

Christopher R. Browning. *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xii + 185 pp. \$21.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-77490-1.

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Ordinary Killers, Extraordinary Crimes

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This volume comprises six lectures delivered by Christopher R. Browning at Cambridge University in the Lent Term of 1999. Fortunately, author and publisher decided not to revise the format of the original texts substantially. Hence the book as a whole is very readable, with the individual lectures being shining examples for concise and clear argumentation. The lectures address three pertinent issues of current Holocaust scholarship: (a) decision and policy making with regard to the Final Solution, (b) the role of economic considerations in these decision making processes, and (c) the behaviour and mindset of those Germans who implemented Nazi policy on local level.

Addressing these issues in close (and often horrible) detail and based on his own extensive archival work, Browning presents the reader with a critical, yet very reasoned and diligent discussion of other scholars' viewpoints.

The first two lectures deal with the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy from the time of the invasion of Poland to late 1941. Browning discusses in detail the various plans to implement Nazi racial and resettlement policies in (former) Poland. He portrays Eichmann's autumn 1939 *Nisko Plan* for the expulsion and deportation of Jews and Gypsies from Reich territory—both old and new—to the Lublin district and Rademacher's *Madagascar Plan* of June 1940 as examples of “timely low-level initiative[s] that offered a way to implement policy decisions just made at the top” (p. 17). According to Browning, both plans were abruptly halted when political circumstances changed without being formally abandoned. Instead these plans “lingered as the official policy until an alternative was proclaimed” (p. 17). Browning illustrates this by referring to the sudden defeat of France and the problem of finding space for the incoming ethnic Germans which had rendered the *Nisko Plan* obsolete, just as the *Madagascar Plan* was ren-

dered unrealistic by the failure of the *Blitzkrieg* against Great Britain. Similarly, Browning continues, Heydrich's three *Nahplaene* (short-range plans), aimed at deporting Poles and Jews from the recently annexed Polish territories to the Generalgouvernement, had to be revised due to changing conditions in the Generalgouvernement.

Browning contends that wartime Nazi Jewish policy initially was dominated by the ideological goal to cleanse all Reich territory of Jews and that plans put forward by lower level officials to that effect were readily seized upon without having due regard to their feasibility. Additionally, Browning contends that these plans either failed to take account of other NS policy objectives—such as the resettlement of ethnic Germans and wartime economic planning—or were overtaken by events in the war. The repeated failure of these SS plans for ethnic cleansing “left the frustrated German demographic planners receptive to ever more radical solutions” (p. 17). Browning goes on to argue that it was in the context of planning the invasion of the Soviet Union that Nazi Jewish policy reached another level of escalation—the wholesale deportation of Jews from European territories ruled or controlled by Germany to a “territory yet to be determined” (i.e., the Soviet Union).[1] Clearly, Browning is not of the opinion that this phrase (used in late January 1941) was merely a euphemism camouflaging the intended annihilation of European Jewry (p. 21), even though he speculates that as early March 1941, Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich might have lost interest in this 'solution' and were thinking “of another possibility, if all went well with the imminent military campaign” (p. 22).

The question of when and how precisely the decision to annihilate the Jews of Europe was eventually arrived at is at the center of Browning's second lecture. Here he takes issue with Christian Gerlach's hypothesis [2] that the fate of German and west European Jewry

had still been undecided in mid-December 1941. According to Gerlach, it was the United States' entry into the war that triggered the implementation of Hitler's 1939 prophecy of annihilation. Gerlach refers to an entry under the 18 December 1941 in Himmler's *Terminkalender* as the "smoking pistol" document" (p. 34). This entry reads: "Judenfrage ? | Als Partisanen auszurotten" ("Jewish question ? to be exterminated as partisans" [3]. For Gerlach, this brief entry in Himmler's office diary documents the Fuehrer's instruction to eliminate all the Jews in Europe: "There can be no doubt that what Himmler wrote down after the vertical line represented the results of that conversation. But what did the brief notation mean? Linguistically, the statement is an order." I would argue that not only is it possible in principle to doubt that this statement is a summing-up of their conversation, but there is also no compelling reason to interpret what clearly is a notation by Himmler as a statement from Hitler. Linguistically, it may just as well refer to a suggestion that Himmler intended to put to the Fuehrer at that meeting. Gerlach, however, doesn't even entertain that thought, which is not surprising as his whole line of argument depends on the assumption that this sentence refers to a fundamental decision in principle by Hitler. And it was this fundamental decision, Gerlach claims, that is the real reason behind the postponement of the Wannsee Conference: it had to be rescheduled for 20 January 1942 in order to give time to prepare for this new task.

Browning's refutation of Gerlach's argumentation is not based on a linguistic and philological analysis of this single entry, even though this alone is sufficient to put a big question mark on Gerlach's hypothesis. Instead, Browning draws on numerous archival records and established facts to reconfirm his viewpoint that the fate of European Jewry had been sealed much earlier than December 1941. And Browning's refutation is as detailed as it is convincing. For one, he doubts that Hitler attributed as much meaning to U.S. entry into the war as Gerlach would hypothesize him to have had. Rather than U.S. entry into the war, Browning asserts, it was the military situation on the eastern front that eventually sealed the fate of European Jewry. Browning points to the fact that Hitler solicited a "feasibility study" for the physical destruction of European Jews as early as mid-July 1941. He shows that by late August of that year Eichmann had changed his "year old formulaic answer to the Foreign Office" that the Final Solution was "imminent" to saying that it was "now in preparation" (p. 36). Browning stresses that the deportation of Reich Jews began in mid-October, at the same time that Himmler ordered that all

Jewish emigration cease immediately and construction of the Belzec death camp got under way. Unconvincingly, Gerlach tries to explain away the fact that Belzec was under construction already well before Hitler's alleged fundamental decision by stating: "Exactly what future expectations were associated with the erection of the Belzec camp remains unknown" (p. 807). Thus, Browning sticks to his well-known thesis [4] that the Final Solution was the result of "an incremental, ongoing decision-making process that stretched from the spring of 1941 to the summer of 1942, with key turning points in the midsummer and early fall of 1941 that corresponded to the peaks of German victory euphoria" (p. 56).

Browning's model of incremental, ongoing decision-making is supported by his findings on the exploitation and destruction of Jewish workers in Poland, the theme of his third lecture. Focusing on the situation in Lodz and Warsaw, Browning studies in some detail the debates over the use of Jewish labor between so-called "productionists" (arguing that ghettoized Jews ought to be put to work so as to keep themselves alive by their own efforts and at their own expense) and so-called "attritionists" (who viewed ghettos as a means only to liquidate Jews). Browning shows convincingly that during those periods in which the "productionists" were permitted to pursue their goals, "the ultimate ideological goal was never superseded, just temporarily deferred" (p. 59). Economic considerations (e.g. the labor shortage in Germany) were allowed to be taken into account only so long as there was no agreement over the nature of the Final Solution. Once the decision was made for the Final Solution, the ideological goal proved paramount and the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto commenced in July 1942 regardless of the economic productivity and usefulness of its inmates.

Browning's fourth lecture is based on 134 testimonies by survivors of the Starachowice labor camp (south of Radom). These testimonies fall into three distinct categories: those collected immediately after the war in Poland, 1960s testimonies taken by German investigators, and those videotaped for the Fortunoff Archives in the 1980s. Browning's critical evaluation of these sources is meticulous. This chapter of the book is all the more relevant and merits scholarly attention because it serves to redress the imbalance that most historiography of the Holocaust is based on sources that emanated from the perpetrators. By combining survivors' testimonies and archival written evidence, Browning overcomes the shortcomings of either category of sources and uses them to construct an account of the everyday history of this labor camp. This account is as fascinating as it is depressing

to read, especially when one learns at the very end that despite these detailed testimonies, just one Starachowice guard was convicted for exactly one murder (p. 115).

The issue of local initiative and leverage in the decision-making process is revisited in the fifth lecture, where Browning discusses the destruction of the Brest-Litovsk Jewry. The author argues that the guidelines issued by the Nazi leadership for a war of destruction against the Soviet Union were interpreted by local authorities in different ways and that the SS leadership in turn seized upon those local initiatives and improvisations “that best suited their purposes and institutionalized them as policies and methods to be implemented elsewhere” (p. 126). Where, however, local initiatives “challenged the regime’s policies in principle”, they “were crushed with draconic severity” (p. 142).

While Browning is appreciative of recent regional studies by German scholars [5] that stress the importance of local initiatives, he maintains his well-known viewpoint that it is really the interaction between local and central authorities that is key to understanding how the Final Solution evolved. Hence Browning reaffirms in this lecture his position combining intentionalist and functionalist reasonings, and again he does so very convincingly. His almost awesome command of primary sources serves to show that the arguments of either school are best put to use not to refute each other but to arrive at a synthesis—a synthesis, however, that acknowledges the center’s preponderance in the decision-making process.

The final lecture addresses the issue which is at the heart of Browning’s study of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 [6]—the motivation, mind-set, and behavior of ordinary Germans involved in the Final Solution. Against the backdrop of his findings in that study, Browning in this chapter looks at three specific instances of racial persecution, and he does so by drawing on new evidence from four rather different sources: eyewitness accounts by Jewish survivors; the records of the *Schutzpolizei* station of Czeladz in East Upper Silesia; the letters of a member of Reserve Police Battalion 105 in the Baltic; and the records of a German wartime investigation of an unplanned massacre of the Jews of Marcinkance in the Bialystok district in November 1942 (p. 145). Again it is the combination of both victims’ and perpetrators’ perspectives, and the reliance on both survivors’ memories and documentary facts that add significantly to the quality of this chapter. In particular, Browning’s detailed account (pp. 159-167) of the official investigation of the unplanned massacre at Marcinkance yields interesting information: 17 Germans had been assigned the

task to clear the ghetto which resulted in the unplanned killing of some 100 Jews and the escape of approximately the same number, of whom 45 survived the war, and of those 17 Germans, only four (two career policemen, a customs official, and a railway man) joined in the hunt for the escaped Jews. According to the documentary evidence available, they were “all Nazi Party members and avowed anti-Semites” (p. 166). No reserve policeman joined them. On the morning of the ghetto clearance one German committed suicide, and following the action one German lodged an official protest triggering the official investigation. Browning compares this with a Jewish survivor’s account of the behaviour of a German Gendarmerie unit in Mir (Byelorussia) which paints a rather similar picture (pp. 150-154). While Browning acknowledges that the empirical basis is very small, he nevertheless ventures to infer the following: there was a “significant core of eager and enthusiastic killers [...] who required no process of gradual brutalization to accustom themselves to their murderous task” (p.166). At the same time, the evidence pertaining to Mir and Marcinkance does not indicate “any transformation over time into eager killers”. And finally, among both groups there was “a significant minority of men who did not participate in the shooting of Jews” and who faced no disciplinary consequences for their abstention (p. 167). Only when non-participation turned into protest (lodging the official complaint) did tensions arise within the unit and was disciplinary action taken.

In a way, these new case studies at the micro level support Browning’s own findings in the previous chapter with regard to initiatives taken at local and regional level. Anything that challenged the regime’s policy in principle was met with draconic severity. Apparently, this also applied to the individual behaviour of ordinary Germans. Unfortunately, so Browning concludes his final lecture, “the presence of a minority of men who sought not to participate in the regime’s racial killing had no measurable effect whatsoever” (p. 169).

At the same time, however, these new case studies also require Browning to modify one of the conclusions he drew in *Ordinary Men*. While he sees his original findings with regard to those Germans that sought to abstain from the actual killings supported (i.e. that they were a small minority of some 10-20 per cent), his assessment of the so-called “eager killers” needs to be revised. They were actually a “significant minority, not a majority, and some were transformed by the situation in which they found themselves. But, many of them were ideologically motivated men ready to kill Jews and other so-called enemies of the Reich from the start” (p. 175). Browning thus

goes some way to bridging the gap between his earlier position and the findings of Omer Bartov who stresses the importance of ideological motivation [7]. Nevertheless, with regard to the relative majority of men in the German Order Police, Browning maintains that they “complied with the policies of the regime more out of situational and organizational rather than ideological factors” (p. 169).

Together, these lectures are the best introduction to current issues in serious Holocaust Studies available at the moment. I would highly recommend the book to any student or scholar looking for a succinct summary and critical discussion of the state of knowledge in this field.

And yet, as it is the case with many studies in the behavior and motivation of genocidal killers, the reader is eventually left pondering the basic question: how could these men do it? (There were only very few female perpetrators). The rational sociological and psychological explanations we academics have to offer, as concise, analytical, and convincing as they are, answer that question but partly. Put another way: how can we ultimately explain the (crucial) difference in behaviour between the small minority that evaded participation in the killings and those that did not? Or between those that (merely) evaded participation and the one German at Marcinkance that committed suicide rather than become part of the ghetto-clearing squad? Is it ultimately possible to explain these differences in behavior without attributing them to a fundamental choice made by the individual human being between good and evil? This question was put to the participants of a recent conference on the role of the Security Service in the Nazi regime by Yacoov Lozowick [8]. The assembled experts on the Security Service found it a difficult one to answer.

Notes:

[1]. Theodor Dannecker, memorandum dated 21 Jan-

uary 1941. Cf. p. 20.

[2]. Christian Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews”, *Journal of Modern History*. 12 (1998), pp. 759-812.

[3]. *Ibid.*, p. 780.

[4]. Christopher R. Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York, 1985).

[5]. He mentions, inter alia, Christian Gerlach’s and Christoph Dieckmann’s articles in *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939-1945: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen*, ed. Ulrich Herbert (Frankfurt, 1998).

[6]. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992).

[7]. Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991).

[8]. “Rolle und Politik des SD im NS-Regime”, Hamburg (Germany), 11-13 Oct 2001. The conference was organized by Michael Wildt on behalf of the Hamburger Institut fuer Sozialforschung. The proceedings of this conference will be published by Hamburger Edition. See also Jaacov Lozowick’s forthcoming book (together with Haim Watzmann), *Hitler’s Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil* (Continuum Pub. Group, due out March 2002; ISBN: 0826457118).

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