

Guenter Lewy. *Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 208 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-066113-7.

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Over seventy years have passed since the liberation of the notorious Nazi concentration and extermination camp at Auschwitz by the Russian army in January 1945. Yet, even today, the German state continues to convict and sentence former SS guards who served at Auschwitz—a symbol of the Holocaust—despite the advanced age and declining health of both perpetrators and witnesses. Has Germany always demonstrated the political will to try such perpetrators, decades after the commission of the acts? What about the uniformity of sentences imposed? In an insightful new work, Guenter Lewy examines these key questions as well as others, focusing specifically on the perpetrators—their crimes, their motivations, and justice received. His book, while a difficult read, makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust.

As one can perhaps surmise by its title, *Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers* is a grim and unrelenting work, which, like most of its predecessors, spares no detail in order to illuminate the horrific acts associated with facilitators of the Holocaust at the ground level. The author writes, “Much of the book, unfortunately, reads like a catalogue of horrors” (p. viii). Thus, the focus of Lewy’s book is on the killers themselves, as opposed to bureaucrats or staff members who enabled the Holocaust from a distance, avoiding

close contact with the victims. It is in the tradition of earlier works, among them Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996), and Saul Friedlander’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination* (2007), the second of a two-part history. Each of these describes in graphic detail the nature of the perpetrators’ roles, and each draws its own conclusion as to what motivated the killers. Lewy follows suit in *Perpetrators*.

The author brings several unique perspectives to his survey of Holocaust perpetrators. He witnessed Kristallnacht as a child and his father survived a short internment at the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp. For Lewy, “taking up the subject of why so many ordinary Germans participated in Nazi crimes was ... of more than theoretical interest. It illuminates a chapter in my personal life that I cannot and should not forget” (p. ix). Lewy is passionate yet objective throughout the book, despite the one-sided nature of his subject matter. Also unique is his source material; the author relies heavily on evidence not previously available in the English language. Most important here are the German court trial records of many of the Nazi functionaries and

perpetrators, particularly those that focus on crimes committed during the years 1939-45. Of course, the German legal system continues to try perpetrators, as mentioned above, so the author also references those trial transcripts. In addition, Lewy includes other non-English-language sources, such as letters from German soldiers assigned in the East to their families back home; diaries; and eyewitness accounts, previously untapped, from Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Collectively, Lewy's sources and personal insight add depth and value to the growing literature focusing specifically on the Holocaust perpetrator perspective.

Perpetrators is organized clearly and logically. Following an introduction that contains a useful survey of the literature to set the context, Lewy divides the book into seven chapters. The first four analyze categories of killers: concentration camp guards, members of the mobile task force death squads (Einsatzgruppen), and those who served in death camps—those designed specifically to kill rather than “concentrate” Jews and other persons deemed unworthy of life by the Third Reich. Chapter 5 provides valuable insight on what options were available for those who chose not to participate in the killings, and how the chain of command dealt with them. In the penultimate chapter, the longest and perhaps most useful, Lewy effectively describes the inadequacies of postwar judicial systems that resulted in “flawed justice” for the perpetrators as a whole (p. 87). (It is one of Lewy's central arguments and provides the title for this review.) The final chapter provides the author's conclusions as to what motivated “ordinary people” to kill, essentially adding to the conversation established over time by Browning and Goldhagen, among many others.

The strengths of *Perpetrators* are the added depth and breadth the book brings to Holocaust discussions. While descriptions of the atrocities are familiar to specialists, Lewy's use of court records includes eyewitness accounts that convey

a very personal, ground-level view of what transpired. Accounts of participants, victims, and eyewitnesses regarding the mass killings, crimes against women and children (as well as infants), and medical experimentation are particularly devastating, harrowing to read, and difficult to imagine. The author includes accounts of well-known as well as obscure perpetrators, whether members of the SS, the Wehrmacht, or other national contingents who willingly participated in the mass murder of Jews. Collectively, the accounts encapsulate the horrors of the perpetrator world and are perhaps necessary to gain an understanding of the magnitude of the crimes committed on behalf of the Nazi state. They also help to put into context the extent of justice doled out to the perpetrators once put on trial.

This leads to perhaps the book's greatest contribution: Lewy's insights on “flawed justice.” The author shows us that in many cases justice was either not served or served unevenly at best. As an example, Lewy shows that through the year 2005, (West) German authorities had brought charges against 16,704 alleged perpetrators, from an estimated population of well over 100,000 potential killers in the organizations most involved. Of these, only 981 were accused of offenses involving killing, and of that small number only 182 received the maximum sentence—life imprisonment—under German law (pp. 88-89). (Note that Germany abolished the death sentence in 1949; relatively few German courts administered that penalty prior to that time. By comparison, the Allied military tribunals in the western zones of occupation executed a far greater number of convicted perpetrators—approximately 6,500—before 1949.)

Lewy posits a number of reasons for this seemingly dismal record. Among them were the difficulty in finding and trying defendants in the chaos of the immediate postwar period, the ebb and flow of German public opinion that favored perpetrators during much of the Cold War, and

the political-military climate of the Cold War itself. Another reason is the differing legal standards between the Allied military tribunal system and the German civil system; the Allies employed a “common design” framework in which defendants could be charged based on membership in a particular killing organization or assignment at a death camp, regardless of their specific role in the machinery of killing. Most useful are Lewy’s insights into the inner workings of the German court system, with the ebb and flow of judicial rulings, legislative changes, and reaction to public opinion. Lewy characterizes the postwar German judiciary as “tainted” (p. 116). For example, many postwar judges were members of the Nazi Party, and the state retained many of them despite the Allies’ systematic denazification program. Hence, those who escaped justice themselves were sitting in judgment of others. As a result, many judges were sympathetic with defendants, resulting in inconsistent or reduced sentences. Of course, complicating all of this was the political-military atmosphere within Germany, especially with the onset of the Cold War. The Allies, in need of West Germany as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, ceased the aggressive pursuit of war criminals, also resulting in commutations or reduced sentences. In the decades since, with generational changes and shifts in German attitudes, the German state today continues to convict Holocaust killers with marked determination. However, as Lewy notes, the opportunity for future trials is rapidly diminishing with the passage of time.

Finally, the author adds his personal take on what motivated the perpetrators to kill so many innocents, particularly women, children, and infants. Indeed, by simply mentioning the term “ordinary men,” Lewy enters the intellectual fray with the other authors previously mentioned. Lewy, like others before him, argues that “there was no typical perpetrator” (p. 45). He disagrees with Goldhagen’s thesis regarding eliminationist anti-Semitism: “With regard to the *motivational* cause of the Holocaust, for the vast majority of

perpetrators, a monocausal explanation does suffice.”[1] Lewy contends that there is no single explanation for why perpetrators killed, nor was there any single murderous prototype. He recites a litany of potential reasons, then discounts them one by one as singular causes. The author does agree, however, with a number of Browning’s social constructs that existed within such organizations as the Reserve Police Battalion 101, which made it easier for killers to kill, although he would argue that anti-Semitism played a larger role in perpetrator motivation than Browning argues in *Ordinary Men*. (Browning focuses primarily on structural reasons, such as the Nazi indoctrination policy regarding the Jews,[2] rather than any latent anti-Semitism on the part of ordinary Germans, as more critical in motivating perpetrators.) Lewy’s argument is thus nuanced and based on multiple influences, none of which is pre-deterministic: “None of these factors creates causality or dictates a person’s behavior.... There remains an element of personal agency” (p. 136).

Some may question the book’s length; it is only 136 pages, excluding notes and index. Perhaps it could have been published as a chapter or journal article, or made longer with additional depth, evidence, and insight provided by Lewy’s excellent source material. Regardless, the author makes a valuable contribution by providing detail on the perpetrators and by offering his views on what motivated the killers. His embellishment of each chapter with specific court case evidence and/or testimony is particularly noteworthy.

Due to its specialized nature, *Perpetrators* will be of most interest to students of the Holocaust and perhaps not as much to the general reader, who may turn to different sources for a broader portrayal—one focusing beyond the world of the killers themselves. Nevertheless, the book represents the most recent scholarship on these critical topics, and readers will benefit from Lewy’s valuable insights on how the German justice system dealt with perpetrators, a subject still

relevant seventy-two years after the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of World War II.

Notes

[1]. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 379.

[2]. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 184.

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