



Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers by Guenter Lewy.

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In *Perpetrators*, political scientist Guenter Lewy (emeritus; Univ. of Massachusetts Amherst) seeks to explain how thousands of Germans and Austrians,¹ could murder over six million Jews and another six million of their European neighbors. How did ordinary people of all ranks and educational backgrounds come to commit “the worst crime in modern history” (vii), conducting genocidal round-ups, shooting and bludgeoning civilians to death, using diesel engines to gas children, and operating mass-destruction death factories?

Lewy, himself a witness of *Kristallnacht* and son of a Buchenwald camp survivor, has written three earlier books on Nazi Germany. The present volume, devoted specifically to German perpetrators, includes thirteen photographs and generous footnotes to back up its author’s assertions.² He has examined hundreds of trial records of Nazi functionaries, SS men, and regular Wehrmacht soldiers from Nuremberg in 1945 to the present.³

Chapter 1, “Jews in Concentration Camps,” examines the spread of special prisons like Dachau (est. Apr. 1933) intended for various classes of “undesirables.” By April 1944, there were twenty such camps with 165 sub-camps (7). After barely two weeks of training, sadistic guards routinely tortured inmates, often despite having signed declarations forbidding mistreatment. Some starving Mauthausen prisoners worked eleven-hour shifts in a quarry, where guards for sport pushed them off the “stairway of death” (120). Others were frozen to death in cold baths, forced to eat excrement, or provided targets for firearms practice. The few guards who elected not to engage in such tormenting prove that they could choose humanity (20).

In chap. 2, “Massacres by Shooting,” we learn that in some 1.8 million cases, one man killed another human being, usually with a bullet to the head (21). Adolf Hitler’s words spurred the annihilation of Jews as the arch-enemy, even if his subordinates lacked written orders to kill all Jews. The *Einsatzgruppe* mobile killing units in the East comprised about three thousand men, of whom 43 percent were university graduates (24). In the last half of 1941, Germans shot more than half a million Jews. They began with males (considered saboteurs, Bolsheviks, or some other type of “undesirable”) but were soon killing women and children, even infants thrown in the air like clay pigeons. Sick and crippled Jews were shot immediately to avoid traffic delays. The Germans and their Ukrainian helpers murdered 33,771 Jews in two days at Babi Yar (29–30 Sept. 1941).

1. With the willing, often enthusiastic, assistance of Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Serbians, Romanians, and others.

2. Lewy critiques Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (NY: Knopf, 1996) for its, in his view, too simplistic attribution of virulent anti-Semitism to the killers. He prefers Christopher Browning’s more limited conclusions in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: Harper/Collins, 1992).

3. Lewy also exhumed internal Third Reich trial records in which men killed Jews or, worse in Nazi eyes, kept gold extracted from their victims’ suitcases and bodies without authorization. By contrast, defendants who took photographs or committed unapproved forms of murder were tried, condemned, and duly punished.

Victims were spared no humiliation (31).⁴ German commanders typically ordered them to strip naked in order to, allegedly, make it easier for gunmen to see their fellow humans as animals. It also made it easier to send unbloodied clothing back to Germany for reuse. Living victims were forced to lie together like sardines on the bloodied dead and wounded before they too were shot. Officers freely distributed alcohol such as schnapps to dilute their men's sense of responsibility beforehand and facilitate their celebrating afterward (35). The Wehrmacht at first condemned the Waffen-SS murders of civilians, but observation and practice habituated officers and men to the "necessary task." There was no "clean" German Army.⁵ German soldiers were instructed to regard every Jew in the Soviet Union as a partisan, even before there were partisan units; this made them suitable for summary execution.

Chapter 3, "Portraits of Killers," describes individual Germans who followed orders and others (viz. "excess perpetrators") who went beyond them, as well as a few who tried to avoid participating. Attorneys, doctors, church ministers,⁶ and other highly respected members of German society volunteered to shoot Jews. Some were proudly genocidal, others passively complicit. Lewy even found records of German families indulging in "Execution Tourism."

Chapter 4, "Serving in a Death Factory," concerns the evolution of mass killing from amateurs hooking up diesel truck exhausts to crowded vans (Chelmno, Dec. 1941) to constructing dedicated professional murder camps like Belzec (Mar. 1942), Sobibor (June 1942), and Treblinka (July 1942) during *Aktion Reinhard*. Often built by Jewish slave labor, the death camps forced Jews to supervise undressings, sort looted property, remove dead bodies of gassed victims, clean killing rooms, and carry corpses to the ovens, pyres, and burial ditches. At Auschwitz, still living Jewish children were thrown into the fires (67). In postwar trials, Auschwitz perpetrators claimed they did not know about the mass murders. Rudolph Höss, the camp commandant, on trial after the war, insisted "I didn't personally murder anybody" (69). Kurt Franz, deputy commander at Treblinka, kept a photo album entitled "Good Times" (71).

In chap. 5, "Evading Participation and Opposing the Killing," the author explores why, when Germans were allowed to opt out of the killing process, so few actually did so. After all, none of the 103 who asked to be relieved on grounds of psychological strains was tried or punished (74). Paul Blobel, an *Einsatzgruppe* commander, hated Jews for making him participate in killing them (78–79). Police lieutenant Klaus Hornig objected to the illegal killing of civilians on the grounds of international law and the German military code. He was tried and confined at Buchenwald till Allied liberation (Apr. 1945). Anton Schmid, a deputy platoon leader in Vilnius, was executed for saving Jews from the ghetto. All contact with Jews—other than murdering them—was a punishable offence beginning in fall 1941. One Nazi wrote, "We do not want to look like frenzied sadists" (84).

4. See, further, Wendy Lower, *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021).

5. Hamburger Inst. für Sozialforschung, *The German Army and Genocide: Crimes against War Prisoners, Jews and Other Civilians, 1939–1944* (NY: New Pr, 1999), originally a photographic exhibit (1995), initially stirred bitter controversy for proving through many contemporary images that the German regular army in fact took part in enslavement, brutalization, and annihilation in the East. Janina Struk's *Private Pictures: Soldiers' Inside View of War* (NY: Tauris, 2011) expands the topic of war photography to include American and British soldiers' private "trophy" photographs taken at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

6. The ca. eighteen thousand Catholic priests, theology students, and lay brothers who served the Wehrmacht's spiritual needs as military chaplains voiced no objections to the annihilation of the Jews (86).

Chapter 6, “The Perpetrators on Trial: Flawed Justice,” reviews hundreds of postwar trials held in Allied and German courts after West and East Germany were reorganized as states. Most defendants were judged to be, at worst, only accessories to murder. West German authorities investigated 172,000 alleged wrongdoers, brought charges against 17,000, and convicted just 6,700 (88), only 981 of them for acts of killing. Of these, 182 received the maximum sentence—life imprisonment. Many summoned individuals secured fraudulent certificates of incapacitating illness. German judges did not apply the American military courts’ legal concept of “common design” (91), holding that anyone involved in the operation of death camps and their mass atrocities had violated the laws of civilized nations. German courts, often staffed by former Nazi judges and other Third Reich officials, sympathized with the perpetrators.⁷ They certainly did not try their own former judicial colleagues (127).

The Allied occupation’s denazification program vetted five million Germans. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer declared in 1949 that this had caused “much harm and much mischief.” Lewy explains that the German requisites for a verdict of murder in civil society did not fit Holocaust monstrosities (97). For instance, many killers claimed to have acted in the sincere belief that their behavior was patriotic, sanctioned by the highest authority, and for the good of the German people. Military defendants who had obeyed clear orders were considered to be accomplices only and literally got away with murder. The German judiciary concluded that average persons could not be expected to resist totalitarian states’ criminal orders (99). Moreover, since Hitler presumably ordered the extirpation of the Jews, all other Germans were only accomplices and hence absolved of responsibility.⁸ This morally flawed line of thought was no coincidence. John Demjanjuk’s identification as a guard at the Sobibor death camp led to trials in Israel, the United States, and Germany for crimes against humanity. Finally, a Munich court, staffed by a new generation of prosecutors and judges, found him guilty. He was implicated in the deaths of more than 28,000 people, starting with two transports of 1,300 children under the age of sixteen.

In the volume’s seventh and final chapter, “Explaining the Holocaust,” Lewy attempts the impossible. Specifically, he debunks the various psychological experiments “proving” that most anyone can become a torturer or a mass murderer under the influence of group actions or habituation. He missteps in calling Germans among the least anti-Semitic populations in Europe before 1933. This ignores the influence of Martin Luther’s Jew-hating diatribes and downplays earlier, less systematic instances of German and Austrian racial killing. Metaphors of Jews as purulent diseases, insects, blood aliens, etc., etc., constantly spread by respected institutions for six years, helped produce a Christian population indifferent to its now isolated Jewish neighbors. During the war, fanatics like Heinrich Himmler called for “superhuman acts of inhumanity” (129) as the campaign of assault, arrest, and killing accelerated.

Many law-abiding Germans could believe in everyday racism during the Weimar Republic, then serve the Nazi killing machinery, and later convert themselves back to law-abiding citizens

7. By 1949, 80 percent of Nazi-era judges again held office in all Western zones of occupation. In some provinces, 100 percent of Nazi judges returned to their posts. German survivors expertly exploited Allied fears of the Soviet Communist menace, claiming that Stalin’s growing nuclear threat justified Hitler’s attack on his erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union.

8. German courts have more recently rejected the plea that German killers had to follow orders: no trial discovered that serious harm had ever arisen from disregard of orders to kill (109). A few German courts rejected Nazi indoctrination as a defense. But, mitigating circumstances more often reduced guilt and produced light sentences, resulting in “ten minutes of jail time for each person killed.” These factors included youth, old age, lack of education, ambition, internment as a POW, wounding, loss of family members, etc. (113).

in both postwar German Republics. Inclination, circumstance, ambition, and patriotism trumped personal agency and morality and left “an ineradicable blot on an entire German generation” (136).⁹ Guenter Lewy’s welcome new study provides in English summary yet further proof of commonplace German involvement in the past millennium’s ghastliest crime.

9. The German army deliberately starved to death more than two million Soviet POWS and executed over a million more captives contrary to custom and the unwritten laws of war.