

Perpetrators of the Holocaust

Document 1) Description of the “Final Solution”

Even though over 1.5 million Jews were murdered at the hands of these mobile killing squads, Heinrich Himmler, director of the Einsatzgruppen, was not entirely satisfied. He noticed the psychological burden that mass shootings placed on his men, and he wanted a more economical way to murder vast numbers of Jews. At the Wannsee Conference he was able to develop a plan that addressed his concerns. Through planning an efficient, systemic method of “extermination,” the murder of Jews would now be carried out according to rules and regulations, by clerks, administrators, guards, and other employees. One administrator involved in assigning Jews to concentration camps described his role, and the role of other bureaucrats like him as, “just little cogs in a huge machine.”

Thus, the Wannsee Conference was significant not because it started the Holocaust, but mainly because it transferred most of the responsibility of the “Final Solution” from the military over to the bureaucrats. In addition to the leadership of the Nazi Party, many “ordinary” workers were needed to make the system of mass murder function: train conductors, secretaries, guards, cooks, etc. Journalist Bernt Engelmann wrote, “girls like my cousin Gudrun, from solid middle class families...sat there with their chic hairdos and pretty white blouses and typed neat lists of the victims—an important service for Fuehrer, Volk, and Vaterland.”

This statement reflects the mindset of many Germans who participated in this genocide. They did not see themselves as murderers; rather, they saw themselves as loyal, effective workers.

Document #2 Explanation of a German professor who lived during the Holocaust

Another way to understand how these small steps played out in the life of ordinary Germans is through the work of an American college professor, Milton Mayer. Seven years after World War II, Professor Mayer interviewed German men from a cross-section of society. One of them, a college professor, told Mayer how he responded to the policies of the Nazis from 1933, when they first came to power, until their fall at the end of the war:

“If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes millions, would have been sufficiently shocked—if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in '43 had come immediately after the “German Firm” stickers on the windows of non Jewish shops in '33. But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D.”

“You have accepted things you would not have accepted five years ago, a year ago, things that your father, even in Germany, could not have imagined. Suddenly it all

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comes down, all at once. You see what you are, what you have done, or, more accurately, what you haven't done (for that was all that was required of most of us: that we do nothing). You remember those early meetings of your department in the university when, if one had stood, others would have stood, perhaps, but no one stood. A small matter, a matter of hiring this man or that, and you hired this one rather than that. You remember everything now, and your heart breaks. Too late. You are compromised beyond repair."

Document 3) Story of a police battalion in Poland

Just as daylight was breaking, the men arrived at the village [of Jozefow] and assembled in a half-circle around Major Trapp, who proceeded to give a short speech. With choking voice and tears in his eyes, he visibly fought to control himself as he informed his men that they had received orders to perform a very unpleasant task. These orders were not to his liking either, but they came from above. It might perhaps make their task easier, he told the men, if they remembered that in Germany bombs were falling on the women and children. Two witnesses claimed that Trapp also mentioned that the Jews of this village had supported the partisans. Another witness recalled Trapp's mentioning that the Jews had instigated the boycott against Germany. Trapp then explained to the men that the Jews in Jozefow would have to be rounded up, whereupon the young males were to be selected out for labor and the others shot.

Trapp then made an extraordinary offer to his battalion: if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out. Trapp paused, and after some moments, one man stepped forward. The captain of 3rd company . . . began to berate the man. The major told the captain to hold his tongue. Then ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major.

Trapp then summoned the company commanders and gave them their respective assignments. Two platoons of 3rd company were to surround the village; the men were explicitly ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were to round up the Jews and take them to the market place. Those too sick or frail to walk to the market place, as well as infants and anyone offering resistance or attempting to hide, were to be shot on the spot. Thereafter, a few men of 1st company were to accompany . . . Jews selected at the market place, while the rest were to proceed to the forest to form the firing squads. The Jews were to be loaded onto battalion trucks by 2nd company and shuttled from the market place to the forest.

Having given the company commanders their respective assignments, Trapp spent the rest of the day in town, mostly in a schoolroom converted into his headquarters but also at the homes of the Polish mayor and the local priest. Witnesses who saw him at various times during the day described him as bitterly complaining about the orders he had been given and "weeping like a child." He nevertheless affirmed that "orders were orders" and had to be carried out. Not a single witness recalled seeing him at the

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shooting site, a fact that was not lost on the men, who felt some anger about it. Trapp's driver remembers him saying later, "If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans."

Doc 4) Sonia Weitz, Holocaust survivor, describes her walk to Auschwitz concentration camp:

It was almost Christmastime and brutally cold. I remember that everything was bright. People saw us, but nobody offered help. Some averted their eyes. Others stared through us as though we were not there. Perhaps, in a sense, we were not there. We were no longer in the land of the living.²⁸

Doc 5) Primo Levi, an Italian Jew, describing his first few days in Auschwitz:

Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name....My number is 174517...



Doc 6) Rita Kesselman, Holocaust survivor, describes her experience at Auschwitz:

For three days and three nights, we were taken. Destination unknown. Trains were stopping in villages and train stations, in cities. We were screaming through the windows, "Water, water." We were hungry. . . . I was alone. I didn't have my parents to cuddle up with. I was sitting there by myself. . . . After three days and three nights, we arrived in a big field. And that was Auschwitz. . . . We were told to separate the men from the women. . . . And then, from the younger people were selected people to go to the right and to the left. At the time, we did not know that the people who were selected to go to the right, would live and the rest would die. About one hundred people were picked from the women to go to work. . . . We were made to undress, leave the clothes on one side, and they took us to the other side. Every person was given a tattoo. My

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number was thirty thousand seven hundred seventy-five. . . . Our hair was shaved and we were given striped clothes and wooden shoes. And that was our uniform for the two years I was in Auschwitz. I never bathed. I never saw water. I never had water to drink.³⁰

Doc 7) Heinz Stalp, an eyewitness to the murder of 18,000 Jews on November 3, 1943, at Maidanek concentration camp:

Later on November 3rd there was an operation in which around 18,000 Jews were shot . . . in a large open area near the crematorium. Four big loudspeakers had been set up and played music records—waltzes, popular music, various songs. . . . And these prisoners, these Jews had to stand naked at the edge of the ditch and were shot from behind with two machine guns.³²