to the actor's roles and status".⁸³ In the concentration camp situation the

⁷⁷ Browning, *Ordinary*, 85.

⁷⁸ Cohen, *Human*, 9.

⁷⁹ Browning, *Ordinary*, 77.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸¹ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 227.

⁸² John Hanson and Michael McCann, "'Situation' Trumps 'Disposition' - Part II," *The Situationist* 9 August 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/08/09-situation-trumps-disposition-part-ii/>>

⁸³ Phil Zimbardo, "Person X Situation X System Dynamics," *The Situationist* 30 July 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/07/30/person-x-situation-x-system-dynamics/>>

rewards were based on who could best keep the prisoners under control and kill them. In the case of the Order Police, Wehrmacht, and SS the rewards were given to those who could best follow orders to kill civilians. Though the process of getting the rewards, killing human beings, seems barbaric, that was the norm for these men. An example of normal people succumbing to social and situational pressure can be seen in Dr. Phil Zimbardo's 'Stanford Experiment'. In this experiment college students with no behavioural problems were randomly assigned either the role of 'guard' or 'prisoner' in a 'prison'. The prisoners were to remain under guard 24 hours a day with guards working 8 hour shifts. The guards were to not physically attack the prisoners but could use everything at their disposal in their power to maintain control. The experiment had to be stopped after only six days due to almost half the 'inmates' suffering emotional breakdowns. The guards, with no prodding, subjected those under their care to being forced into sexually humiliating poses, sleep deprivation, dehumanization through forcing them to walk around naked with bags over their head, and verbal degradation. This experiment showed that "given certain conditions, ordinary people can succumb to social pressure to commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable".⁸⁴ A modern example was through a study of Brazilian policemen who acted as interrogators/torturers:

Torturers were not unusual or deviant in any way prior to practicing their new roles, nor were there any persisting deviant tendencies or pathologies among any of them in the years following their work as torturers and executioners. Their transformation was entirely explainable as being the consequence of a number of situational and systemic factors, such as the training they were given to play this new

⁸⁴ Phillip Zimbardo, "From Heavens to Hells to Heroes—Part I," *The Situationist* 12 March 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/03/12/from-heavens-to-hells-to-heroes-%e2%80%93-part-i/>>

role; their group camaraderie; acceptance of the national security ideology; and their learned belief in socialists and Communists as enemies of their state.⁸⁵

The men believed the ideology and the fact that Bolsheviks and Jews were enemies of the state. Many of them may not have actually hated Jews for being Jews but did 'recognize' that they were enemies of the people.⁸⁶ For the soldiers and Order Police this was drummed in through the pamphlets and propaganda. The Wehrmacht soldiers received constant reassurances in that what they were doing was right for both the massacres they may have been involved in as well as the war effort in general.⁸⁷ The same was true of the concentration camps this was constantly repeated from the head of the concentration camp system on down.⁸⁸ It must also be made clear that it was not just Germans who were under this situational control, however. Apart from just the Trawniki, the Order Police were actually mostly of non-German origin. Only between two and ten percent were German, the rest being drawn from the local population.⁸⁹ As well, the concentration camps that had mostly non-German guards and those Order Police units made up of mostly non-Germans showed little difference in their actions.⁹⁰ Even though the antisemitic "moral current" had been operating in Germany for far longer than other nations, those citizens too were drawn into actions against the Jews.⁹¹

The massacres and the concentration camps existed under a different set of rules from normal society.⁹² Hitler set this tone

⁸⁵ Phillip Zimbardo, "Situational Sources of Evil – Part II," *The Situationist*, 23 February 2007, 29 November 2007 <<http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/02/23/situational-sources-of-evil-part-ii/>>

⁸⁶ Hoess, *Commandant*, 147.

⁸⁷ Wette, *Wehrmacht*, 175.

⁸⁸ Hoess, *Commandant*, 83.

⁸⁹ Finkelstein and Birn, *Nation*, 121.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹¹ Cohen, *Human*, 241.

⁹² Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 175.

when in 1934 he dismissed the prison sentences handed down to to prison guards for their sadistic treatment of prisoners.⁹³ This was followed five years later by the dropping of a prison sentence for the murder of 50 Jews by an SS officer and military police.⁹⁴ In the concentration camps the first head of the system, Eicke, would punish the guards for any perceived lapse of duty so it was quickly learned that it was better to do more than one felt necessary for fear of punishment.⁹⁵ If one could not do the duties of the camp the guard would actually be expelled, bringing a sense of shame and failure upon the individual.⁹⁶ This necessity for violence became especially true after the institution of a bounty for killing prisoners.⁹⁷ Many also felt that it was in their career's interest to be as brutal as possible,⁹⁸ this being true both in the concentration camp system and in the east. The lack of punishment for brutalizing the Jews can be best expressed in the number of photographs showing the actions of the Order Police, SS, and Wehrmacht, even with the rules expressly forbidding photographing the abuses.⁹⁹ With the situation created that violence towards Jews would not be punished, but in fact be rewarded, it should come as no surprise that only ten to twenty percent of the Order Police did not kill Jews in the east.¹⁰⁰ These situational factors overrode the fact that one could opt out of killing Jews and civilians with relative ease.

It bears mentioning just how easy it was to opt out from killing. Even if one's superior did not offer to let people leave before a massacre, as Major Trapp did with his men, many officers could request to be left out of an action.¹⁰¹ Amongst the regular

⁹³ Cohen, *Human*, 250.

⁹⁴ Stein, *Waffen*, 271.

⁹⁵ Hoess, *Commandant*, 264.

⁹⁶ Cohen, *Human*, 246.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁹⁸ Browning, *Ordinary*, 169.

⁹⁹ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 241.

¹⁰⁰ Browning, *Ordinary*, 159.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

trooper as well, they could request to not be forced to shoot and, apart from some berating by their superior,¹⁰² they were normally allowed to leave. Some officers even disparaged their men when they chose to take the not kill when given the option by the officer.¹⁰³ Some who did not want to participate in the killing of civilians just wandered off and pretended to look for runaways rather than actually kill those Jews in front of them.¹⁰⁴ These men were never missed, however, as there were always plenty of volunteers ready to take part,¹⁰⁵ especially amongst those men who had never been in combat.¹⁰⁶ In terms of the other groups of perpetrators already mentioned before the most extreme form of punishment for not doing your duty in a concentration camp was to be expelled. Those in the police battalions as well as the Einsatzgruppen could request transfers to leave their units.¹⁰⁷ Though it could look bad requesting a transfer or refusing to follow your orders people saw that there was little punishment, if any, handed down by their officers.¹⁰⁸ The common soldier, guard, and Order Policeman ignored this and followed their orders, even if they believed the orders were wrong.

Orders coming from a superior or authoritative source are extremely difficult to ignore. In repetitions of Stanley Milgram's experiments it was found that 61 to 66 percent of subjects would continue administering higher and higher doses of shocks to victims even if they were unconscious. These numbers do not vary from country to country or from year to year.¹⁰⁹ In another experi-

¹⁰² Ibid., 103.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁷ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 380.

¹⁰⁸ Browning, *Ordinary*, 170.

¹⁰⁹ Phillip Zimbardo, "Situational Sources of Evil—Part I," *The Situationist*, 16

February 2007, 29 November 2007 <[http://](http://thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/02/16/when-good-people-do-evil-%e2%80%93-part-i/)

thesituationist.wordpress.com/2007/02/16/when-good-people-do-evil-%e2%80%93-part-i/>

ment “all but one of 22 nurses flouted their hospital’s procedure by obeying a phone order from an unknown doctor to administer an excessive amount of a drug”.¹¹⁰ Many of the men involved in the killings would later have thoughts similar to Rudolph Hoess; I should have refused the orders, but that thought never crossed my mind.¹¹¹

The situational forces that the Nazi system exerted on its rank and file, that of antisemitism, a linking of Jews with their ideological adversary (communism), the use of violent imagery, rewards for violent behaviour and punishments for non-compliance, and the authoritative power from which the orders to kill emanated, all coalesced to form a near inescapable situation for the common man. These forces, all beyond the control of the ordinary individual,¹¹² led them to becoming killing machines. These situational forces were even able to impose their will upon inmates within the concentration camps, as survivors recall that the Kapos, those prisoners in charge of keeping the other prisoners in line, were more cruel than the guards themselves.¹¹³ Many of those committing grievous acts, such as the Einsatzgruppen, suffered mental breakdowns due to the fact that they knew what they were doing was wrong but they continued to do it anyway.¹¹⁴ The ability to go along with something, even though you know it is wrong, is a powerful tool. In the Solomon Asch experiment subjects were asked to compare a set of lines in order of length. Unbeknownst to the subjects, a number of confederates were placed within the group and purposefully instructed to give obviously false answers. 70 percent of the subjects ended up agreeing with the confederates even though they were obviously wrong.¹¹⁵ Obvi-

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Hoess, *Commandant*, 23.

¹¹² Florence R. Miale and Michael Selzer, *The Nuremberg Mind: The Psychology of the Nazi Leaders* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1975), 4.

¹¹³ Finkelstein and Birn, *Nation*, 63-64.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Carrie H. Kennedy and Eric A. Zilmer ed., *Military Psychology: Clinical and Operational Applications* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2006), 265.

ously giving the wrong answer to what line is longer is not comparable to murdering thousands of people. However, if the social situation is powerful enough one can do something that is obviously wrong.