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The Accessibility of Atrocity: A Case Study of Responsibility during the Holocaust

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**THE ACCESSIBILITY OF ATROCITY:
A CASE STUDY OF RESPONSIBILITY DURING THE HOLOCAUST**

By

Nate Christiansen

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of History

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Master's Thesis

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Nate Christiansen

June 1st, 2018

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By Nate Christiansen
May 2018

Abstract

Konrad Jarausch was an educated and generally perceptive man with a strong inclination towards humanism. Nonetheless, he aided genocide in Poland and Belarus. Although he did not stand on a firing line or operate a gas chamber, he did abet the callous starvation of tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners. His responsibility for those deaths cannot and should not be dismissed.

He was not, however, a zealot or a sociopath. Though it is no doubt reassuring to think that the Nazis and their acolytes were uniquely evil, that belief is not supported by facts. In reality, the killing was carried forward by ordinary people from all walks of life. Konrad was one among them, and his story gives cause to refigure the stagnant assumptions we hold about the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Contrary to popular portrayal, their brutality did not depend upon any sort of unique rabidity.

Konrad therefore deserves consideration because his example should humble us. His failure to rise above his situation is a familiar human fault. Regardless of the small charities he extended to some prisoners, those gestures could never countervail the pressure of starvation and confinement which weighed upon them, which Konrad helped enforce. Although he felt tremendous angst throughout his service, he never took the daunting steps towards resolving it. Complicity came easier than resistance.

Rather than being called to refuse one clear choice: to murder or not, Konrad acquiesced to a series of small, dooming decisions. His guilt came in increments. As a perpetrator, he served on the very margins of the Holocaust, and his story invites us to reconsider the boundaries of responsibility for atrocity, and the susceptibility of our own societies to its perpetration.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On Christmas day in 1941, half a year after Germany's surprise invasion had knocked the Soviet Union back on its heels, a German camp guard named Konrad Jarausch sought to celebrate the holiday with some of his prisoners. Given how little they had to cheer, Konrad's invitation would have been perverse if not for its apparent sincerity. Of the hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers who had been captured, many had already died from exposure, starvation, or other abuses. They were hardly housed, hardly fed, and hardly cared for by captors who generally preferred to see them dead.

Konrad was a witness and accomplice to their privation, and the letters he left behind offer a vivid record of both the infliction of the intense suffering that defined Nazism, as well as his own persistent faith in God's mercy. As a German soldier and prison guard, Konrad was responsible for the prisoners who still lived. He supervised the kitchens, but even that simple task was steeped in the brutal reality of a war without mercy. Because the Germans so rarely provided enough food to go around, even something as straightforward as feeding prisoners could and did provoke riots.

Konrad lived in abjectly miserable conditions, but they were worse still for the prisoners who did not have the bit of shelter which a poorly insulated barracks provided or enough to eat. In the weeks before Christmas 1941, Konrad recorded temperatures which ranged from barely above freezing to twenty degrees below depending upon the vagaries of the wind. At his posting near Kritschew in Belarus, he rated temperatures between negative twenty and twenty-five degrees below Celsius to be "bearable."¹

¹ Konrad Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice: A Wehrmacht Soldier's Letters from the Eastern Front* ed. Konrad H. Jarausch, trans. Eve Duffy (Princeton University Press, 2011), 207, ProQuest Ebrary.

The prisoners suffered immensely in this cold, and their visible agony affected Konrad deeply. In a letter written to his wife at home, he reflected on the seemingly inexpressible scenes before him. “Now that I have the pencil in my hand,” he wrote, “I find it hard to find the right words. May God have mercy on everything that has happened in the past and that will happen in the future.”¹ Konrad was not well suited to war, and his sincere religiosity restrained him from endorsing Nazism and its ambitions in their entirety. Nonetheless, he felt himself a patriot and did his duty as a soldier as he saw it.

In facing the tension that arose from his sense of duty and the doubt that it fostered, Konrad was caught between his impulse towards Christian love for all mankind and the horrible consequence of Nazi ideology. The latter, he said, was “merely right within narrow limits,” and his enduring hope was that personal faith in Christ would foster “those impulses that are hints of a deeper, inner understanding of the world.”² Even amidst the dreadful effects of Nazi aggression, Konrad sought to understand and celebrate the humanity of the captive men who were slowly starving under his care. His Christmas invitation to his favored prisoners was, therefore, an evocative example of his nature. It typified both his incisive intellect and his amazing naivety such that it seems almost impossible that the two could have existed together within the same man. Because Konrad was neither a zealot nor violent by nature, his incongruities illustrate the tragic absurdities of racism and war.

“As the dark began to settle in,” he wrote, the prisoners cum celebrants arrived at Konrad’s room “freshly washed, their hair combed.” Among them was a translator who communicated Konrad’s speech to his fellows. Because of their condition, Konrad told them that

¹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 198.

² Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 28.

he “didn’t dare wish them a Merry Christmas” but for the sacrificial example of Christ who had “himself lived in absolute poverty and was himself a prisoner just as they were.” In flagrant defiance of the facts of their imprisonment and the ravages that had been visited upon their country, Konrad assured the assembled men that “we Germans didn’t harbor any hatred toward the Russian people.” His wish was only that “we would all return to our homes in the coming years.”³ That Christmas was instead Konrad’s last before he died of typhus. He would never know the son whom he had left at home.

Throughout his service, Konrad was beset by contradiction. Earnest to the point of foolishness, his sense of compassion and his dutifulness undercut each other. The first obliged him to do the best he could see to alleviate the suffering of his prisoners, while the second propelled him to support and enforce the regime from which their suffering grew. He could never quite reconcile that dissonance. Though he set out to do what little good he could as he saw it, his personal struggle to find justice was swallowed whole by the wrongness of the cause he served.

The challenge in Konrad’s story is that he was an apparently compassionate man in a role where his compassion had no practical effect. Of course, his choices were his own. Although the decision to accept barbaric orders or defy them may have been difficult or even seemingly impossible, his actions carry the weight of responsibility regardless. But, because Konrad was neither a cartoonishly evil villain nor a soulless machine that was thoughtlessly carrying out orders, his example calls long standing assumptions about the Holocaust and its perpetrators into stark relief. In that regard, Konrad occupies a liminal space. He did not set policy, and he was not a serial murderer or a fanatic, but he was not an innocent bystander either.

³ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 202-3.

Studying his role in an event that tended to subsume individuals is a chance to reflect upon ourselves. Because there are no answers for the questions that the Holocaust raises that will ever be perfectly satisfying to every individual in every circumstance, enfolding knowledge of it within oneself is and always will be more a process of divination than science. No matter where study of the past might lead us, we would do well to reconsider the conceit that we are fundamentally separated from the events of the Holocaust and cannot replicate them. Among those things that we must question is the assumption that they are without parallel in history, or our own societies. To the contrary, Konrad's story proves that the realization of the Holocaust did not depend upon any sort of unique rabidity among its perpetrators.

As with so many other wartime stories, we know Konrad's through the letters he wrote between the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 until his death in January 1942. Addressed to his wife, friends, and professional acquaintances, they range across topics from theology to the practicalities of life during war. Though we cannot know what Konrad may have omitted, or what was otherwise lost by happenstance or bad luck, the fact that the descriptions of many events and thoughts are repeated across multiple letters to different audiences indicates that his surviving letters are a thorough record of his experience. The collection totals more than 300 letters, about half of which have been reproduced in English translation. The omitted letters primarily concern the "minutiae of the German war machine," and the translated letters were only slightly edited to remove redundancies, formulaic greetings and references to trivial family matters.⁴ Among the preserved letters, none bear censor marks.⁵ Though Konrad sometimes

⁴ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 6-8.

⁵ In written correspondence with Konrad H. Jaraus, he confirmed that his father's letters showed "no censor's marks, only references to potential censorship in the text," October 2017.

retreats to euphemism to describe particularly unpleasant events, he remarks on them nonetheless.

Reading Konrad's letters is an emotional experience because his unsparing descriptions of the pain that Nazism wrought impart a sense of tragedy, which is sometimes lost in official records and reports. That he was writing from the perspective of a perpetrator is also all the more interesting for the fact that he did not count himself as one. Though his excuse making wore thin under the weight of the suffering his prisoners faced, Konrad saw himself as something of a bystander. He convinced himself that things would otherwise be much worse if not for his service. He could not muster the imagination to fully recognize his own guilt or to take the daunting steps towards refusal and resistance.

Outside his wartime writing, there is nothing in Konrad's biography to suggest that he was naturally inclined to brutalize other human beings. Born on December 12, 1900 into a family of shopkeepers, he lived a comfortable life which was not marked by any unusual prejudice. As described by his son who reviewed his father's curriculum vitae, personnel file, a family memoir, and the recollections of friends and colleagues to construct his biography, Konrad trended towards intellectualism throughout his life. He was an especially bright student as a child, and by the age of seven he had enrolled at the Friedrich-Werdersche Gymnasium which was "one of the best classical secondary institutions in Berlin." His ability impressed teachers, so much so that he "was able to skip a grade, helped by special tutoring in writing during the summer." Ever the "valedictorian or salutatorian," Konrad even gave "private lessons in the homes of Jewish families as well as in the house of the painter Lovis Corinth." Deeply religious, he was confirmed at the age of fourteen at Heilandskirche in Moabit, a place where Konrad inculcated a

profoundly Christian worldview and which a school friend would later recall as the site of “intense conversations about religion questions”.⁶

Like so many Germans his age, Konrad’s transition to adulthood was marked by the experience of the First World War. Despite the strict rationing which threatened the prosperity of his family and the disruption caused to his studies by mandatory service, Konrad bore the difficulties of war far easier than many others. Because he was assigned to an artillery unit that was still training when the armistice was signed, he never faced combat as a young man.⁷ Konrad was consequently spared the traumatic experiences that afflicted the psychologically damaged and violent veterans who went on to form the core of the Weimar-era *Freikorps* and Nazi Stormtrooper battalions.

Instead, he returned to a staid life in Berlin to study German literature and history with a minor endorsement in Protestant theology. Moderate success as an academic eventually followed, through which he “involved himself in Protestant pedagogy” in order “to unfold the purity of faith even in the work of the school.”⁸ With professional success came personal triumphs as well. Following a shy romance, Konrad married the love of his life Elisabeth Charlotte after a halting proposal in which he listed his many failings, only to conclude by asking her if she could tolerate them.⁹ Like Konrad, “Lotte” was a woman possessed of substantial intellectual curiosity, and their common convictions formed the basis for their sometimes surprisingly frank war-time correspondence.

⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 14-15.

⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 16.

⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 19.

⁹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 20.

Between the First World War and the Second, Konrad's intelligence and hard work won him a comfortable place in German society. It did not, however, prepare him for the privations and moral quandaries he would later face. As a middle-class intellectual, Konrad also belonged to a strata of society that was not specifically threatened by Nazism. As described by Peter Fritzsche, "Even though a number of educated professionals privately disdained Hitler and his lower-middle-class followers, they supported the broad outlines of the national revolution."¹⁰ This was certainly true for Konrad.

When Nazism did come to power, he celebrated the prospect of a national renewal. He cheered it as a return to a "genuine state" that would put the "individual into the *Volk*." However, his optimism was tempered by concern that fascist dogmatism would bring about the "devastation of the church." His circle of scholarly Lutherans was at once confident that Nazism marked an opportunity to bring conservative values of family and faith to the center of public life while also fearful that the "dishonest" Nazi-sponsored German Christians threatened to "falsify or destroy the gospel." Despite his expressed affinity for the idea of a revitalizing *volkish* ethos, Konrad was nonetheless wary of fanaticism. For one thing, the Nazi directed German Christian movement stood largely in opposition to Konrad's sense of religiosity. As Doris Bergen describes them, the German Christians separated "the earthly church from the universal community of believers" so as to make it "a vehicle for the expression of race and ethnicity." But, in contrast to that distinction, Konrad honored "the fellowship of the holy spirit described in the New Testament," which the German Christians denied.¹¹ Even in the Soviet Union, when interacting with a people whom he had been propagandized to believe were purely bestial,

¹⁰ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 206.

¹¹ Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 12.

Konrad clung to shared religious sentiment as a possible seedling from which a more hopeful future might grow.

Caught between hope for a new future and apprehension about its specific shape, Konrad therefore resolved to work with the Nazi movement but declined to join them formally because he treasured “the claim of [Christian] epiphany” above the “ties of space, race, and people.”¹² Although Konrad could not escape the influence of Nazism in his daily life, he did maintain an identity apart from it. In short, he was the image of an educated and religious man who retained intellectual and social restraints that might have inculcated him against Nazi extremism. Nevertheless, he eventually submitted himself to its dictates.

But why would he? Why would anyone? One can hardly glance towards the human suffering which the Holocaust represents without addressing those questions. Participation in those crimes looms so large as a mythic evil that it can seem impossible to understand. Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, and the now vanished villages across Poland, Belarus and Ukraine were a revelation which continues to provoke enduring questions about the very nature of humanity.

However, such questions are not easily addressed. The Holocaust was simply an event of such enormity that it defies superficial examination. Whatever methods one might typically employ in order to grasp the world, they all wither when weighed against the naked brutality of the murder of so many millions. Placing the Holocaust in history therefore requires more than an austere catalog of names, dates, places and people. As the survivor and memoirist Elie Wiesel wrote, “traditional ideas and acquired values, philosophical systems and social theories -- all

¹² Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 22-23.

must be revised in the shadow of Birkenau.”¹³ Beyond even the human toll which they exacted, the ethicist John Roth notes that the perpetrators of the Holocaust “did enormous harm to ethics by showing how ethical teachings could be overridden, rendered dysfunctional, even subverted to serve the interest of genocide.”¹⁴ Any attempt at coming to terms with the horrors that they inflicted must therefore involve the reconstitution of those same values which normally serve as the anchors by which we orient our understanding of the world, but which were left broken in the wake of genocide.

Consequently, one of the difficulties in approaching the subject is the lingering pain of the tragedy and the discomfort that pursuing answers can provoke. When the war ended, some found the idea of a comprehensive accounting of individual crimes too daunting to face. Even among survivors, there were those who were reluctant to turn back towards the recent past and reflect. Elie Wiesel himself struggled to overcome silence before he could ever put words to paper. Even after he had done so, he recalled how poorly they were received. “If a Rabbi happened to mention the book in his sermon,” he wrote, it would be to “complain that it was senseless ‘to burden our children with the tragedies of the Jewish past.’”¹⁵

Similarly, Sarah Kofman noted the effect of a “double bind” which manifests itself as a “duty to speak infinitely [about the experience of the Holocaust], imposing itself with irrepressible force” coupled by “an almost physical impossibility to speak, a choking feeling.”¹⁶ These “knotted words,” as she describes them, are a product of the emotional weight of the

¹³ Foreword to Harry James Cargas, *Shadows of Auschwitz: A Christian Response to the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), ix.

¹⁴ John K. Roth, *In the Shadow of Birkenau: Ethical Dilemmas during and after the Holocaust* (Washington D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005), 10.

¹⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), xiv.

¹⁶ Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 39.

Holocaust in the memory of anyone who witnessed it, and they can restrain the possibility of even attempting to express or otherwise come to terms with the past.

But, as time passed and a generation that had not personally experienced the war grew into adulthood, silence became less tenable. Konrad's son, a historian himself who shares the same name, speaks to that change in introducing his father's letters. His "missing father," he wrote, "hovered like a phantom over my entire childhood." Among so many of the German war children, the past loomed unforgivably. As the younger Jarausch recalled, "instead of being proud of their relatives and emotionally close to them," many children of his generation felt "personal betrayal and deep embarrassment."¹⁷

It was even more difficult, he said, for those like himself with absent fathers. Their "retrospective encounters with ... missing progenitors create a double challenge" in which one must not only discover the "unsavory actions of a parent in the Third Reich," but then also deal "with one's own subsequent reaction." The latter part complicated by the fact that "a missing father cannot be interrogated and confronted." As was typical of many Germans his age, the younger Jarausch found that "instead of admiring my father, I came to see him as part of the problem." The determination to stand apart from a shameful national legacy created a "skeptical generation" which he counts himself a part of.¹⁸

In much the same spirit that survivors and their children have struggled to reconcile themselves to the memory of torment, the children of perpetrators have been pressed to confront the memory of its infliction. In West Germany, the result of their effort was "generational revolt" during the 1960s. For his part, the younger Jarausch sought a complete separation from his

¹⁷ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 13-14.

¹⁸ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 34.

familial and national past by immigrating to Wyoming to study. There, he wrote, he “finally breathed more freely.” But, though he found that “the break with tradition was necessary,” it was nonetheless “insufficient since it produced an unstable memory regime.” In his opinion, the “arrogance of youth” caused many Germans, himself included, to “misunderstand how much their rejection was still driven by their personal past.” Understanding, however, demanded a “maturity” that “blurred the sharp edge of condemnation” to allow “a more balanced attitude that combined criticism with sympathy.”¹⁹

It is in the spirit of such difficult revision that the Holocaust makes demands upon the present that few, if any, other historical events can match. Even in the days shortly after the war, the investigators and prosecutors who were tasked by the Allied Powers to make an accounting of Nazism’s crimes faced the difficult task of acting not only as finders of fact, but then also translating the “terrorism into a record that meets the firm tests of an established code of justice.”²⁰ Beyond mere description, their duty was to render Nazism’s horror comprehensible. Now, as then, that same duty continues to drive us. Looming behind every discussion of the Holocaust, no matter how technical, is an insistent need to make sense of it all.

The last is a need which the elder Konrad felt himself, which agonized him at times, and meeting it depends upon far more than a practical understanding of the forces that conspired to produce the Holocaust. It instead requires that we consider how those forces might interact within our own societies now, or in the future. Further, a satisfactory conclusion for one particular person or group at one time could prove entirely inadequate for others.

¹⁹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 34.

²⁰ “Woman will testify on Oswiecim Horrors,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 1945, 7.

Perhaps more so than other events, the history of the Holocaust is therefore subject to constant revision. There are, of course, touchstone events about which every reasonable person will agree. Germany's armed forces fought an aggressive war at the direction of Adolf Hitler, the primary purpose of which was to dominate rival peoples and seize their land. To that end, Germans and their allies systematically murdered some six million Jews and five million other victims besides the many millions more who died in battle or otherwise. To effect this destruction, tens of thousands of Germans individually perpetrated crimes against humanity while tens of thousands more assisted peripherally. The point of revision is not to rewrite those facts. But, facts in isolation do not speak for themselves.

Revision should instead be undertaken in the spirit of advice like that given by the survivor Ruth Klüger. In her own reflections on the intractability of memory and the past, she likened our mental spaces to dusty museums, wherein the furniture and exhibits that constitute our understanding of the world must be periodically rearranged so as to maintain perspective when new information or attitudes are introduced.²¹ From among the innumerable facts that we have cataloged about the Holocaust, the methods by which we order their significance are reflections of our own values. In this way the conclusions we reach can be as much a product of the questions we ask of evidence as of the evidence itself.

Consequently, the most enduring impressions born from the Holocaust are significant precisely because they contradict moral assumptions that we hold about our own societies: namely that people are inculcated against evil, that the average person has neither the desire nor the capacity to murder, and that come what may, there must be some sort of social or

²¹ Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2001), 73.

institutional safeguard that will protect us from such horrors as were visited by Nazism. Relative to those assumptions, the Holocaust demands that we confront intensely personal questions: who were the perpetrators and why did they do what they did?

When we do address ourselves to those questions we would be well served to do so with humility lest we fail to learn from Konrad's example. Although every person will react to the particulars of his story differently and thereby form disparate and often equally justifiable opinions about him, his guilt, and his responsibility, his story is ultimately one of very human failure. Though it is jarring to consider sympathy for perpetrators of such a horrible crime as the Holocaust, our understanding depends upon it. Sympathy is not absolution. By accepting it as a valid emotion, we can break past those conceits that Ruth Klüger disparaged for blocking constructive engagement with a painful past.

The point of examining a perpetrator's perspective of the Holocaust is not to seek exoneration. Rather, a nuanced view of Konrad's experience allows us to acknowledge the way in which systemic violence blurred the lines of responsibility and choice so that we can better guard our own societies from similar failures.

Ultimately, the lesson that Konrad's experience offers speaks to the impermanence of human resolution. He was an intellectual yet otherwise ordinary man; thoughtful, perceptive and articulate. His religiosity prompted him to see the humanity of his enemies, and to offer charity to them. He also beat them as they starved. That dichotomy is shocking, but also extremely ordinary. The reality of atrocity is that it exists only to the degree that ordinary people acquiesce to it. It does not occupy a separate plane of human experience which is confined to the deranged imaginings of villains. Though we have long since resolved to never again commit past mistakes,

if we fail to confront those mistakes as anything but the work of an abstract and unknowable evil, we will only make their repetition more likely.

Konrad should therefore stand as a reminder, and a check upon our own arrogance. If we think of the Holocaust only as the work of some people some place sometime in the distant past, then we have failed to understand it. Konrad's story proves that those people could as easily be us, today.

Chapter 2: Historiography and Consequence

The Second World War shattered Europe. The fighting touched not only the landscape and cities, but the people as well, and the very soul of what had been assumed to be the bright light of Western civilization. As the full extent of Nazi brutality became apparent with each newly liberated camp or prison, people acted intuitively to document the reality of what they found in order to bear witness to it. That effort has since been marked by the persistent difficulty of comprehending the facts of the Holocaust in order to articulate their significance. Though the victorious armies stopped the killing, might of arms alone could not resolve the many wounds which lingered. The Holocaust had been ended, but it was not finished.

Justice Robert H. Jackson acknowledged as much when he convened the American prosecution at Nuremberg on November 21, 1945 as an early attempt at responding to the Holocaust. “The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish,” he said, “have been so calculated, so malignant and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated.” Though no tribunal had ever before been assembled to judge such crimes, Justice Jackson insisted that “the common sense of mankind demands that law shall not stop with the punishment of petty crimes by little people.”¹ His aim was to discredit Nazism as a whole by proving the infamy of its leadership.

However, significant as those trials were, they were also wholly insufficient. Only a minority of perpetrators ever faced justice such as was dispensed there. Although the Nuremberg defendants were certainly among those who were most responsible for directing the weight of

¹ Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression: Volume I* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 114.

Nazism's genocidal effort, their directives would have been for naught if not for the many tens of thousands of functionaries, soldiers and civilians who aided them. However, the latter group lay outside the scope of the Nuremberg prosecution and their participation was not well understood at the time.

Justice Jackson in fact offered conciliation to the German people whom he portrayed as the first victims of Nazism. "[They] should know by now that the people of the United States hold them in no fear, and in no hate," he said. "We know that the Nazi Party was not put in power by a majority of the German vote ... if the German populace had willingly accepted the Nazi program, no Storm-troopers would have been needed."² His was a point made in good faith, but it nonetheless overlooked the broad culpability of German society.

He was even aware that he might make such mistakes. Admitting to the limited but still exhausting scope of his inquiry, he noted that "I should be the last to deny that the case may well suffer from incomplete researches." Though he defended it as "a completely adequate case to the judgement we shall ask [the Court] to render," he nonetheless conceded that "its full development we shall be obliged to leave to historians."³

Where then have historians led us? As Alon Confino notes, the Holocaust is quite likely the most written about subject in history. By his estimation, "a standard bibliography of National Socialism listed twenty-five thousand titles in 1995 and a whopping thirty-seven thousand in 2000."⁴ This research has largely established the facts of who, what, and how. Using railroad

² *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, 118.

³ *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, 116.

⁴ Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 19.

timetables, diaries, interviews, and much more, historians have tracked how victims were identified, separated, and killed or imprisoned. They have shown how killing squads were organized, supplied and dispatched. They have analyzed censuses, vanished villages and neighborhoods, and the Nazi's own records to determine who the victims were and to estimate how many perished. They have considered investigative records and testimony to understand who the perpetrators were, and where they were drawn from.

But, even these bare facts can carry controversy. The sheer volume of documentation can be overwhelming if not outright obfuscating and, regardless of the wealth of factual information that historians have developed, small differences in interpretation continue to kindle strident disagreement. Should one, for example, refer to the people of Nazi Germany as "Nazis" or as "Germans?" Some think the former is too attenuating, as if Hitler's supporters were not "real Germans," while others believe that the latter wrongly suggests that all Germans were supporters of Hitler's ambitions.⁵ Either reading implicates material ideas about guilt and responsibility. Similarly, while it is true that the large majority of perpetrators were Germans, they were not exclusively so. Though the Holocaust was fundamentally a German project, it was also supported by Germany's allies and even collaborators among subject population.

Examining that aspect, however, can risk severe reproach. When Jan Grabowski described the on-the-ground role that some Polish collaborators played in identifying and then betraying Jews to the Nazis, he faced death threats, accusations of sympathy for Nazism, and more.⁶ Similarly, the Polish government considered withdrawing Jan Tomasz Gross' previously

⁵ Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 2-3.

⁶ The Associated Press, "Facing Death Threats for Highlighting Poland's Role in Holocaust, Historians Come to Scholar's Defense," *Haaretz*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/historians-defend-scholar-who-studies-poland-and-holocaust-1.5486593>.

awarded Order of Merit after he remarked on the degree of Polish complicity in the Holocaust.⁷ That particular insecurity about unflattering historical facts has even culminated in legislation to criminalize some mentions of Polish participation in the Holocaust.⁸

Controversies of that sort are sustained in part because historical claims about the Holocaust often double as moral claims. There is a popular but reductive belief that victim and victimizer are wholly separable categories. Whereas victims are commonly lionized as pure innocents who died as martyrs without any of the complications or messiness that otherwise infect reality, perpetrators are portrayed as having been animated by inhuman malevolence which was inherent to their being. Under these rigid constructions, entire groups of people are held to be only one thing or the other, and a claim against some part of a group can be misinterpreted as an attack upon the whole.⁹ The myths create a simplistic recursion in which the moral qualities of good and bad are attached to broad narratives of victimization, such that historical criticism which threatens to blur those lines can be mistaken as a sort of denial of the suffering which so many victimized peoples endured.

This sensitivity is not exclusive to histories about perpetrators either. The boundaries that have been drawn around who is and who is not a victim of the Holocaust are also a point of sometimes contentious dispute. Clearly, Jews were the particular target of Nazi vitriol. Much of the organizing impetus for the Holocaust was oriented towards them. Even so, they were not Nazism's only victims. In fact, disabled persons were the first to be targeted for organized mass-

⁷ Alex Duval Smith, "Polish move to strip Holocaust expert of award sparks protests," *The Guardian*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/14/academics-defend-historian-over-polish-jew-killings-claims>. and Anna Bikont, "Jan Gross' Order of Merit," *Tablet Magazine*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/198490/jan-gross-order-of-merit>.

⁸ Marc Santora, "Poland's President Supports Making Some Holocaust Statement's a Crime," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/world/europe/poland-holocaust-law.html>.

⁹ Klüger, *Still Alive*, 68.

killing, and the particular methods which were made infamous in the death camps were first tested against Soviet prisoners of war. The Roma and Sinti were similarly stereotyped by hateful racial rhetoric.

Were these groups all victims of a shared, single event, or was each category of murder a particular expression of distinct hatred? Does it matter whether we define the Holocaust to include only Jews, or Jews and others? Why does it matter? Yehuda Bauer, in an essay reflecting on what he sees to be an inappropriate mystification of the Holocaust, offered a perspective that is shared by many. He defined the Holocaust as uniquely and exclusively Jewish, and thereby distinguished it from other genocides. He was not callous in drawing this distinction, but he nonetheless consciously excepted Soviets, Poles, Lithuanians and others who were also murdered. The difference, he said, was that the “Jews in the Nazi world ... had been singled out for total destruction. Not because of their views or their religion, their age or their sex, but simply because they had been born of three Jewish grandparents.” Their persecution was unique, he wrote, because “a sentence of death had been pronounced on anyone guilty of having been born, and born of certain parents.”¹⁰

But, is that in fact unique to the Jews? How could a Pole or a Soviet have avoided Nazi persecution but by having been differently born? Bauer acknowledges and address this objection. There was a difference, he wrote, between the total annihilation of a people as he defines the Jewish Holocaust, and a genocide which might reserve some small portion of a people to continue as slaves. In summary, he said, “there are gradations of evil,” and he argued that the

¹⁰ Yehuda Bauer, “Against Mystification: The Holocaust as a Historical Phenomenon,” in *Perspectives on the Holocaust*, ed. Michael R. Marrus (Meckler: Westport, 1989), 98-9.

Jewish Holocaust was defined by an epochal evil such that it cannot be regarded as “just another case of man’s inhumanity to man.”¹¹

Although the Holocaust was distinct, it was not incomparable. Humans are consistently capable of enormous and repeated cruelty. It is not terribly useful to take a fine comb to the particular victimization of one group or another in the hope of finding meaning among the grains. The Nazis exceeded a threshold of harm which, once reached, renders any further tallying pointlessly morbid. There is no lesson in the trivial difference of motive that defined whether one should be enslaved and then killed or simply killed outright. For one thing, such abstract distinctions mattered naught to victim or perpetrator. Their days were ruled by violence, not arcane philosophy. Furthermore, Nazism’s genocidal policies were hardly rigorous. Though they were no less brutal for that, they were nonetheless changeable according to caprice and circumstance. The main consistency was the conviction that Germans would one day dominate the entire world at the expense of all others.

So, whereas Yehuda Bauer defines the Holocaust by the attempted “total physical annihilation” of the Jewish people,¹² I include the sum of Nazism’s racially motivated and apocalyptic violence in my understanding of the term. Bauer’s point is not taken poorly, as there is evidence enough to support many reasonable interpretations. Articulating these nuances is difficult precisely because they go beyond the broad facts of the violence towards the more fundamental issue of how to weigh one element against another.

In Konrad’s case, he helped to supervise the starvation of Soviet prisoners and was clearly conversant with the racist ideas that also motivated violence against Jews. As will be

¹¹ Bauer, “Against Mystification,” 104-5.

¹² Bauer, “Against Mystification,” 106.

shown in this essay, there is good cause to conflate the two. Ultimately though, the way in which different facets of Nazi atrocity are distinguished may simply be a matter where thoughtful people disagree. But, in debating these issues historians absolutely must not presume any sort of hierarchy of suffering, as if the legitimacy of one group or another's pain depends upon weighing the specific evils inflicted against them. It is similarly ghoulish to approach these histories as if there is anything to be gained or lost except a better understanding of the past and ourselves.

Because it is not possible to address every aspect of the Holocaust, this historiography therefore concerns itself only with those histories which are most pertinent to Konrad's experience. They are those which have directly addressed who the perpetrators were, and why they acted as they did. In that regard, some of the most important scholarship has been that which has shown that the raw violence of the Holocaust sprawled across a far broader swath of society than had been previously assumed.

Far from being the exclusive domain of practiced killers, Christopher Browning has instead proven that the Holocaust was actually the work of ordinary Germans who would be indistinguishable if not for the fact that they took part in atrocity. Contrary to the idea that the great mass of German soldiers were committed Nazis who were but chaffing for the opportunity to kill, Browning instead proved that the men who were called upon to do so were in fact those who "were least likely to be considered apt material out of which to mold future mass killers."¹³

To prove that, he examined records of post-war interrogations in order to profile the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101. That battalion was a rear-echelon unit which was recruited from

¹³ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 164.

the city of Hamburg and deployed in the execution of the Holocaust in an ad-hoc fashion. Browning argues that those men who were employed at the point of action, where rhetoric met reality in actual killing, were not selected by any sort of “careful choosing of personnel particularly suited for mass murder.” In fact, he writes that “by age, geographical origin, and social background,” the soldiers who provided the manpower which enabled Nazism’s annihilatory ideation were generally unremarkable. They were assigned the task of murder simply because they were “the only kind of unit available for such behind-the-lines duties,” and not because they were “specially selected or deemed particularly suited” to it.¹⁴

Of course there were some, perhaps even many, perpetrators who were fundamentally satisfied or even excited by killing. Oskar Dirlewanger comes to mind as loathsome proof of that fact.¹⁵ But, even their example contradicts what Alon Confino notes to be the “common view of the persecution and extermination of the Jews as a cold, administrative, industrial process.” Although perpetrators sometimes pretended to detachment, Confino argues that “the denial of emotion was a mechanism to deal with feelings of moral unease, transgression, guilt, or shame.”¹⁶ The Holocaust was in fact written in the strongest emotions imaginable.

This is especially true of Konrad. His letters reveal a man whose conscience was extremely burdened by his own action and inaction. Though he strove at times to wrinkle out some kernel of hope for the future, he was often lost to despair. Biographically, he was also very similar to the men who populated Reserve Police Battalion 101. As an older reservist like them, Konrad was not fit for duty on the frontline. Though he was distinguished by class, in that only a

¹⁴ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 164-5.

¹⁵ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 241-2.

¹⁶ Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 19.

handful of the rank and file whom Browning reviewed were middle class professionals, they had all come to age in an era before Nazism and had therefore formed political and moral identities independent of its influence.¹⁷ Like the selection of the men who made up Reserve Police Battalion 101, Konrad's assignment to guard starving Soviet prisoners was a matter of chance rather than deliberate policy.

But, besides his general similarity to the men whom Browning wrote about, Konrad's story is distinguished in a number of important ways. For one thing, Konrad's prisoners were not Jewish. Though many Jews served in the Soviet army, they were typically separated from other captives and killed immediately or nearly so.¹⁸ Konrad was in fact a witness to these selections, and may have aided them, though he does not record his specific level of involvement. Regardless, the difference is significant because many histories of the Holocaust have focused on Jewish victims and explained Nazi violence as if antisemitism was an exclusive or at least determinative motive. Such explanations are insufficient for Konrad.

It is also unknown whether Konrad ever shot someone personally. His proximity to murder may therefore have been far more impersonal than the experience of the men who formed firing squads. In that sense, he is most comparable to the reservists who were tasked to form cordons around a massacre site, or were responsible for rounding up victims. What's tricky though, is that those roles were never absolute. Soldiers would do one thing one day, and another

¹⁷ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 45-48.

¹⁸ General Hermann Reinecke was responsible for the Wehrmacht's prisoner of war policy. Three weeks after the invasion of the Soviet Union he concluded an agreement with the SS that they would "sort out [kill] ... politically and racially intolerable elements" among captured Soviets. Christian Streit, "The Fate of the Soviet Prisoners of War" in *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis*, ed. Michael Berenbaum (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 146.

the next. Furthermore, each element supported the other, such that the killing squads could never have functioned without the assistance of the men who found and contained the victims.¹⁹

Raul Hilberg once wrote that the Holocaust saw “a variety of perpetrators, a multitude of victims, and a host of bystanders.” They were three groups, he said, that were distinct from each other. But, as he nodded towards himself, those groups were not always easily divisible. Take, for example, the leaders of the Jewish ghetto in Lodz. They made the horribly mistaken decision to ask their fellows to surrender their children to the Nazis, from the hope that it might save more lives. In the end, they were killed regardless. They were victims of the Holocaust, but victimizers as well, of other Jews.

That is an exceptional circumstance, but it points to the difficulty of drawing clear distinctions across an event that was so devoid of reason as the Holocaust. The line between bystander and perpetrator was also mutable, as Hilberg acknowledges. Because Nazism’s crimes were not impulsive or individual actions, but rather were the product of systematic genocidal effort, their execution implicated soldiers and even civilians who might never have stepped out upon a killing field or lifted a gun in anger.

Hilberg’s definition of a perpetrator is therefore both too expansive and too constrained. He said that they were those people “who played a specific role in the formulation or implementation of anti-Jewish measures,” who generally “understood his function” and “ascribed it to his position and duties.”²⁰ But, as Konrad’s example shows, many Germans did not play any specific role and did not necessarily understand their function, though perhaps they

¹⁹ As Christopher Browning points out, “the personnel of the death camps was quite minimal. But the manpower needed to clear the smaller ghettos -- to round up and either deport or shoot the bulk of Polish Jewry -- was not.” Browning, *Ordinary Men*, xvi.

²⁰ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), ix.

should have, but still contributed to the overall mechanics of killing. The group might include a farmer or factory manager who took advantage of slave labor from a nearby concentration camp. It could be that they were individually decent to their slaves. Were they a perpetrator or bystander? By Hilberg's definition, it is not clear.

Conversely, Hilberg disdains the example of a German officer named Lechthaler who, he writes, "was troubled enough to want to walk away from the [killing] operation. His pangs of conscience, however, were not so severe as to cause him to revolt. He completed the assignment, leaving flames and corpses, including those of children, behind him."²¹ Clearly, Lechthaler bears substantial responsibility as a perpetrator. But, what would Hilberg make of the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101 who refused to shoot prisoners but were then reassigned to corral them? Or, how would Hilberg categorize Konrad who helped confine prisoners who were destined to die but naively hoped that they might not? Again, neither example fits cleanly into his definition.

To point out that Konrad was likely a step away from the actual act of killing does not excuse him. Though the tangible experience of shooting someone and watching them starve is distinguishable, the end is the same. Instead, Konrad's example is historically and morally interesting because it further challenges us to reconsider the boundaries of responsibility for atrocity, and the susceptibility of our own societies to its perpetration. It is easy to fantasize refusing one large, stark choice: to shoot someone or not, but it is more difficult to guess how anyone might react when faced with a series of small, dooming choices such as those Konrad made. Following from Browning's work, Konrad's example is also important for further illustrating how many soldiers had little opportunity to conceptualize or plan what they would be

²¹ Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, 64.

asked to do before they were asked to do it. Though Hitler's prejudices were apparent from the start, no German could have predicted the specific horrors which he would later demand of them. Nonetheless, average and seemingly well-adjusted Germans like Konrad showed themselves to be willing to aid in the carnage without substantial preparation or indoctrination.

It's that fact which strikes to the heart of one of the most daunting questions raised by the Holocaust. If these men showed no prior inclination for murder, why did they do it? Why would ordinary people commit such extraordinary acts?

One possibility is that the killers were in fact nearly universally satisfied by their acts. So argues Daniel Goldhagen, who stipulates that German perpetrators did not need to be specially selected or conditioned for genocide because they were already naturally suited to it. To his mind, the fundamental misrepresentation that colors popular knowledge of Nazi crimes is an erroneous assumption that "Germans were more or less like us or, rather similar to how we represent ourselves to be: rational, sober children of the Enlightenment."²² Because he does not believe they were, participation in the Holocaust is therefore explained simply as an expression of uniquely German antisemitism.

Theirs was a brand of hatred, Goldhagen argues, which "governed the ideational life of civil society in Germany, predating even Nazism."²³ In somewhat Orwellian terms, the massacre of Jews is taken as the expression of a simultaneously personal and endemic German desire *to* massacre Jews. As Goldhagen puts it, by "choosing not to excuse themselves from the genocide of the Jews, the Germans in police battalions themselves indicated that they wanted to be

²² Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 27.

²³ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 106.

genocidal executioners.”²⁴ Ultimately, he argues, the “comprehension and explanation of the perpetration of the Holocaust” requires prima facie acceptance of “the *Germans*’ drive to kill Jews.”²⁵

But, the problem with attributing participation in mass murder to a single all-encompassing and socially pervasive phenomenon as Goldhagen has done, is that such an explanation diminishes the agency of individuals. It could as easily be said that Germans killed Jews simply because they were evil. Of course antisemitism was essential to the realization of the Holocaust, and of course perpetrators trafficked in antisemitic ideas, but to claim that their actions are completely explained by a single aspect of their personality is to ignore the far greater human ability to rationalize behavior, compartmentalize beliefs, and ignore any information which threatens to foster doubt. Goldhagen’s thesis cannot explain Konrad’s emotional angst.

Rather than treating Nazi Germany as fundamentally different from all other contemporary societies, such that it was uniquely capable of perpetrating the Holocaust, Christopher Browning counters that the “fundamental problem” of understanding perpetrators is not the difficulty of explaining why “ordinary Germans” were “people utterly different from us.” Instead, he says, it is necessary to acknowledge their ordinariness so as to uncover why anyone “under specific circumstances” might transform into willing killers.²⁶

Certainly, some perpetrators were more eager than others. For them, Nazism’s racial ideology amounted to an invitation to enter an alien ethical world. Their maxim did not oblige the individual to do good independent of duty. Rather, moral good was achieved through the fulfillment of individual duty, no matter how that was defined. As far as they were concerned,

²⁴ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 279.

²⁵ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 6. Emphasis his.

²⁶ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 222.

their only duty was to their Führer and their race, and goodness followed from the same.²⁷

Because they embraced that maxim without apparent reservation, those men represent the hardest edge of the Nazi movement. They were the ones who, given situational license, indulged brutality and arbitrariness of their own initiative. They were also, however, a minority.

By contrast, Konrad's Lutheran beliefs restrained him from fully subordinating his ethical sense to the dictates of the state. As Christopher Browning summarizes, the "spectrum of behavior" observed among perpetrators ranged from a nucleus of not more than a third who were "increasingly enthusiastic killers," through the larger group who resembled Konrad, who would obey orders while also occasionally subverting them, onto the remaining minority who either evaded or refused the orders entirely.²⁸ Whereas a true believer may have accepted murdering Jews or others as justified in all circumstances, the participation of those who acted without extraordinary conviction requires more explanation.

Naturally, the especially virulent racism promulgated by the Nazi party was one factor which hugely influenced the specific circumstances in which German perpetrators were called to act. As Eugen Weber argues, "Before the Jews could be isolated and exterminated, they had to be divested of the human qualities which emancipation and liberalism had endowed them like other members of modern societies."²⁹ Racism was therefore fundamental to the Holocaust in the

²⁷ Despite his supervisory role as an organizer of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann is infamous for claiming to have lived by Kantian moral principles, and Hans Frank bastardized the same when he expressed the belief that one should always "act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew of your action, would approve it." Further, even though Rudolf Höss claimed to have felt pity for his victims, when he was asked how it was possible for him to kill them anyway he replied that "in view of all these doubts which I had, the only one and decisive argument was the strict order and the reason given for it by the Reichsführer Himmler. If it is not carried out now then the Jews will later on destroy the German people." Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 136. and "Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Volume 11," in The Avalon Project, accessed November 26th, 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/04-15-46.asp>.

²⁸ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 168.

²⁹ Eugen Weber "Jews, Antisemitism, and the Origins of the Holocaust," in *The Nazi Holocaust: Historical Articles on the Destruction of European Jews*, ed. by Michael R. Marrus (London: Meckler, 1989), 176.

sense that it was the mechanism through which the killing was first envisioned and then articulated. As Alon Confino argues, the rhetoric levied against Jews served both a practical and ideological purpose. It not only isolated Jews and deprived them of the sympathy of their fellows, but it also built up an imaginative world of mystical evil, such that the taint of Judaism could be attached as a black mark against any target that fell afoul of Nazism's gaze.³⁰

Whereas ideological antisemitism gave purpose to Nazism's planned massacres, it was not necessarily the primary motivation for every perpetrator. In Konrad's case, his behavior towards his prisoners as well as the musings he included in his letters home reveal that, although he did express racist ideas about Jews, Poles and Russians, he clearly distinguished each group from the other, and from Bolshevism. He also often took pains to see past stereotypes in an attempt to understand the humanity of the people whom he encountered. As he wrote during the depths of Russian winter, "Genuine humanity between peoples and races is necessary if a better world is to arise from the excess of blood and destruction."³¹ Although racism was foundational to the Holocaust in the sense that its expression provided the schema through which the annihilation of entire peoples was first imagined as a possibility, for perpetrators like Konrad its strength was not such that it could be described as a sole or sufficient motivation.

Konrad's particular deployment as a prison guard well to the rear of the most serious fighting also distinguishes him from explanations which suggest that atrocious violence correlates primarily with situational brutality. One such is John Dower's study of American soldiers and their descent into merciless war in the Pacific. Therein he argues that repeated killing depends upon a "psychological distancing" which is aided "immeasurably" by the

³⁰ Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 5, 15 and 20.

³¹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 36.

techniques of propaganda which dehumanize the enemy so that they are regarded as little more than a soulless alien.³² In the case of the German army on the Eastern Front, Omer Bartov has shown that such distancing was a factor on the frontlines where “the long years of bitter fighting... the tremendous casualties, physical hardship and mental strain experienced by the troops, all certainly played an important role in ... blunting [the individual’s] sensitivity to moral and ethical issues.”³³

However, Konrad had no equivalent experience. Although his deployment was hardly luxurious, he was spared the worse experiences which Bartov identified as moral dampeners. A camp guard simply experienced the war very differently than a soldier on the front lines. Konrad also died towards the beginning of the war against the Soviet Union and therefore missed the long years of grueling retreats and bitter winters which Bartov argued influenced average soldiers to embrace Nazism more whole-heartedly.³⁴ Konrad also seems to have avoided the anti-partisan duties³⁵ which were required of other similarly situated men. Furthermore, the killing of non-combatants in camps, in villages and in fields cannot be conflated with degrading conditions at the front because the majority of victims of the Holocaust were killed within the first two years of war when German morale and optimism was still high.

Konrad’s own attachment to universalizing Christian ideals in particular restrained him from fully embracing the ethical relativism which was embodied by more enthusiastic

³² John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 11.

³³ Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1985), 35-36.

³⁴ Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-45*, 90.

³⁵ Anti-partisan is an imperfect description. Although the security divisions to which Konrad’s unit belonged were ostensibly tasked to combat insurgency, the reality of their method was that they simply killed whoever they found in whatever area had been troublesome most recently. When Hitler heard that Stalin had given the order for partisan warfare, he actually cheered the news, saying that “it gives us the opportunity to exterminate anyone who is hostile to us. Naturally the vast area must be pacified as quickly as possible; this will happen best through shooting anyone who even looks askance at us.” Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 10.

perpetrators or situational apathy. He therefore stands apart from the theories which attribute German participation in the Holocaust to a dulled moral sense -- arisen either from racism or the conditions of war. Though he too was searching for meaning in a land which he hardly recognized, and for all that he understood and misunderstood about the cause he served, Konrad never abandoned his faith in God or the principle of justice which he felt emanated therefrom.

Konrad's religiosity is especially significant because it was often the lens through which he reflected on the suffering he witnessed and his own role in propagating it. That act of introspection distinguishes Konrad from what had been for years the most famous account of a perpetrator's mindset: Hannah Arendt's retelling of Adolf Eichmann's sensational trial in Jerusalem. From the press booth, Arendt was especially intrigued by the thoughtlessness which she thought underlay Eichmann's acts. She took special notice of Eichmann's protestation that he had "at the moment [of the crimes] . . . sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling," as if he were free of guilt. Eichmann had further emphasized that "none of his superiors, among the most prominent people in the Third Reich, had any hesitancy in embracing the policy of mass killing."³⁶ In consideration of Eichmann's apparent attenuation of moral responsibility, Arendt summarized his behavior as "the banality of evil."

Especially regarding Eichmann's unwillingness to address the accusations against him directly, Arendt theorized that his reliance on cliché and prevarication arose from an unrealistic worldview which he had constructed for himself in order to make his actions more palatable. She also further speculated about what an enormous impact the visible and widespread participation of "respectable society" could have had on others, such that when Eichmann "saw the zeal and eagerness with which 'good society' everywhere reacted," it reassured him that "his conscience

³⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 114.

spoke with ‘a respectable voice,’ with the voice of respectable society around him.”³⁷ In sum, she viewed Eichmann -- and by extension many of the other perpetrators of the Holocaust -- as something of a hanger-on. Without any serious convictions of his own, Arendt proposed that the defining characteristic of Eichmann’s criminality was how diffidently he portrayed it.

But, true though it is that the perpetrators were ordinary, they were not necessarily banal. By contrast to Eichmann, Konrad showed himself to be wracked by guilt. His own unrealistic worldview arose not from a tendency to conform to society around him, but rather from the dissonance between his internal beliefs and worldly experience. For lack of an excuse, Konrad remained intensely aware that his situation was extraordinary. Whereas Eichmann may have simply put the thought out of mind, Konrad ached from trying to make sense of senseless violence.

It is on that note that Abram de Swaan criticizes Arendt and others for their uncritical treatment of the notion that the Nazi state “was a mighty machine, manned by countless nameless, faceless bureaucrats and soldiers who were no more than cogs in the apparatus, obediently and unthinkingly doing whatever they were told, without much conviction of their own, except loyalty to the system.”³⁸ Though it is not meant this way, the idea that perpetrators were slaves to circumstance approaches the same ground from which defense attorneys attempted to exonerate clients by claiming that superior orders had compelled them to commit horrible crimes.

After all, if it were admitted that a man like Konrad or some other bureaucrat had no real power to act independently of their immediate situation, then it must be similarly admitted that

³⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 61.

³⁸ Abram de Swaan, *The Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 22.

they bear no responsibility for failing to do so. Like expansive claims about the determinative power of German antisemitism, the idea that perpetrators' behavior depended so substantially upon circumstance is insufficient because it dismisses the significance of individual agency by failing to give due consideration to the real variation of behavior among them.

For that matter, Nazi authority was not so overbearing as is commonly assumed. Though the idea of impossible duress was often leveraged as a defense against indictment following the war, Christopher Browning notes that not once has anyone been able “to document a single case in which refusal to obey an order to kill unarmed civilians resulted in the allegedly dire punishment.”³⁹ David Kitterman, for his part, also examined the question of whether a German could “refuse to participate in the roundup and murder of Jews, gypsies, suspected partisans, ‘commissars’ and Soviet POWs - unarmed groups of men, women, and children - and survive without getting himself shot or put into a concentration camp or placing his loved ones in jeopardy?”⁴⁰ Though he defers giving an absolute answer due to the lack of adequate documentation, Kitterman concludes that of the hundreds of cases which are verifiable, none of the individuals who refused to participate “paid the ultimate penalty” and very few “suffered any other serious consequence.”⁴¹ But, despite proving that Germans were capable of making choices for themselves about their own conduct without suffering dire penalty, even under the authoritarian rule of Nazism, and even to the point of defying direct orders, Kitterman cannot answer why most never took the chance.

³⁹ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 170.

⁴⁰ David Kitterman, “Those who said ‘No!’: Germans Who Refused to Execute Civilians during World War II,” *German Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (May 1988): 241.

⁴¹ Kitterman, “Those who said ‘No!’,” 241.

He is not alone. Like humanity as a whole, the perpetrators of the Holocaust displayed such a variety of personal traits and preferences that their motives must be similarly disparate. As such, there cannot be any single reason as to why people chose to act or not. Although authors including Browning, Goldhagen, and Bartov have identified social and environmental factors ranging from peer-group pressure, racism, a broad sense of duty, demoralization due to war, and sometimes self-interest as the most eminent influences upon atrocious behavior, not one of those factors is definitive because none were consistent in their intensity from person to person or even day to day. Browning, for example, notes that one lieutenant by the name of Gnade had initially made an enormous effort to avoid involving himself or his men in killing, but “later learned to enjoy it,” while another lieutenant named Buchmann was the “most conspicuous and outspoken critic of the battalion’s murderous actions, [but still] faltered once.”⁴² Still other enlisted men in the battalion would sometimes shirk by allowing their victims to escape the cordon or by intentionally missing shots despite diligently killing at other times. Across the broad spectrum of German perpetrators, many wrestled with their conscience, some were driven to drink or insanity, and the vast majority experienced distress to one degree or another.⁴³

Contrary to the presumption of rigid or consistent decision making, there is an underrated element of chaos to the Holocaust. It is expressed in all the contradictions and absurdities which the killing produced. German officers, for example, worried that excessive drinking after massacres might ruin the moral balance of the men under their command.⁴⁴ Although the

⁴² Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 188.

⁴³ Among other examples, Waitman Wade Beorn quotes an officer whose soldiers manned the outer cordon of a mass shooting as being affected to the degree that they were “so depressed that evening that they wouldn’t eat anything.” Sociopaths were the exception rather than the rule. Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching Into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 85.

⁴⁴ Edward B. Westermann, “Stone-cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 30, no. 1 (April 2016): 1-19.

Holocaust is often characterized by a perceived sense of order, grim though it was, mass murder by its very nature erodes order. There was a wildness to the killing, an almost constant improvisation that was frenetic in its nature. Understanding the behavior of perpetrators therefore requires acknowledging that it will not necessarily conform to any sort of rule. Beyond the binary distinction between the soldiers and civilians who abetted atrocity and those who resisted it is the more complicated truth that many people did both depending on the moment, and that there is rarely any logic to that fact that someone like Konrad might beat a prisoner one day and allow them an extra ration the next.

It's exactly that contradiction which makes Konrad Jarausch's story so compelling. Neither fully one thing nor the other, he is exactly the image of a "reluctant accomplice" who played a bit part in the greater horror of the Holocaust despite himself. Understanding him, and by extension the idea of an "ordinary perpetrator," requires acknowledging that someone can feel internal anguish but still do the thing which pains them. It requires acknowledging the ease with which humans will betray themselves.

Chapter 3: *Prelude to Catastrophe*

Hitler's vision for Europe was not merely revanchist or colonial, but wholly apocalyptic. Although Konrad's hope for revived German pride and stature were markedly more modest than Hitler's cataclysmic desire, the latter was controlling. No matter an individual's private reservations, the relentless hatred that defined Nazism impinged upon every task. Even the most mundane military work advanced the cruelties of racism, but Konrad was ill-prepared to accept that reality, or the guilt which it reflected upon him. The degree to which the German army subordinated itself to Nazism's genocidal ideology overwhelmed Konrad. He cast about for explanations which could give meaning to his service and satisfy his worries. However, failing to find them, he despaired. In despair, he acquiesced to atrocity.

Konrad was recalled to service the day that Germany invaded Poland. Because he was a veteran, he had been previously enrolled in the army reserve and he was assigned to a local territorial defense force when his conscription resumed. His was a second-rate unit: made up of older men who were no longer fit for life at the front. Much like the group that was profiled by Christopher Browning, Konrad's unit was organized and deployed according to immediate need rather than as a result of meticulous planning. One week after being inducted, they were bundled onto a train headed east towards the Polish border, and towards the second world war of their lifetime. None of them, and especially not Konrad, could have been prepared for the violence and misery which would consume their coming months and years.

Despite their age and comparative inability, Konrad and his fellows were recalled to military service because Germany's aggression against its neighbors required a vast expansion of its armed forces. The task of occupying conquered land exceeded the ability of the regular army units that were also responsible for fighting across hundreds of miles of front line. Middle-aged

reservists like Konrad were therefore thrown into units that would follow behind the advancing armies to round up surrendered or cut-off enemy soldiers, collect abandoned weapons or military equipment, and secure supply lines.¹ These units were also often deployed to enforce German occupation upon civilian populations.

Whereas those tasks could be regular military operations in most other armies, the racial component of Nazism's war in the East soon dominated every action taken there. In a land which Konrad noted to be "almost purely Polish ... especially in terms of patriotic feeling," his company followed behind the front and installed Protestant mayors in predominantly Catholic towns, apparently following Konrad's observed maxim that "German = Protestant and Catholic = Polish."²

Even the task of taking prisoners was ruled by racial dictates. After crossing the frontier, Konrad's unit was ordered to organize captured Polish soldiers and interview them so as to "find the ethnic Germans among them so that they can be released early."³ If they could answer a series of questions they would be given parole and receive papers certifying their privileged ethnicity. Konrad interrogated them about whether their father had fought for Germany during the First World War, whether they attended a German school, and what their profession was. Those who could not answer satisfactorily remained imprisoned. Though Konrad never saw the desperate fighting which marked the experience of soldiers in prolonged combat, Nazism soured even the mundane work of guarding and transporting prisoners by transforming it into an instrument of terror.

¹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 39 and 143 as well as Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 38 and Beorn, *Marching into Darkness*, 67.

² Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 42-43.

³ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 47.

That it was so was not an accident of war, but rather the consequence of deliberate policy. Conquest alone was not Hitler's goal. As Konrad himself remarked, there were "larger dimensions of the Polish campaign."⁴ The purpose was to unite the German people and to settle this new nation across a vast expanse of newly seized *lebensraum*. Because Nazism was fundamentally motivated by the idea that Germans were a part of a uniquely worthy race which was nonetheless under threat of extinction, seizing the land of other inferior races was thought to be the only means by which Germans could struggle to protect the sanctity of their people.

Timothy Snyder summarized Adolf Hitler's view as the belief that "ecology was scarcity, and existence meant a struggle for land."⁵ Races could either triumph by dominating new frontiers, or else starve and be extinguished. When he ordered his soldiers eastward, Hitler's primary war goal was therefore the realization of a vast living space where land would be cultivated anew in order to incubate fresh generations of German soldiers and mothers. The oppressions which Konrad was called to assist did not therefore sprout wild like weeds. They grew from a carefully tended garden of hate

In Hitler's vision there was room for neither a Polish state nor a Polish people. Well before he waged war against them, he declared that his movement "will never see subjugated, so-called Germanized Czechs or Poles as a strengthening of the nation or of the people; rather this represents a racial weakening of our people." As criticism of the "German bourgeoisie," Hitler set his own party apart by declaring that "the national conception will not be determined by previous patriotic notions of state, but rather by ethnic and racial perceptions."⁶ Rather than

⁴ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 81.

⁵ Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015), 1.

⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Second Book*, trans. Krista Smith, ed. Gerhard Weinberg (Enigma Books, 2006), 79, ProQuest Ebrary.

conquering new lands to incorporate their people, he sought the space to fill with his own. As such, the discrimination between ethnic Germans and Poles in prisoner-of-war camps was but one component of a racial pogrom which mandated the wholesale murder of intellectuals, Jews, and ultimately anyone who stood athwart Nazism's colonial vision of the East.

As seen through Konrad's eyes, Poland served as a proving ground for Hitler's annihilatory ambition. It was a place where rapidly accelerating violence won out over the better inclinations of ordinary men. In his letters home Konrad recorded disturbing scenes of arbitrary violence, as well as the explicit separation of Jews from society as a whole and their subsequent victimization. Even as Konrad sought out "Polish folktales and Polish history" in order to "understand some of the problems that arose during the beginning of the war," he and his comrades were "increasingly warned to stay away from the Poles."⁷ Though Konrad held onto the pretense that there might be some settlement between the two peoples, his hope was fantasy.

The oppression which was previewed in Poland was then refined in the Soviet Union. As Hitler himself wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states."⁸ Even while Hitler's diplomats were negotiating the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with Moscow, the League of Nations High Commissioner Carl Burkhardt recalled Hitler complaining that it was a distraction which only delayed the moment when he could "turn all my concerted force against the Soviet Union." Everything, he said, was ultimately "directed against Russia."⁹ Like Poland, that land to the east was the space wherein he imagined that Germany would deliver itself from disaster.

⁷ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 78-79.

⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 654.

⁹ Carl J. Burkhardt, *Meine Danziger Mission 1937-1939* (Munich, 1962) quoted in Lorna Waddington, *Hitler's Crusade: Bolshevism and the Myth of the International Jewish Conspiracy* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), 156.

It was the particular brand of Nazism's racism that transformed a colonial ambition into an annihilatory one. The basic hatred with which Hitler and his party regarded the Soviet Union transcended petty politics. To them, Communism and modernity in general were parts of a single parasitic miasma which was inspired and directed by Judaism and which threatened their entire world. To the Nazis, the liberal ideas that defined the modern world: "political reciprocity" and any other concepts that "allowed the world to be seen less as an ecological trap and more as a human order," were themselves the danger because they were assumed to be the product of Jewish plots to erode natural racial divisions.¹⁰ As Gerhard Fricke of Göttingen, an average German at the moment of Nazism's ascension, declared in a sublime expression of Nazism's ideological emptiness: celebrating Germany meant standing against "democracy, liberalism, individualism and humanism, capitalism and communism."¹¹ That revanchist ethos -- Germans forever against the world -- drove to the very heart of Nazi paranoia. Their belief, again summarized by Timothy Snyder, was that "the very attempt to set a universal ideal and strain towards it" was sure evidence of Jewish corruption. In their world "ethics as such was the error, the only morality was fidelity to race." Consequently, "participation in mass murder" could be presented as a "good act" if it advanced the fight against racial degeneration.¹²

Konrad, however, never endorsed that ethic. To the degree that he applauded German expansion, the central importance of Konrad's Christian faith to his worldview ensured that he could not look past consequences without concern. Nearly every one of his letters reflects his personal struggle to maintain his faith in the universal ideal of Christ while serving an ideology which denied the possibility. Konrad's experience during war was therefore defined by the

¹⁰ Snyder, *Black Earth*, 4.

¹¹ Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 49.

¹² Snyder, *Black Earth*, 5.

irreconcilability of the actions which his duty demanded and the strain their performance placed upon his conscience.

Ultimately, Konrad was an individual who became lost in events that dwarfed any single person. Though the Holocaust could not have occurred but for the consent of the individuals who enabled it, it also grew with a momentum which could consume them. Most everything around Konrad was pushing him towards moral surrender. Dull compliance with even the worst directives of the German war machine was, in one sense, the path of least resistance. Although Konrad did not lose his agency, he did enfold himself into a machine which was larger than himself, against which the strength of his private convictions hardly registered.

The degree to which Konrad succumbed is clearly shown in one of the worst moments of crises he faced. In October 1941, after German aggression had progressed from Poland to the Soviet Union, he found himself patrolling the uppermost floor of a factory where Soviet prisoners-of-war were being held in order to investigate whether it was true “that the Russians had stolen a corpse in order to cut the flesh off of it [to eat.]” He discovered no such thing that night, although the search did produce a number of still clothed corpses which had been otherwise forgotten. When that unpleasant duty was completed, Konrad returned to his barracks to take in a performance of Russian folk songs, Mozart and Wagner. “Every now and then a shot exploded through the air,” he wrote, as “the sound that we fall asleep to [and] the sound we wake up to” punctuated a day where a shortage of rations saw hundreds of prisoners go hungry. The suffering was such that he wrote that he had “seen such images of misery that I’ve never encountered in my life.”¹³

The next morning cast a rare quiet over the camp, but although it brought Konrad a brief

¹³ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 182.

respite from his daily duties, he nonetheless remained burdened by doubt. As he wrote to his wife that morning, he could only express gratitude for the “intellectual world” that they shared and hope that “it doesn’t crumble in the face of the images before [him.]” Otherwise, he wondered, “how could one stand this ... without becoming an animal?”¹⁴

Among the comrades that he sometimes despised for their simplicity in taste and boorish attitudes, Konrad’s correspondence was a solitary line which tethered him to the life that he had once known. Even under the strains imposed by military conditions, he made a conscious effort to keep up with his former colleagues, to request and read new books, and to submit scholarly articles whenever he was able. War, however, has no regard for the individual. The landscape that he found himself in had little in common with the classrooms from his past, and the acts of brutality that he witnessed and participated in were equally alien. The chance to pause a moment to exchange letters with the woman he loved was therefore a welcome outlet through which he could distance himself from the world immediately about him.

Unfortunately for him, that world which he sought to escape was never long distant. Even in a letter that grasped at normalcy by noting what a “blessing” it was to receive word from home, Konrad related the grim reality that faced him in a bleak register. The mere fact that thousands of prisoners had been sent marching to an unknown fate was enough to merit an expression of relief because it meant that Konrad didn’t “have to play the policeman and ... beat anyone down with a nightstick or have them shot.” Though he was ashamed that he had quit work the night before while “there were still some five hundred men on the parade grounds who had not yet received their second portion of soup,” in the moment he could at least lay the blame

¹⁴ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 182.

at the feet of others, and he did. “Bureaucrats,” he said, were responsible for the misery before him.¹⁵

Imagining that the intercession of a distance and impersonal state machinery was rendering his own choices meaningless was perhaps the only thing that could salve his troubled conscience. Much like the Nuremberg defendants who claimed that their orders absolved them, Konrad’s complaint against anonymized bureaucrats was an excuse designed to diminish the weight of his own individual responsibility. That does not, however, mean that it was offered insincerely. As a defense against indictment such statements are of course infused with no small measure of cynicism. But, Konrad was not facing any earthly judgement, and his only audience was his wife. In the moment that he wrote her he could not have expected that his words would be closely analyzed in the distance future, nor could he have been choosing them with an eye towards establishing an alibi. Why then did he defend himself to her?

To a degree, the answer to that question is unknowable. Historians cannot discern what lay in Konrad’s heart except by what he chose to share in writing, not all of which would have survived. However, that some information might be unavailable does not preclude the possibility of forming a view of his actions and motives that is substantially accurate. As with any other historical figure, understanding Konrad’s behavior does not require that we reach back into the unknowable mist of the past in order to undertake a historical psychoanalysis of his mind. To the contrary, as long as due care is given in examining each piece of evidence relative to the context within which it was created and transmitted, as well as by comparison to other supporting or contradictory information, it is possible to know not only what Konrad did, but also who he was.

¹⁵ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 182.

To that end, there is no reason to doubt that his letters are anything less than an honest expression of what he was seeing and doing and how he felt as a consequence.

As a rule, German soldiers were surprisingly explicit in their letters home, including when they wrote about the massacres and other crimes which they perpetrated against the conquered populations to the east. In a grim reflection of the situation at the front, the German soldier had soon become so accustomed to violence that Goebbels himself felt it necessary to caution their families at home to understand that “in a gigantic struggle of worldviews ... uncompromising thinking about the war, and its causes, consequences, and aims” might produce “points of friction [with] life at home.”¹⁶ The Nazi state did not intend for its soldiers to feel ashamed about their conduct, and so soldiers who witnessed the hate-fueled violence of the Holocaust often shared their experience through letters and photographs.¹⁷ Konrad himself pledged to write in “a very matter-of-fact fashion.”¹⁸

He wrote often and openly, and was preoccupied with the nature of the war -- especially the palpable senselessness of the worst violence and suffering. Rarely was he able to perceive a higher purpose to it. In recognition of the vast gulf of experience which had grown between his present life and his past, Konrad remarked that “it’s hard to repress the feeling that I’ve wasted months and that it would be best to wipe them from my memory.” Nonetheless, he held the “feeling that we need to persevere here, even if our work often seems pointless.”¹⁹ Most importantly, we know all these facets of his personality because he wrote about his experience in

¹⁶ Quoted in Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death during the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 151.

¹⁷ German soldiers were sometimes shockingly open about recording and communicating the facts of murder and abuse. For a few examples, please consider “The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders” ed. Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess, trans. Deborah Burnstone (New York: The Free Press, 1991)

¹⁸ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 25.

¹⁹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 77.

such detail that it is simply implausible that he would freely record the horrors of cannibalism and the violence that he used against his prisoners but then hold back from sharing some other aspect of his story.

All this to say that the excuses which Konrad made to his wife are important because they reflect an earnestly held personal worry. Absent any fear that he might be punished by his superiors for the acts which shocked his conscience, and because he harbored doubt that his actions were justified despite the flood of anti-Jewish and anti-Soviet propaganda which was meant to reassure him about the eminent justice and necessity of his often gruesome mission, the only explanation for Konrad's excuse making is that he himself remained personally disturbed by his calamitous role as an accomplice to atrocity. In something of an inversion of the claim that Germans killed Jews and others whom they had deemed subhuman because they wanted to, the fact that Konrad attempted to justify himself by passing blame unto others betrays the fact that he suspected that his actions were indeed blameworthy.

Chapter 4: Christian Intellectual to Accomplice

In Poland and the Soviet Union Konrad face an intractable dilemma because he was not willing to surrender his moral sense to Nazism. Once he realized the full extent and consequence of Nazi cruelty, he had to either reconcile himself to complicity, or else dare to resist, and he could do neither. Konrad's trouble was that, for him, his understanding of the true nature of Nazism's war in the east had come upon him slow, and then sudden. When he first departed to Poland, he had expected that war would bring some measure of unavoidable misery, and that assumption provided him a schema through which he excused progressively greater injustices until, suddenly, he could no longer maintain the pretense. His willingness to hope for the best acclimated him to the advance of Nazi atrocity because of his aversion to seeing it for what it was. Along with his comrades, Konrad was integrated into a machinery of death in Poland.

It was extremely difficult for Konrad to reconcile himself to the fact that his actions advanced enormous harm independent of his private motives. At times he was intimately aware of his role in a broader atrocity, as when he could not remove Matthew 25: 42-43 from his thoughts while in Belarus –

“for I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

He insisted then that he was “trying to do what I can,” and that perhaps he could “prevent further calamities.” However, that hope rang hollow in his concluding remarks. “On Sunday,” he reported, “one of the Russians said to me: ‘This is hell.’ Now at least we have some semblance of order. But we achieved it with blood and tears.”¹ At other times, Konrad did not even entertain

¹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 181.

the question of his own guilt at all. “One of the strongest experiences I’ve had in this war,” he wrote in November 1941, “is that in the face of so much hunger, destitution, disease, and death, I have not had to renounce anything that I’ve done as a German or a Christian.”²

Like so many of the other German men who were thrust into the terrifying circumstances of war and then asked to amplify them through murder and abuse, Konard was not a hardened killer. His first letters after he crossed the Polish border with his new comrades are painfully naïve about the full consequence of the German invasion. He devotes paragraphs to detailed descriptions of the beauty of the landscape, his ambition to visit again when peace returns, and abstract reflections about the people he encountered, their culture, and the historic tragedy which he felt had entangled the two nations. Though he remarked on the possibility of suffering, and that “it seems that we’re going to see and experience more than we thought we would at first,” to him it was “only an inconvenience” in the absence of “any grave danger.” Despite an allusion to “a lot of horror stories . . . making their way into the city,” at that early juncture Konrad regarded his service to be “more romantic than dangerous,” and wrote that if not for the news from home and the West, he “could have completely forgotten the war.”³

In those first days, Konrad retained hope that the war could be won quickly without undue pain. Because he was a staunch nationalist, he saw the return of German armies to lands which had once been ruled by the empire as liberation, not conquest. Upon crossing the border into formerly German territory, Konrad noted with satisfaction that the area in which “swastikas fly from many houses” and where “decorated arches have been draped over the streets and the railroad lines” had “hardly seen any suffering.” These were, to his mind, “real East German

² Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice* 185.

³ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 42-43.

vistas” which were now being properly reclaimed.⁴ The nature of his service also meant that many of the realities of war, especially the type that Nazism intended to fight, remained temporarily outside his understanding.

However, whatever optimism he might have held was misplaced. War is rarely so neat as people hope when they embark upon it, and the circumstances of Germany’s war against Poland guaranteed carnage.

Since even before the invasion, German military planners had been fantasizing about the potential danger of an incipient Polish insurgency. Against that possibility, the high command of the German armed forces cooperated with Heinrich Himmler’s police agencies to prepare extensive lists of “important political figures, clergymen, political activists, Communists,” and any others who might resist German domination. Those listed were to be specially targeted by the *Einsatzgruppen* that were attached to the occupation forces, and against them every measure was permitted; “including shootings and arrests.”⁵

Informed in no small part by latent prejudice, German officers expected that “enemy civilians would take up arms against German forces and commit atrocities against ethnic German civilians.”⁶ In the run up to and during the initial weeks of the invasion, German soldiers were then further feted on exaggerated atrocity stories in order to train them to distrust and despise the Polish people.⁷ Konrad, for his part, referred darkly to rumors of Polish atrocities against ethnic Germans, the retelling of which in the German press often blended fact and fiction. He also remarked that the greatest danger he faced was being part of the “‘rear echelon,’ and everything

⁴ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 42.

⁵ Alexander Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology and Atrocity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 16.

⁶ Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 23.

⁷ Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, 2-6. as well as Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 62-74.

that goes along with that,” apparently in reference to the assumed threat of a terroristic Polish insurgency.⁸

Because they were encouraged by their superiors to rely on racist notions that “Polish civilians were treacherous, underhanded opponents,” German soldiers were inclined to fear that any Pole “would shoot at German columns as they passed, poison water supplies, and fall upon unwitting German troops as they slept.”⁹ They were taught that their war was not one which would be fought between armies, but rather entire populations.

Even Konrad was influenced by these dire predictions. Despite his efforts to learn the Polish language and history so that he could better understand the people, Konrad was nevertheless taken in by exaggerated atrocity stories. In a letter to his wife he recounted what he had heard of the massacre of ethnic Germans by Poles near Bromberg. “Those who spoke had an enduring hatred as a result of their experience,” Konrad recounted. According to his telling, some 5,000 people were assembled along a “long church courtyard in Lowicz” where they were then attacked with machine guns and grenades. The men relating the story to Konrad were quite clear in assigning fault. “The priests and the Jews,” they said, were to blame.¹⁰

Only four days earlier, Konrad had written about the “horror stories ... making their way into the city.” He said then that “in the future it will be just as difficult to ascertain the truth as it was in Belgium in 1914.”¹¹ Yet, despite that earlier skepticism, he apparently believed the later tale of atrocity without reservation. In reality, between several hundred and one thousand ethnic

⁸ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 45.

⁹ Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 26-27.

¹⁰ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 45.

¹¹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 44.

Germans were massacred at Bromberg, but the tale Konrad was hearing was an exaggeration spread by Nazi propagandists. Konrad noted that the Germans attacked the town a day earlier when they heard “about these people’s fate,” but the implication that theirs was a merciful mission again tells an incomplete story. Once the Germans took the town they arbitrarily imprisoned several thousand Poles and murdered several hundred communists and prominent locals in retaliation.¹²

As the place where Nazism’s racial rhetoric was sharpened into action, Poland therefore provided the geography wherein ordinary men like Konrad Jarausch were enfolded into a growing apparatus for state murder. Beyond even the immediate cruelty of a few individuals, Poland proved to be the staging ground where Adolf Hitler and his party developed an entire system of annihilation, and tested the men who would operate it.

In his first major assignment, Konrad was tasked to collect and guard Polish prisoners and then discriminate among them in order to separate the ethnic Germans from the rest. By comparison to his stereotype of Siberian gulags, Konrad at first wrote that “German camps [were] orderly and run with good intentions,” but his subsequent letters show that to be a claim that he could not long support. By the end of October 1939, conditions were deteriorating for those that remained imprisoned. Hundreds of men were crammed together in improvised facilities without suitable hygiene or bathroom facilities, or even clothing and food. Even when the latter was available, it was wholly inadequate, as when “a container of margarine has to be divided in ten portions.” Fights would break out, and not without reason said Konrad. “Deprivation causes mistrust.” To prevent escape, any prisoner who needed to use the latrine at

¹² Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 62-74.

night had to surrender their “jacket or coat, so that their shirts will gleam in the night.” The odor, Konrad wrote, was “oppressive,” and the prisoners were “stiff with dirt; the worst part [being] the smell clinging to many of them.” Though he bragged that he felt no need to “resort to such measures,” some of Konrad’s comrades had already adapted themselves to brutality. Standing guard one night he could hear a hapless prisoner “being pistol-whipped” by the other entrance.¹³

The wretched fate of Polish prisoners typified the expansion of violence which followed the invasion -- from oppression to annihilation -- and it was no doubt eased by the fact that so many Germans accepted the basic racial premises of Nazism. In his every-day history of Nazi Germany, Peter Fritzsche argues that “in many ways, the political success of Nazism rested on whether individual Germans came to see the world through the lenses of racial comradeship and racial struggle.”¹⁴ The behavior of the average German in Poland then proved their widespread affinity for both.

Konrad, despite his faith in the universal presence of God, disdained the locals for their shabbiness, and felt that “the population doesn’t make a particularly sympathetic impression,” because “the women in many cases have sunken and washed out faces, and the mixture of shabby elegance and slatternliness reappears in every facet of life.” He concluded that “overall, the poverty and meanness of things is alarming.” As he traveled towards what had once been “the old Prussian border,” he confirmed his distinction between Polish and German life by noting the “East German” setting with “a broad square” and “straight avenues leading up to it,” which “the Jews” had nonetheless “filled ... with their miserable seediness.” In Lodz, visiting the Jewish ghetto, his judgement was similarly harsh. “How pitiful and sordid these people are in

¹³ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 61.

¹⁴ Fritzsche, *Life and Death during the Third Reich*, 6.

appearance,” he wrote. “Intelligence” and “elegance” were the exception, he thought, because “overall, there’s just poverty and misery.” Among his early impressions of Poland, the “only good thing” he noted “was the number of swastikas hanging from the houses of the ethnic Germans.”¹⁵ Ultimately, Konrad shared the then common belief that Germany had been victimized at the conclusion of the First World War, and that the Polish state was an aberration. He therefore endorsed the Nazi project in Poland in so far as he believed that Germany should reclaim its old empire in order to restore the prestige of its people.

That does not, however, mean that Konrad was without sympathy, or that he was ignorant of Germany’s role in creating the poverty that he derided. While on the march into Poland he remarked that “the thing that makes the war most visible here is the suffering of the refugees.” Some, he said, “have left in part out of their own free will,” but “mostly they’ve been forced to move.”¹⁶ In terms which aped Nazism’s own rhetoric, he also recorded some admiration for the simplicity of life and depth of faith which he perceived among Polish peasants. “They are *polanie*,” he wrote, “people of the fields, inhabitants of the plains.”¹⁷ Although he felt that it was better that Germans should occupy the lands which they inhabited, Konrad nonetheless acknowledged that the Poles had been “making good progress in their young state.”¹⁸ In terms which were again reminiscent of Nazism’s *volkish* ethos, he pondered the end of the Polish state now that their “sons will go off as workers far away, rootless and homeless, happy if they can become part of a foreign people within two generations.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 58.

¹⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 44.

¹⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 51.

¹⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 63.

¹⁹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 52.

This was a naive hope, but Konrad maintained it because, to the degree that he accepted the premises of Nazism's racist, colonial ambition, Konrad's intellectual curiosity also allowed him to perceive some of the contradiction which underlay that mission. As an example, when he was first detailed to question prisoners of war so as to find the ethnic Germans among them, Konrad hinted at the impossibility of the task by remarking upon the "interesting insights" that he had gained "into the fluid boundaries between languages and peoples."²⁰ Such a thought is anathema to the hard-core racists who hold it as a matter of faith that such boundaries are both severe and perfectly definable. But, Konrad saw nuance. It was perhaps that trait which led him to label his companion in the task, Plagemann, as "unfortunately ... a rabid Nazi."²¹ Konrad's inquisitive personality also led him into cynicism about the ultimate viability of Nazism's colonial ambitions – an attitude which would deepen as he was exposed to the fuller consequences of the same.

Within months of first crossing the frontier into Poland, Konrad was reflecting on the foolishness of his comrades who "feel that everything isn't all that bad," because the struggles of the "survivors [who] flock to the soldiers offering things to sell, and the women [who] offer themselves because they don't have anything to eat" don't touch them personally.²² Conversely, he felt himself that "even knowing that I'm secure in God's hands doesn't mean that I can feel sure of what I'm to do here." Faith alone could not protect him "from feeling exhausted in ... body and soul."²³

²⁰ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 47.

²¹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 55.

²² Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 71.

²³ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 68.

But, whereas Konrad was willing to see misery clearly and to accept it as misery, he also never admitted the full consequence of Nazi administration in Poland. Even when he acknowledged the harms which the occupying Germans inflicted, he tended to address them as abnormalities or temporary measures or somehow as unavoidable. Regarding the upswell of Polish national feeling and agitation during the first passing of their independence day under German occupation, Konrad accepted the necessity of “special measures and curfews” by passing the blame to the “ruling Polish circles” and recalling the exaggerated rumors of Polish atrocities against ethnic Germans from “the beginning of the campaign.” Absent the details, he said that “in any case, Soviet policies [mass arrest and persecution] now seem more comprehensible.”²⁴ Konrad’s attitude was that that which the Polish people were suffering had been brought upon themselves by themselves, as if Germany were a reluctant disciplinarian dealing with an aggravating child.

In other instances he seemed to be possessed by convenient, almost unbelievable naivety. Regarding the fact that Polish women were regularly raped by German soldiers or else enslaved to serve as prostitutes in Army brothels, Konrad congratulated his comrades for behaving themselves around the “Jewish girls and women [who] have to scrub the barracks and clean our windows.” Obscenely, he speculated that “the Nuremberg race laws can perhaps serve to protect” them.²⁵ In much the same way that he would later condemn nameless bureaucrats for failing the starving prisoners under his care, Konrad refused to recognize that the visible suffering which gave him pause was the desired outcome of systematic policy.

²⁴ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 65.

²⁵ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 68-69.

His obliviousness in this regard could not have been less than deliberate. Even early in the campaign, Konrad recorded the influx of “more reserve police battalions, SS troops, and others,” who were congregating in Lodz to the point that he felt his own unit was becoming “superfluous.”²⁶ If he ever wondered about their purpose, the answers were writ into his own letters home: the arrival of reinforcements heralded a massive expansion in violence against the native population. Near his barracks, Konrad noted the “concentration camp” which had recently been erected to hold “almost 5,000 Jews of all ages” who were being “driven out in large numbers.” To fill it and the others like it, soldiers like Konrad conducted “large round-ups.” They were brutal actions which he conceded didn’t “occur without victims.” That winter any contact with Poles was forbidden, and soldiers were “to be armed everywhere, in the cafés, etc.” The mood, Konrad wrote, “seems to have become tenser.” He heard that Poles were arming themselves, and in the countryside farmers were shot for possessing illegal weapons. Regarding Warsaw, an officer confided in him that “according to official records 300,000 civilians and 60,000 soldiers” had died there.²⁷ Whenever Konrad went into Lodz he would pass the Jews that were hanged in the town square. He claimed not to know why.²⁸

Contrary to his affected ignorance, Konrad’s conclusion that “things are boiling just under the surface” betrayed his own deeper understanding of the situation.²⁹ Although his occasional insight is balanced by pronouncements which seem hopelessly naive, such as when he claimed that “when we’re gone, the only people who’ll miss us are the Jews who bring our

²⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 59.

²⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 73.

²⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 64.

²⁹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 81.

coal,”³⁰ Konrad possessed an astute analytical mind and all the information that he needed to understand that Germany’s occupation was not and never would be benign.

Though Konrad was not Hitler, nor a strict partisan of the Nazi cause, he did not live apart from it either. When Jews were required to wear yellow armbands, Konrad noted the change without surprise or consternation, the same as when those stigmatic marks were replaced “by a gold star... displayed on the right chest as well as on the back.” The change hardly elicited comment on after a trip into town which Konrad felt hadn’t “offered any lasting impressions.”³¹ To him, it was simply a sign of the progress of the German mission.

At one point, when Konrad was stationed in a town that he felt was historically and therefore properly German, he wrote that “when one walks through the city streets, one can easily forget that this was only just recently enemy territory.” Yes, he acknowledged, those enemies were still visible. After all, “people speak Polish [and] there are a lot of Jews.”³² But, success was more visible still in the fact that “everything is so completely in German hands; [one sees] German troops and construction units; swastikas; Hitler Youth armbands all over the cities.”³³

Konrad’s understanding of nationalism was being realized in “the factories [which] are now being incorporated into the German economy and using German methods.”³⁴ And, ultimately, the displacement of Poles and Jews. When even Plagemann, the comrade whom Konrad had previously dismissed for his Nazi convictions, was feeling “so skeptical and negative

³⁰ In another example of Konrad’s almost unbelievable credulousness, after they did his laundry or cleaned his barracks he would tip the Jews who had been enslaved by the army he served. Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 81.

³¹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 73.

³² Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 63.

³³ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 63.

³⁴ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 63.

about our existence here,” Konrad struggled “inwardly ... against his view that everything that we’re doing -- indeed our very existence -- is meaningless.”³⁵ Konrad took his duty to his country seriously, a fact which he felt distinguished him from many of his fellow soldiers.

That his comrades did not share Konrad’s specific sense of mission was a source of constant frustration. He was “surprised,” he wrote, “to discover that my comrades here really don’t know anything about the larger dimensions of the Polish campaign. They seem to forget that we are fighting for *lebensraum*, for generations to come.”³⁶ Their drunkenness and their lack of curiosity especially grated on Konrad. “Reading,” he complained, was “something that sets one apart.” It was “seen as disturbing the ‘*volksgemeinschaft*.’”³⁷ Konrad was not well impressed by the comradeship embodied by soldiers at war. His impression was that “it’s not like the people here have the ability to understand me.” At fault was an “inner emptiness that leads [these men] to act in this [drunken, inconsiderate] manner.”³⁸ The “drunken desperation ... mixed with an odd sense of the carnivalesque” frightened Konrad, unnerving as it was “to see such existential emptiness.”³⁹ In his opinion, the fault arose from a failure to communicate the grand ideas for which they were fighting. To that end, Konrad believed that “the Hitler Youth could be doing wonderful things here.”⁴⁰ To his mind, his fellow soldiers’ misbehavior and apathy was symptomatic of what he felt was the greater ill: that they had no sense of purpose.

But, in some respects they seemed to have come to grips with Nazism’s purpose far better than he. These other men were those who appear on the periphery of Konrad’s account. Among them are the “noncommissioned officers [who] appeared with whips” with which they intended

³⁵ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 69.

³⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 81.

³⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 63.

³⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 77.

³⁹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 75.

⁴⁰ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 77.

to abuse prisoners.⁴¹ They were “the drunken brawling soldiers among the Poles and Jews, some of whom were being evacuated and sitting there with their pitiful belongings.” They attuned themselves to the spirit of the SS man who berated another soldier who had shown kindness, because he could not “allow someone in a gray uniform standing up for a Pole!” They were the ones who took advantage of local women and bought up or requisitioned already scarce local goods. When Konrad took note of “how much hatred there is for us here,” and how the Poles “look at us with some derision,” his observations was a belated recognition of the reality around him. He was forced to concede that “they certainly have some reason to do so.”⁴²

In a letter to a colleague concerning the meaning of the war, he noted that “the Jewish baths are burning, and the synagogue burned down last night.” As criticism of his comrades who “can just ignore such things and protects themselves with cheap explanation,” he derided them for acting “as if our destinies were nothing more than the result of a mere accident.” Sensing the struggle yet to come, Konrad could only conclude that “the enormity of the task facing us in the East is slowly becoming apparent.”⁴³ Put simply, systematic murder requires systematic effort, and it was in Poland that Germany built out the structure which enabled continued atrocity.

What Konrad knew about German crimes is therefore a different question than what he would admit to himself. As Primo Levi answered in response to a question about whether or not Germans had known of the Holocaust, while it was “true that the great mass of Germans remained unaware of the most atrocious details of what happened. . . varied sources of

⁴¹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 53.

⁴² Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 74.

⁴³ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 66.

information were available.”⁴⁴ To the extent that most Germans did not know, it was because, like Konrad, they did not care to know. But, in turning himself away from the difficult realizations which his experience demanded of him, Konrad adapted himself to Nazism. He did not envision Nazism’s murderous machine, nor even build it, but he made himself a tool in its service.

From planning to policy, Poland was the place where Nazism tested its racial ideology and the men who were slated to execute it. Although the intended mechanism of their annihilatory ideation was not clearly articulated from the start, by its very nature Nazism demanded apocalyptic confrontation with other races. The abuses which Konrad witnessed and abetted were therefore not isolated events or tangential to the German war effort. The persecutions of Poles -- Jewish and Gentile alike -- were *the point* of the war, and they lay among the first steps along a path that ended with crematoriums.

They were, as Doris Bergen describes them, “experiments in brutality.”⁴⁵ After years of escalating rhetoric, the Polish landscape stood in as a proving ground for Nazism’s ambitions; the unerring intent of which was to destroy perceived racial enemies. It was there that the occupational authorities channeled the ill-restrained and arbitrary personal violence which some individual German soldiers directed against Poles into methodical action. Most importantly, it was there that so many men like Konrad learned to surrender themselves to Nazism’s demands.

⁴⁴ Primo Levi, “Primo Levi’s Heartbreaking, Heroic Answers to the Most Common Questions He Was Asked About ‘Survival in Auschwitz,’” *The New Republic*, February 16, 1986, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119959/interview-primo-levi-survival-auschwitz>.

⁴⁵ Bergen, *War and Genocide*, 101-134.

Chapter 5: Konrad's Darkest Days

That which was prepared in Poland was then unleashed upon the Soviet Union. The winter following the German invasion was marked by massive death among the captured Soviet prisoners who were purposefully starved in ill-built camps. Amidst that horror, Konrad sunk into despair before dying of typhus in January 1942. His generous nature did shine through at moments, but Konrad's better inclinations were simply swept aside by the purposeful cruelty that he served. He was stuck, and scared.

The war against the Soviet Union was more than a merely material conflict. As reported by General Franz Halder, Hitler himself demanded "a clash of two ideologies," the conclusion of which would only satisfy if Germany did more than defeat the enemy's forces. This was to be "a war of extermination," he said.¹ In order to achieve lasting victory, Hitler declared that the "Jewish-Bolshevik *intelligentsia*, as the oppressor in the past must be liquidated."² Failure to grasp as much, he warned, meant only that "thirty years later we shall again have to fight the Communist foe." In the Soviet Union, the German soldier was told that they would find "no comrade before or after the battle," and so was advised to gird themselves for the "extermination of the Bolshevik commissars and of the Communist *intelligentsia*."³ In anticipation of a struggle defined by "racial differences," Hitler ordered "unprecedented, merciless, and unrelenting

¹ Franz Halder, *War Journal of Franz Halder: Volume VI*, European Command of the United States Army. From the Combined Arms Research Library, *World War II Operational Documents*, N16845-F. 41-42.

<http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p4013coll8/id/3973/rec/4>

² Briefing guidelines written by General Alfred Jodl following a meeting with Hitler on March 3rd, 1941. Quoted by Jürgen Förster, "Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest and Annihilation" in *Germany and the Second World War: The Attack on the Soviet Union*, Volume IV. eds. Horst Boog, Jürgen Förster, and Joachim Hoffman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 482.

³ Halder, *War Journal*, 41-42.

harshness”⁴ against the Communist enemies whom he believed to be the living embodiment of everything wrong in the world. To effect that demand, the high command of the German armed forces distributed a series of criminal orders which were designed to unleash murderous violence against the whole population of the Soviet Union.

The first among these was the *Barbarossa Decree*.⁵ It was issued a few weeks before the invasion of the Soviet Union, and it was drafted in order to translate Hitler’s exterminatory rhetoric into firm policy. Its text presumed that every civilian was an enemy and German soldiers were ordered to approach them “without mercy.” To that end, any criminal act against a civilian was withdrawn from the jurisdiction of military courts, effectively making them unpunishable.

More than amnesty, the *Barbarossa Decree* not only excused criminality, but mandated it. In cases where soldiers were suspicious of a local civilian, they were directed to bring them before an officer who would “decide whether they are to be shot.” In individual culprits could not be identified to answer for an attack upon or sabotage of German forces, then “collective drastic actions” were to be “immediately” undertaken against whichever community was unlucky enough to be at hand. Even in those cases where it was possible to capture or arrest suspected culprits, detaining them for trial was forbidden. The only permitted treatment was execution.

That decree was then followed a week later by formal *Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia* which reiterated the racial and ideological aspect of the coming war. German

⁴ Quoted in Ben Shepherd, *Hitler’s Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 123.

⁵ “Decree concerning the implementation of Wartime Military Jurisdiction in the area of operation ‘Barbarossa’ and specific measures undertaken by the troops” in Theo J. Schulte, *The Germany Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 321-3.

soldiers were reminded that “Bolshevism is the moral enemy of the National Socialist German People,” and that the bearers of its “subversive worldview” were the “reason for Germany’s struggle.” Triumph, they were told, required “ruthless and energetic measures against Bolshevik agitators, irregulars, saboteurs, and Jews, and the radical elimination of all active or passive resistance.” The guidelines also cautioned German soldiers against the “underhanded and callous” nature of the supposedly “Asiatic soldiers of the Red Army.”⁶

The intent of these orders, that German soldiers should integrate themselves into a growing machinery of death, was then affirmed by the subsequent *Commissar Order* which again assumed latent “hatred, cruelty and inhumanity” on the part of the Soviets. It therefore directed soldiers to cast aside “mercy or considerations of international law,” and to be “unhesitatingly severe” when dealing with “political commissars” who were said to be “the originators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare.” Whenever they were captured, they were to be “as a matter of routine ... dispatched by firearms.” If ever an individual soldier was unsure about the possible guilt of a captured Soviet, they were assured that their “personal impression ... should as a matter of principle count for more than the facts of the case which it may not be possible to prove.”⁷ As an expansion of the earlier propaganda which posited Jews as the nefarious agents behind anti-German resistance in Poland, the *Barbarossa Decree*, the *Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia*, and the *Commissar Order* together gave explicit license to kill any Soviet out of hand even under the thinnest pretext.

⁶ “Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia,” in Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies*, 317-8.

⁷ The Commissar Decree, 6 June 1941,” in *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts*, ed. Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 277-297

In that way, the orders represented another turning point in the realization of the Holocaust. Between the association of every Soviet with ‘Jewishness’ and all the negative traits thereof, as well as the granted license to murder, the historian Christian Streit argues that the increasingly formal inclusion of the German armed forces in annihilation policy “extended the circle of prospective victims ... in an almost geometrical progression.”⁸ Whereas the impromptu and somewhat disorganized nature of the German persecutions in Poland led to disquieting, public spectacle which fostered “considerable unrest” among troop commanders who were concerned about the negative effect that they might have on discipline, the full integration of the armed forces into racial policy in Russia encouraged unprecedented cooperation between the formations that were effecting genocide and the military units who were delivering them their victims.

The degree to which these annihilatory policies penetrated and were accepted is evidenced in part by the orders which General Von Schenkendorff issued to his subordinates. He was the commanding officer of the 286th Security Division to which Konrad was attached, and regarding the refugees who his soldiers were encountering, he ordered that they should “as a matter of principle be arrested or liquidated.”⁹ In their summary of the division’s actions during the months after the invasion, the intelligence section for the 286th also happily reported that “constant contact was maintained with the Security Service, specifically the *Einsatzgruppe* of *Gruppenführer* Neumann, the *Einsatzkommando* 8 of *Sturmbannführer* Dr. Bratfisch [sic], and in particular with *Untersturmführer* Reshke’s Orscha-based squad.”¹⁰ These units were responsible

⁸ Christian Streit, “The Germany Army and the Policies of Genocide,” in *The Policies of Genocide: Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, 10.

⁹ Shepherd, *War in the Wild East*, 104.

¹⁰ Beorn, *Marching into Darkness*, 80.

for the massacre of tens of thousands of Jews among others, and their integration with regular army units shows how, by comparison to the somewhat experimental nature of the violence in Poland, the German conquest of the Soviet Union formalized brutality as a military objective.

Besides Jewish civilians, Soviet prisoners of war also suffered terribly at the hands of their German captors. Like in Poland, Konrad was again assigned to guard these prisoners, and all across the conquered territory of Belarus and Ukraine, in camps like Konrad's, Soviet prisoners were dying by droves. Although the exact figures varied considerably depending upon the particular camp, by winter their mortality rates were consistently above 30 percent, sometimes as high as 95 percent. What rations the prisoners did receive were left largely to the individual initiative of camp commanders. Some requisitioned food from local communities, while others forbode such assistance.¹¹ Even when food was made available to the prisoners, access to it was often determined by one's willingness and ability to work. From August to December of 1941, average caloric intake ranged from barely more than 1,000 a day to a bit more than 2,000 at the high point.¹² In analyzing the numbers, Theo Schulte points out that even the values based on the "official guidelines fall well below the minimum required for basic survival."¹³

Though Konrad expressed regret for the plight of the prisoners whom he watched over, the common German attitude was that "the more of these prisoners die, the better it is for us."¹⁴ Among those who held it, every morsel of food fed to a prisoner was resented as if it were taken

¹¹ Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies*, 186-8.

¹² Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies*, 197.

¹³ Theo Schulte, "The German Army and National Socialist Occupation Policies in the Occupied Areas of the Soviet Union 1941-43" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1987), 214.

¹⁴ Letter from Alfred Rosenberg to Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel on February 28th, 1942, concerning the mistreatment of Soviet prisoners of war. Document 081-PS in *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression: Volume III* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 126-30.

directly from the mouth of a deserving German.¹⁵ Konrad's experience in his camp exposed the official guidelines as a fiction. "The undernourishment and diseases," he said in January 1942, "are just terrible."¹⁶ A week later he was confronted by a desperate Russian. "Hitler promised us bread and fair treatment, and now we're all dying, after we've surrendered."¹⁷ Konrad did not record his response.

The effect of starvation on the prisoners was naturally deleterious. Many arrived at the camps already exhausted, sick, hungry or all three together, and the lack of stable nutrition combined with essentially non-existent medical care or shelter proved a death sentence. Of the prisoners taken in 1941 alone, two thirds of those three million were dead by the end of the year. Throughout the entire course of the war, more than half of almost six million Soviet prisoners died in captivity. The extent of the catastrophe is put into grim focus by the fact that "more Soviet soldiers died daily in the hands of the Wehrmacht than American or British prisoners did in the entire war."¹⁸ Conditions were so dire that some prisoners were reduced to cannibalism. Konrad discovered at least one case and was suspicious of others. To his east at a camp near Bryansk, at least six prisoners were shot for cannibalism and another five were sentenced, awaiting the same fate. Their situation was so desperate that, despite standing orders to shoot escaping prisoners on sight without warning or attempting to recapture them, prisoners still tried their luck. Better, they figured, to take their lives into their own hands than "starve, be ill-treated or shot in the camps."¹⁹

¹⁵ Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 143 and 153.

¹⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 208.

¹⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 210.

¹⁸ Beorn, *Marching into Darkness*, 59.

¹⁹ Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies*, 190.

Even if a prisoner could weather the passive depredation of starvation, many were simply killed out of hand. In September of 1941 an open letter addressed to camp guards advised them that “the use of arms against [prisoners of war] is, as a rule, legal.” The presumption among German captors was that the Soviet *Untermenschen* could only be controlled by harsh and brutal measures. German guards were ordered that “Insubordination, active or passive resistance must *immediately* be broken completely by force of arms (bayonets, butts and firearms).”²⁰ When prisoners failed to keep up while on the march or showed even minor defiance while imprisoned, they were often shot in full view of civilians and their corpses were simply left wherever they fell. Regulations dictated that “the scale of punishment knows no intermediate steps between restriction of rations and summary execution.”²¹ Beatings and arbitrariness were commonplace. By the racist logic which governed Nazism’s conquest, they were necessary.

Although some individuals like Konrad harbored private doubts about the truth of that axiom, or the justice of the German cause, they only very rarely acted against it. Often, as was the case with Konrad, they would delude themselves to believe that there was nothing to be done, or that they were not the ones who could do it. But, it wasn’t mere circumstance which was killing prisoners. While the most prolific killers -- hunger, disease and exposure -- stalked the countryside as well, their presence inside the camps was by design. Ultimately, the abuse of Soviet prisoners was as much an expression of Nazism’s core hatreds as the concurrent persecution of Jews. The Nazis had long associated the two ideologically, to the extent that if Judaism were the greatest spiritual enemy of the German people, then its avatar in Bolshevism

²⁰ “Regulation for the treatment of Soviet PWs in all prisoner of war camps.” Document 1519 PS in in *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression: Volume IV* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 59-65

²¹ “Besprechung vom 7.11.1941 über den Einsatz von Sowjetrussen,” quoted in Dallin, *German Rule In Russia*, 411.

was thought to pose the most serious material threat. The soldiers who served the Soviet Union were therefore targeted for annihilation because they had been generalized as *Untermenschen* and agents of Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracies. Consequently, although the wasting sicknesses which Soviet prisoners succumbed to most often are impersonal killers compared to bullets or gas, their reign in the camps was intentional, and enforced by the personal behavior of men like Konrad Jarausch.

Konrad never fully came to terms with his role as an accomplice to atrocity. When he died of typhus in early 1942, he was still struggling to respond to events which he never would have chosen for himself. Because he was not a convinced or fanatical Nazi, Konrad could not bring himself to endorse the cruelty which his prisoners endured. Their inescapable suffering tore at his conscience, and the effect upon his psyche was immense. “One is constantly surrounded by the stench and the cries, beset by incessant pleading,” he complained. The man who in Poland had once boasted that he need not resort to brutal measures to maintain order now resigned himself to them. “To keep things going overall,” he confessed, “one sometimes has to be hard-nosed toward individuals.”²² There was not one moment which shocked him, but many, and they came upon him one after another with a weight which wore him down into compromises which he might never have otherwise made. No matter how he might have wished to hold himself apart from Nazism’s violence, his service chained him to the consequences of the same.

It was at prison camps in eastern Belarus that Konrad came face to face with the depths of German cruelty. There, through the baking heat of summer and bitter cold of winter, he continued in his role as a bit-player in the larger tragedy of the Holocaust. As in Poland, Konrad

²² Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 162.

was assigned to transit camps where new captives were collected from the front to be processed and then sent further into the rear. His was an enormous task, because the rapid German advance had netted hundreds of thousands of surrendered soldiers to whom “relatively little advance planning had been devoted.”²³ Caring for them would have been difficult for any army, but Germany’s had little interest in even making the attempt. “In contrast to the feeding of other captives,” explained General Hans Nagel of the Wehrmacht’s economic office, “we are not bound by any international obligations to feed Bolshevik prisoners.”²⁴ They were happy to leave them to suffer in the spirit of racial hatred. Most camps were little more than barren fields with barbed wire strung crudely about them. Without materials to build shelters, prisoners often dug pits or simply lay on the ground. Running water and sanitary latrines were unheard of.

As far as the conditions in his own camps went, Konrad’s first post near Orscha was typical of the norm. After arriving there, he wrote home to describe the situation. The camp was located in a low meadow by a stream, and the summer rains had soon flooded the entire field. “At the same time,” he wrote, some “10,000 to 12,000 prisoners” arrived. “They had marched thirty to forty kilometers from the front; they were soaked, they had gone days without food and had eaten green sheaves of grain.” The flooded field was “transformed into a muddy morass” by their arrival, and their deprivation made them uncontrollable. Some tried to access the kitchens to eat, and “shots were fired to keep them in order.” Konrad was careful to note that only “some (not many) were killed.” Many others were too weak to move and “rolled around in the mud, howling from their hunger pains.” Still others were simply trampled to death in the overcrowded

²³ Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945: A Study of Occupation Policies* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1957), 409.

²⁴ Quoted in Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945*, 419-20.

conditions. “The next morning, several corpses were pulled out of the mud; only their legs or heads stuck up out of the mess.”²⁵

The visceral reality of these horrible scenes shamed Konrad in a way that he was not prepared to confront. Buoyed by the improbable success of their conquests thus far, few Germans seemed to realize the full gravity of the war which they were seeking. When planning their invasion, Hitler and his commanders had expected the Soviet government to simply collapse under the weight of the onslaught.²⁶ On the ground, Konrad was similarly optimistic. Though he remained somewhat restrained so as not to upset his pregnant wife, Konrad hoped that he wouldn't have “to spend the winter in Russia.”²⁷ After all, he wrote, “if the war ends in the near future, we won't have a need for these transit camps.”²⁸ Whether willful or arrogant, his blindness to the coming horrors rendered them all the more difficult to respond to. By the time Konrad surfaced from his excuse making to take stock of the gruesome realities about him, he was already caught in their midst and at a loss as to what he could do.

In his attitude towards Russians, Konrad did nod towards racist stereotypes at times, such as when he distinguished between white Russian prisoners and “Mongolian types.”²⁹ In another instance he described the Russian women who lingered outside his camp out of concern for their husbands as possessing “patience peculiar to the peoples of the East” which might seem to be the “mere passivity” of “a stupid, dumb mass intent on resisting their destinies.” But, his anecdote

²⁵ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 155-6.

²⁶ David M. Glantz and Johnathon House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 31 and 74.

²⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 151.

²⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 150.

²⁹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 156.

also ended with a retelling of how he had “looked into their eyes and seen something else,” perhaps the humanity which Nazism sought to deny.³⁰

Earlier, when Konrad was first settling into life at his new camp, he had delighted at finding “a really bright high school student” among the prisoners. Because the student had studied in Berlin, Konrad jumped at the chance to talk with him “about Russian schools, the Komsomol, and the future of the revolution.” The chance encounter cemented Konrad’s own heterodox views. “In reality,” he wrote, not all Russians are ‘swines’ or ‘beasts.’ Of course we knew that before, but it’s good to have that impression confirmed by firsthand experience.”³¹

Throughout his service, Konrad would make it a practice to adopt certain favored Russians as tutors or aides. He was genuinely interested in their language and culture and, despite Nazi propagandizing to the contrary, he tended to see his charges more as victims rather than agents of Bolshevism. “Even though the Bolsheviks tried to kill any trace of human emotion,” he wrote, “one can see in their eyes that they feel the same things that we do.”³² When he stopped by a church which had been converted to a movie theatre and was now being restored to its former function in Minsk, Konrad speculated optimistically that the watching crowd might have assembled out of some kind of “religious sentiment.”³³ Later, when another young translator defended Russian religiosity against a German guard’s cynicism, Konrad seemed to favor the youth.³⁴

³⁰ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 153.

³¹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 153.

³² Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 162.

³³ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 150.

³⁴ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 161.

In all his letters home, Konrad did not content himself with superficial descriptions. He instead sought to probe every experience or chance encounter in order to express hidden depths which might reflect an intrinsic truth about the human condition. Regarding the aforementioned Russian women, he waxed poetic that their gleaming eyes and agitated faces revealed “the beginnings of something new: ancient customs are being replaced and people believe in new goals and have a different definition of humanity all together.”³⁵ In the same letter Konrad seems entranced by a crushingly sympathetic moment when two lovers spotted each other from their respective sides of the barbed wire and rushed to try to embrace each other. “One can imagine,” Konrad reflected, “that the entire existence of this people rests on the shoulders of these nameless women ... [who] carry the burden through the decades, while the men, with their deliberate efforts, have missed their mark, drowning all in a pool of smoke and blood.”³⁶ The scene was remarkable in part for the fact that neither Russian was shot down for approaching the camp fence.

His eloquence about this moment also previews the tension which would grow in Konrad as he was increasingly forced to confront his own role in advancing the terrible harms which he lamented. Perhaps because of how poorly it reflected on him, he was reluctant to acknowledge the ill-faith with which Nazism was treating his prisoners. But, Konrad was also unfailingly introspective, and the latter quality ensured that he could never simply put all the sorrow and angst out of mind as others did. As a result, he was torn between his Christian sense of shared humanity and duty to the impoverished, and the immediate pressures of serving as a soldier in

³⁵ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 14.

³⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 154.

Hitler's army. Unfortunately, he never saw himself clear of the morass in which he had allowed himself to be trapped.

Despite his initial confidence in his comrades who found to be more impressive and "better educated than most of the territorial reserves,"³⁷ and his similar confidence in a camp that seemed well enough situated that he crowed that it would run itself, everything about Konrad's Belarusian service and the way in which his prisoners were treated was inescapably bad. So long as Nazism ruled, it could be no other way.

Weather was also a constant factor. As late summer and autumnal storms swamped the largely featureless camps, the rain transformed them into a mess of mud. "But things were bearable" according to Konrad. "At least the sick and those without coats" could crowd together under what little shelter there was. He further noted that one 2,000 gram loaf of bread was distributed between every four prisoners which was certainly better than no food at all. They were still starving, but starvation alone is not an immediate killer. All the same, Konrad found that he could not "even begin to describe the impression that these starving, filthy figures make when they stand with their tin cans in the soup lines."³⁸ When rain turned to snow their hardship would deepen, and Konrad's excuses would grow ever more tenuous.

At least at the beginning, Konrad could shelter in the belief that all the ills he was witnessing were either a result of the natural poverty of the land and people, or an unavoidable but temporary consequence of war. "The sad thing," he wrote in August 1941 "is that the country is already so pitiful, and it's suffered such losses in terms of people and farms." One small mercy

³⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 152.

³⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 158.

that day was that the prisoners he received “weren’t too miserable or exhausted.” It’s very telling of course that only minor ills were considered something of a victory. His concluding hope was that maybe “we can look forward to a few decades that won’t be entirely dominated by war.”³⁹ Even in that, however, Konrad was firmly ensconced in naivety.

Of course, Konrad’s internal struggle to make sense of his world was small measure besides the injustice which his prisoners faced, beaten and shot and starved as they were. It is therefore not a point of comparison between the two. Where it matters is in understanding how and why Konrad accommodated himself to Nazism.

The turmoil he felt was a very isolating emotion. His letters, for example, are dominated by the sentiment that those who were at home could never grasp what he was experiencing short of seeing it for themselves. One day after he had again been awakened in the night by shots, “four dead in an attempted escape,” Konrad noted a letter he had received from his friend Franz who was stationed in Belgium, and who was only then “starting to experience things there that have been customary in the East here for some time: mass shootings.”⁴⁰ By that time it was December, and a deep cynicism infused Konrad’s remarks. Any hope he might have had for a quick resolution to the fighting was by then dashed as staunch Soviet resistance barred the German advance towards Moscow.

Besides his wavering confidence in German military might, Konrad’s belief in the good faith of the broader mission he served had also diminished as repeated upsets forced him to come to grips with the truths which he had previously minimized. Even as early as September, he had

³⁹ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 160.

⁴⁰ Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 196.

begun to acknowledge that his best wishes and intentions rarely aligned with reality. In a stark admission he stated simply that “we can’t satisfy the prisoners’ hunger... they want warmth, work, bread -- and we can’t give it to them.” Above him, there was the “friction with our superiors; they fight with one another and that rubs off on us; above all there is a constant pressure to economize.”⁴¹

His complaint followed only a week after he had attempted to approach a new camp inspector about the inadequacy of the prisoners’ rations. “Yesterday,” Konrad reported, “I had a long discussion ... in order to secure at least the minimum required to feed the prisoners, with some success.” Or, at least he thought so at the time. However, subsequent events showed no improvement for the prisoners, and the attitude of the camp’s administration was revealed by the inspector’s response to him. “We need people [like Konrad] in such positions who have robust natures who aren’t shaken when a few hundred prisoners die.”⁴² But, Konrad wasn’t that man, at least not by nature. It was only by the incessant pressure of his position pressing down upon him that he was molded to accept more and more without comment, as unchangeable.

It is not that he simply accepted the killing to be good, but rather that over time he became dulled to the indignities which had once elicited greater alarm. Whereas at the start of the campaign Konrad had written very humanistically about a Soviet captive approaching the camp fence to reunite with his young wife, he reacted far more callously to a similar action a month later. In early September, a starving prisoner had merely tried to reach through the barbed wire surrounding the camp to grab some cauliflower and was shot in front of Konrad’s eyes for the attempt. Konrad, despite his misgivings, acceded that “the guard was certainly right to

⁴¹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 162.

⁴² Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 196.

shoot.”⁴³ In this and many other small ways, Konrad accommodated himself to Nazism’s murderous demands.

However, each step taken along that path invited another, and by November Konrad was feeling overwhelmed. He had skipped a number of lessons with his Russian tutor because “it cost too much effort to concentrate.” The “psychological strain,” he said, “is likely also to blame. The dull dying around us is just so terrible.” He and his fellow guards had discovered another case of cannibalism that day, and Konrad expressed his hopelessness through somber descriptions of the prisoners who “stagger, fall over, and expire right at our feet.” Buried naked without clothes, their scrawny bodies reminded him of “late Gothic figures of Christ, frozen stiff.” Regarding the often Jewish civilians who were mixed among the military prisoners, “many who are just in shirtsleeves,” Konrad mused that perhaps “it would really be the most merciful thing if they would be taken out into the forest and bumped off, as the experts put it.”⁴⁴ That he could think such a thing was, in part, an expression of his despair.

It is also a clear admission of guilt. Konrad was an intelligent man, cursed by introspection. Because he could not look past his role in advancing the horrors which pained him, he raged that “we’ve just been thrown into this situation, incapable of doing anything other than our limited duty.”⁴⁵ He cast about for any explanation which might absolve him, and failing to find one, he sunk into paralyzing doubt.

⁴³ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 166.

⁴⁴ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 189-90.

⁴⁵ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 190.

“Sometimes I’m terrified,” he wrote “by the thought that all these people whom we had to hurt and humble deeply, might at some time band together for revenge.”⁴⁶ Though his comrades reassured him of the certainty of complete victory, Konrad could not be convinced. He knew that Nazi Germany had only been able to sustain itself through plunder and conquest, and that “we are living at the expense of these people and are sucking them dry. What should we expect,” he wondered, “other than bitterness and an abiding desire to overthrow this foreign rule.”⁴⁷ He could not see any good coming of it, and as his despair advanced so too did the severity of his prose. “The world is so barren without God both here and at the other side of the front. I have often thought so when watching yet another one of our prisoners lie dying. No priestly words. Carried out like a corpse. Such deaths occur by the millions. This is truly the work of the devil.”⁴⁸ Though he long sought to deny it, his conclusion could be naught but that “the whole thing is already more murder than war.”⁴⁹

And yet, despite realizing all that, he could not see his way clear. He blamed bureaucrats and commanders and nature itself for the prisoners’ suffering because he could not bear to blame himself. As winter settled in, he articulated his defeat. “I have put aside all my ambitions and am happy when people leave me alone.”⁵⁰

To be sure, Konrad did, in small ways, seek to alleviate what harms he could. He approached his prisoners equitably, as when he traded for a curio rather than simply taking it as he undoubtedly could have. Those prisoners who he knew best were given gifts of wine and

⁴⁶ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 168.

⁴⁷ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 170.

⁴⁸ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 171.

⁴⁹ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 190.

⁵⁰ Jaraus, *Reluctant Accomplice*, 195.

extra food to help sustain them, and were even invited to spend time with Konrad socially, bizarre and uncomfortable though it likely was for the men whose lives hung in the balance. He regretted those blows that he felt he had to dispense. But, that he continued to give them at all illustrates one of the many failures of the human condition. Though Konrad sought absolution in personal mercies, what small measure he could offer had no material effect in the face of the sea of harm which his blows helped to fill.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Tempting though it is to write the history of the Holocaust as the climax of a sorrowful arc of German history that has since vanished, and tempting though it is to despise the perpetrators as a discrete group of uniquely identifiable evil men, such conceptions imply a false finality. The question of how the Holocaust could have occurred is, in that scenario, answered too simply; through attribution of evil intent, fanatical character and mindless subservience to the perpetrators. But, we do ourselves a disservice if we so limit our scope of understanding.

Although it is satisfying to believe that the crimes of the past can be dismissed as the work of people who were untroubled by what they were doing -- either because of sincere belief in the effort or because of a lack of examination of their own role -- such dismissals invite self-deception. Those explanations do not excuse the responsibility of the perpetrators, but they do ease our own burden of reflection. Because we are troubled by what was done, because we have no evil intent, because we are not fanatics or thoughtless in our action, the crimes of Nazism might seem entirely foreign to our being. They adopt the character of something which, because it happened in the past, is similarly confined to the past. Looking past the very human failures of perpetrators like Konrad to instead assume unearthly evil places both action and motive safely outside our own experience.

There was a machine operating around and through Konrad, elements of which were unique to Nazism, and it is true that that machine was evilly conceived. It was that machine which amplified individual acts into the transcendent evil that was the Holocaust. But, though their actions did propel it, the people who manned this machine were not controlled by it as it could not act for them. Quite apart from the stereotype of an effortlessly evil and self-possessed

officer with a peaked cap and menacing trench coat, the people who gave themselves over to atrocity were most often men like Konrad who could not have imagined constructing such a machine themselves, but who nonetheless surrendered themselves to work the cogs and flywheels by which it operated. This machine was larger than any individual, and yet it depended upon the constant input and consent of the individuals who worked to support it. The machine did not annihilate agency, but it did entice its operators to forget their own.

Konrad was not a leader. He did not have the discretion to set policy, and he was not directly cruel, nor wanton in dispensing death as others were. Whether he killed personally is unknown, although guards around him did. No matter his objections, whether he was a mastermind or not, however little power he felt he had within the machine of death that Nazism created, he made himself a part of it. He was all too aware that prisoners were dying due to the conditions in which they were being held, and he was similarly aware of the civilians and prisoners who were being shot for trifling reasons or for no reason at all, some of them in his presence. So too was he aware of the round-ups and executions that *Einsatzgruppen* were leading in his vicinity. By his service as a guard he enabled these things. While his role may have been smaller and less direct than that which many other Germans played, Konrad was present as a perpetrator of the Holocaust. Konrad Jarausch was not a manufactured cog, or an automaton, or otherwise enslaved by the machine. He possessed the basic autonomy common to all human beings to exercise choice and, even being aware of the atrocities unfolding about him, he chose to continue in his given role.

Konrad blamed bureaucrats and commanders and nature itself for the deaths because he could not bear to blame himself, and perhaps that was weakness on his part, but there were very few who were strong enough to do otherwise. Contrary to the presumption that these men who

abetted the Holocaust had a clear or constant sense of purpose, Konrad vacillated endlessly. He agonized over what was expected of him. One of the defining features of his experience was how quickly events on the ground outpaced his ability to coherently respond or even understand them. The dissonance which tore at him was such that, while he never endorsed the mass killing as a moral good, he did construct elaborate mental scenarios which at least made it *not his fault*.

Konrad's failure was that, while he may never have imagined such terrors as those that he would later advance, neither did he imagine a way out while he was in the midst of them. He clearly understood that his prisoners were being wrongly abused, but he closed himself to the consequence of that knowledge. He was not willing to accept that he was an accomplice himself. Though he understood that his actions were wrong, he imagined they were necessary, or that things would be worse altogether without his interventions. Besides those relatively few perpetrators who were positively motivated by malice or moral nihilism, Konrad's example again illustrates how someone can be wholly aware that what they are doing is wrong, how the wrongness of it can even discomfit them, but continue regardless.

In this, Konrad personifies the uncanny human ability to create stories and excuses which hammer circumstance, imagined necessity and perceived helplessness into a faint veneer of justification. He persisted as an accomplice to atrocity not because he thought that it was simply right to do so, but because he convinced himself of an artificial dilemma through which he could pretend to have no power to do otherwise. Konrad created a vision for himself wherein he imagined that although the situation was already terrible, it might have been worse but for his meager influence.

None of us should feel so secure as to presume that we could not also fall to similar mistakes. Konrad's path towards atrocity was not preordained. Nor was the Holocaust. No more than any of us, he was not a clairvoyant. He was foolish, and he was cowardly and he was naive, but so might we all be.

Writing during the Algerian War, Jean-Paul Sartre once reflected on the dark days of the German occupation of France. While the Gestapo were working their tortuous methods "in the Rue Lauriston," he wrote, "Frenchmen were screaming in agony and pain: all France could hear them." He remembered in disbelief that in those days the whole of the free world was united in outrage with sympathy for the victims, and that while "the outcome of the war was uncertain and the future unthinkable ... one thing seemed impossible in any circumstances: that one day men should be made to scream by those acting in our name."¹ Nonetheless, France debased itself to the methods of its former abuse by torturing Algerians and other opponents of their colonial system.

Sartre had thought that such an inversion was impossible. But, in confronting its reality, he concluded that the pillars of humanism and law which he had hoped sheltered liberal democracy had no strength in themselves except that which was lent by the people who were willing to defend them. It was not only Algerian rebels who were victimized, but bystanders as well and even metropolitan French men and women who fell afoul of violence which had slipped free of the restraint of law and could no longer distinguish friend from enemy or justice from

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "A Victory" in Henri Alleg, *The Question*, trans. John Calder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), xxvii.

injustice. His conclusion, which echoes with a wringing truth to this day, was that “anybody, at any time, may equally find himself victim or executioner.”²

Regarding the Holocaust, we know that people killed directly and were making choices to do so, and that is a difficult sort of knowledge because it continues to this day. People still kill, they still brutalize, and they repeat so many of the horrors of the past seemingly without consideration for the fact that we now occupy the present. As such, the obligation to explain these atrocities presses upon us as an obligation to explain ourselves. “Happy are those who died without ever having had to ask themselves ‘If they tear out my fingernails, will I talk?’ But even happier are others, barely out of their childhood, who have not had to ask themselves that other question: ‘If my friends, fellow soldiers and leaders tear out an enemy’s fingernails in my presence, what will I do.’”³ While we might expect someone to refuse an order to pull a trigger, what do we expect of people whose participation enables, in some small way, others to do the killing?

² Sartre, “A Victory,” xxviii.

³ Sartre, “A Victory,” xxviii.

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