



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Ordinary Men and Abhorrent Behavior

by Christopher S. Knott

Although the world has seen many horrible events which defy explanation and simply boggle the mind, none has equaled the unparalleled cruelty of World War II's Eastern front and Pacific theater. The intensity and sheer brutality inflicted, not only on soldiers, but civilians, has horrified the world. Who should be blamed for the Holocaust is still an open question. Was it only Hitler's plan? The SS officers who gave the orders? Their subordinates who obeyed them and did the actual killing? Why were Japan's forces so cruel and bereft of humanity in Nanking? How did the Marines in Peleliu spiral into barbarity? These are questions that may never be answered to satisfaction but, more important questions bubble to the surface, reaching beyond blame; how does a soldier reconcile the sadistic killing of unarmed civilians and what did it take for the U.S. marines to become inculcated to the environmental hardships and battlefield horrors they faced?

To shed some light on these questions, the narratives of Christopher Browning and E. B. Sledge are both important and insightful resources. Browning's, *Ordinary Men, reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, attends to the actions of a group of rear area reservists during the German occupation of Poland. Sledge's, *With the Old Breed*, is a memoir of a U.S. marine struggling to survive, not only physically but mentally, during offensive operations on Peleliu and Okinawa. Both these works describe situations and actions experienced by ordinary men, but driving them to do horrendous and inexplicable things.

The Reserve Police Battalion 101's primary duties in Poland were to clear the ghetto and assist in the deportation of Jews to rear areas via train. Many of these men were neither Nazis nor combat trained. (Browning, pgs. 3-4) Nevertheless, after some time, they became remarkably efficient murderers of innocent civilians. Their first experience of this mass execution duty was at Jozefow, Poland, and this became the tactical blueprint for subsequent massacres. Being the first such action, it differed significantly because of its shock value. The Battalion commander, Major Wilhelm Trap, offered a reprieve to those who felt unable to complete the task, but only a few took advantage of this offer. Perhaps the most chilling and confounding detail is that the men were paired off "face to face" with their victims, making these killings personal and almost intimate. It should come as no surprise that, after the executions had ceased and the men returned to their barracks, "they were depressed, angered, embittered, and shaken" (Browning, p. 69). Their commanders had the foresight to have alcohol available, (hinting at prior knowledge of expected events and their possible aftermath), perhaps in hopes of numbing the experience and assisting in coping.

If killing soldiers in military combat is difficult and traumatic, what about killing innocent civilians? There is evidence that some members of the unit asked to be relieved of duty after the killings commenced, while others deliberately shot wide. (Browning, pg. 70) The psychological cost of killing is devastating for soldiers and, for this reason; they are reluctant to

fire their weapons, let alone kill their military targets on an up close and personal basis. Those who participated saw mostly no battlefield experience, they were mostly older men who would not see service in the German Wehrmacht and were used for rear area security.

“The effect on the killer is intensely traumatic, since the killer has limited internal motivation. The close range of the kill hampers the killer in his attempts to deny the humanity of the victim and severely hampers denial of personal responsibility for the kill.” (On Killing, pg. 202) Eventually as the battalion partook in a larger number of operations to round up and execute Jews they would grow more and more accustomed to it and at times would even joke about it. (Browning pg. 127) The unwillingness to shoot did not change the later ruthlessness and efficiency of moving Jews to extermination camps. Christopher Browning writes, "Spared direct participation in the killing, the men...seemed scarcely to have been disturbed" (Browning, pg. 90) It seemed the old adage "out of sight, out of mind" came into play on more than one occasion.

Many in the battalion did participate in more organized bloodbaths during the "cleansing" of Poland. These subsequent massacres followed the blueprint set in Jozefow, with the Jews being marched to the forest, forced to lie down, and receiving the "neck shot." These men experienced shooting so many Jews that they became experts on how to make the killing as mechanical and mentally removed as possible, while remaining efficient. This routine act of dehumanizing and killing Jews of all ages, men and women, desensitized the participating men of the battalion.

Another job that the Police Battalion performed was the hunting down of Jews who hid in the forests or elsewhere in the country side. These "Jew hunts" differed from the deportations and organized massacres. Here, "each individual policeman once again had a considerable degree of choice" (Browning, pg. 27). These hunts turned the killings into a game and a more personal affair since the policemen saw their victims face to face. Some men were so far bereft of humanity that they were more eager than others to participate. Lieutenant Brand's wife recorded an alarming exchange when a policeman approached them at breakfast and "stood stiffly at attention and declared, 'Herr Lieutenant, I have not yet had breakfast.' When my husband looked at him quizzically, he declared further, 'I have not yet killed any Jews.'" (Browning, pg. 127)

So how do ordinary men commit such atrocities? There are several theories, for example, the idea that the Jews had been the downfall of the German people and empire so something had to be done about them, was a constant propaganda tool. A noted German, military historian, Jürgen Förster, researched the attitudes of the soldiers committed to the Eastern Front, “The pitiful hordes on the other side are nothing but felons who are driven by alcohol and the [commissars'] threat of pistols at their heads...They are nothing but a bunch of assholes!...Having encountered these Bolshevik hordes and having seen how they live has made a lasting impression on me. Everyone, even the last doubter knows today, that the battle against these sub-humans, who've been whipped into a frenzy by the Jews, was not only necessary but came in the nick of time. Our Führer has saved Europe from certain chaos". (Förster, pg. 127)

The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101, like the rest of German society, were immersed in a deluge of racist and anti-Semitic propaganda. The ideology of indoctrination, the view of peers, the brotherhood of armed service, following orders, and conformity to authority my help bridge the gap of understanding. With that being said, much of the indoctrination material they were exposed to was clearly inappropriate or irrelevant to them, being designed for front line or

SS units. Material specifically designed to harden the policemen for the personal task of killing Jews is conspicuously absent from historical documentation. These men were influenced and conditioned in a more general way, instilled in particular with a sense of racial superiority and kinship as well as Jewish inferiority and "otherness", many undoubtedly were ready to fight, but being unequivocally prepared for the task of killing unarmed women and children, they were not. "The shooting of the men was so repugnant to me that I missed the fourth man. It was simply no longer possible for me to aim accurately. I suddenly felt nauseous and ran away from the shooting site....I then ran into the woods, vomited and sat down against a tree...my nerves were totally finished." (Browning, pg. 67)

Moving on to the events of the Pacific theater and Sledge's experiences, there is a marked difference in view and environment. Here, the Japanese strategy of "defense in depth" was put into play after the disastrous banzai charges of Guadalcanal and Saipan. This strategy involved the construction of interconnected tunnels, caves, and other defensive positions that the Japanese defended in a prolonged, organized retreat, hoping that through attrition, the Americans would find it too costly in blood and equipment to move against the Japanese mainland.

The Marines not only had to face the ruthlessness of the Japanese soldier, they had to cope with a hostile and unforgiving jungle that played on their psyche. The combination of the unknown quantity and capability of the enemy, partnered with the environmental hazards drove many to close off their humanity; compartmentalize their feelings and views of right and wrong. They were put into a situation where the unbearable heat, knee-deep mud, the stench of decaying bodies, the countless flies and maggots attracted to them, the poor food, undrinkable water, malaria, dysentery, constant rain, and nightly Japanese raids, bleed away the joy of life. Every night these Marines fired while sitting in muddy holes, and every day they were forced to move against an enemy who would never surrender and would give no quarter.

Mr. Sledge tries to convey some of his experience through his writings. "I gazed down in horror and disbelief as the metal scraped a clean track through the mud along the dirty whitish bone and cartilage with ribs attached. The shovel skidded into the rotting abdomen with a squishing sound. The odor nearly overwhelmed me as I rocked back on my heels. I began choking and gagging as I yelled in desperation, 'I can't dig in here! There's a dead Nip here!' The NCO came over, looked down at my problem and at me, and growled, 'You heard him; he said put the holes five yards apart.'"(Sledge pg. 302)

Sledge describes an instance in which he and a fellow marine come across the mutilated bodies of three other Marines, including one whose genitals had been cut off and stuffed into the corpse's mouth. This sparks an attitude of retaliation and he goes on to describe the behavior of some Marines towards dead Japanese. This includes the removal of gold teeth from Japanese corpses and even a severely wounded Japanese soldier, urinating into the mouths of the corpses, as well as other disturbing trophy-taking.

Mr. Sledge seems to speak of the truth of conflict. "War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrade's incredible bravery and their devotion to each other...But it also taught us loyalty to each other--and love. That esprit de corps sustained us." (Sledge, pg. 315)

An interesting contrast between the German and Japanese atrocities is that the German actions were more hidden; they took great pains to hide from the general population the fact that

they were shipping the “undesirables” off to newly conquered territory to the east, to live separately from Germans. Whereas with the Japanese, their atrocities were rarely hidden; entire military units made a contest out of beheading prisoners, women and children were forced into tall buildings of Nanking, which were then set afire, while the Japanese soldiers would watch them jump from the roof in desperation. Their newspapers would cover these incidents and it would be celebrated back home. These differences may come from the fact that Germany was part of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as well as having a tradition of liberal philosophy. Dissimilarly, Japan’s cultural practices were xenophobic and geared to the support of the nation; revering the personification of the divine in Emperor Hirohito. This, perhaps, allowed them to view all races and cultures other than Japanese as inferior and subhuman.

Once convinced that the enemy is subhuman and not worthy to live, then guilt and culpability are easy to manage. One of the most essential elements in the “enemizing” process is the need and the ability to dehumanize the enemy. Moral human beings do not kill other human beings, but they do kill geeks, Huns, krauts, Japs, kikes...etc. Propaganda has repeatedly portrayed the enemy as faceless, stripping them of human and individual characteristics as a preliminary step for fighting and ultimately destroying them. The enemy was simultaneously seen as dangerous, controlling and overpowering, (Japan’s early offensives and Germany’s blitzkrieg or Jewish businessmen and intelligentsia), as well as small, inferior, weak and wormlike. A divide between good and bad, divine and abyssal and finally, “us” and “them”, lies at the root of this conflict. The enemy became a projected object, representing a direct danger to the soldier, the unit and the nation.

Bibliography

Browning, Christopher R., *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper Perennial, 1993

Sledge, E. B., *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, Presidio Press; 1st ed., 2007

Förster, Jürgen, *The German Military’s Image of Russia*, In Erickson, Ljubica; Erickson, Mark; *Russia: War, Peace and Diplomacy: Essays in Honour*, 2004

Grossman, Dave Lt. Col, *On Killing; The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Back Bay Books; Revised ed., 2009

Christopher S. Knott is an Air Force retiree that is now attending Graduate School at the University of Pennsylvania. My current research is in Global Studies and Conflict.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2011, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).



