Special section: Perpetrating violence

Violence
an international journal

Violence: An international journal
1–21
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DOI: 10.1177/2633002420916979
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On the role of dehumanization of victims in the perpetration of mass killings: Research notes

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Abstract

This article discusses the shared idea that dehumanization plays a fundamental role in mass killings, helping executioners in no longer perceiving as fellow human beings those they had to kill. Using perpetrators' letters and judicial interrogations from German people involved in the War in the East between 1941 and 1944, the article questions what some of the killers say about their victims' attitudes and actions, and their observations of them. It examines the recognition of attitudes of humanity by some of the executioners themselves and asks a simple question: What are we to do with these traces? The answer is that these last exchanges between some executioners and their victims deserve our attention because they compel us to argue that the executioners killed in spite of having sometimes recognized the humanity of their victims. Such an argument (killing nonetheless) has strong implications for interpretations of extreme violence.

Keywords

dehumanization, Holocaust, Jewish victims, mass shootings, Second World War

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> *[Near a small Belarusian village] These people, including the woman and the child, were executed on the spot by the members of the SD [the intelligence agency of the SS and the Nazi party] accompanying them, using pistols. They were executed from behind, because I can still see quite clearly the way the child looked over his mother's shoulder toward the shooters. After the gunshots, the victims were left lying on the ground. I don't know what happened to them afterward.*
>
> *[Near Kachowka] Obviously these shootings did not proceed in the calm manner in which one can discuss them today. The women screamed and wept and so did the men. Sometimes people tried to escape. The people whose job it was to get them to stand by the well yelled equally loudly.*
>
> *[At Melitopol] Among the victims there were also families, who died together, holding hands. I still remember a young couple who wanted to die together. At first, the victims had to lie on the ground of the anti-tank ditch, then on the bodies of the people who had already been killed.*[1]

Texte who described these scenes was Richard Tögel, a policeman who served on the rear of the Soviet front between 1941 and 1942. As a member of Reserve Battalion 9, his company was placed at the service of *Einsatzgruppe D* when Operation Barbarossa was launched in June 1941. In other words, he was one of those brutal executioners in the units responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children, whose bodies were left in pits. During judicial proceedings in Bielefeld, on 28 January 1965, he admitted that he was frequently part of the execution groups themselves. In particular, he was one of the shooters during the killing he describes in the second extract, at the edge of a well near Kachowka, in present-day Ukraine. What interests me here, however, is less the descriptions of the executioners and the horrors they committed than their obverse: what the killer says about his victims' attitudes and actions, and his observations of them. Typically, former members of these units who appeared before tribunals used an immediately recognizable tone, one that Browning (1992, 2000) has described as "the anonymous passive." In this instance, however—somewhat surprisingly, given the scene of execution being described and the particularly incriminating role he played in it—Tögel uses the first person to discuss the displays of dread, terror, and tenderness that he recalls among the people he was about to murder. A child's gaze over his mother's shoulder, terrified cries, an embrace that the killers no doubt prohibited: it is the recognition of such attitudes by the executioners themselves that I wish to examine here, both in terms of its presence in their testimonies and its consequences for the study of participation in extreme violence (See box 1).

We may think that this juxtaposition of vocabularies typically alien to each other—atrocities and emotions—results from the fact that the quoted extracts were not produced at the time of the events but many years later and, moreover, while Tögel was on trial. He may have wanted to show his interrogators that, in spite of the horrific acts he stood accused of, he had not been indifferent to his victims' fate. Daniel Goldhagen (1996), in particular, makes this argument to rule out using such remarks unless they are corroborated by other witnesses who were also present ("A Note on Method," pp. 463–468). The time at which the remarks were made and their potential tactical implications, however, do not explain everything. We can find similar traces, though even more fleeting, in archives written at the

Box 1. A note on the documentation and its uses.

This article relies on the identification and extensive citation of documents describing open-air massacres of Jewish communities. By "perpetration" (or "acting out," as psychoanalysts would say), I mean taking part in one of the aspects—roundups, transportation, managing the waiting victims, the shootings themselves—of a process whose fatal outcome was clear to the executioners. As I am interested in examining the conditions of these executions in terms of the face-to-face interactions between the executioners and their victims, the testimonies I use are, primarily, those of the killers themselves, both those doing the shooting and their "helpers" (armorers, guards, "assistants," etc.). To serve as a comparison, however, I also describe the perspective of civilians who did not participate but who witnessed the scene. Finally, since my central topic is the role attributed to the dehumanization of the victims in this process of execution, my main criterion in selecting quotations was that they contain descriptions, by the executioners themselves, of how they perceived those who were about to die at the very moment of the massacre.

In absolute terms, there is a vast body of sources available for such a project. We could potentially draw on the whole corpus of testimonies by the executioners themselves describing the mass shootings, whether at the time (in diaries and letters) or after the fact (in depositions in judicial investigations). In this sense, I could have used the entirety of the monographs produced on the destruction of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, in particular those grouped under the label *Täterforschung* ("the study of perpetrators").[3] To enable the reader to more easily evaluate this article's hypotheses and claims, I selected texts that are familiar to specialists, so that the reader can easily refer to the original sources. My corpus consists primarily of two anthologies of original documents collecting the personal writings and judicial interrogations of executioners (Klee et al., 1991; Umansky, 2018), and three monographs on well-known units, by Browning (2017 [1992]), Goldhagen (1996), and Welzer (2007 [2005]). With the exception of Umansky's collection, these works are available in English, German, and French.

As noted above, one of the main problems facing studies of perpetrators is that most available accounts come from judicial interrogations conducted after the war, often more than 20 years after the facts. In this article, I have tried to compensate for this bias by using writings produced by killers at the time of the events themselves (such as diaries and letters), by quoting third-party accounts of their words and actions (as in the case of Hohn), and by privileging testimonies in which the killers incriminate themselves.

Beyond these classic ways of mitigating the flaws of documentation produced after the fact, much of my work consisted in identifying traces describing the attitudes of the victims—their reactions to death, as described by their tormentors, and the ways in which they appealed to them, in speech and in actions, when the time came for their killers to act. By focusing on these interactions, the differences between types of testimony—contemporary or after-the-fact, unprompted or compelled—tend to blur. The ways in which the killers describe their victims' attitudes are more objective than their judgments of their own behavior, and less likely to be driven by a desire to absolve themselves of responsibility.

time of the massacres, produced by even the most brutal of executioners. For instance, Paul Hohn, a 41-year-old Wehrmacht soldier, wrote in his diary about the atrocities committed before his eyes by *Einsatzkommando 8* of *Einsatzgruppe B* in Belarus—in this case, the complete destruction of the Jewish community of the village of Berezino:

> *31/1/1942. This afternoon, half of the nine hundred Jews were executed: men, women, and children all together. The most hard-working kept at it; seven men; this morning there was grief and lamentation in the houses; already saying farewell when they saw their neighborhood surrounded. It's 3 p.m. For the last hour we have been executing all the Jews who still live here, 962 people, women, the elderly, and children. Finally . . . We can hear harrowing cries. The ones who try to escape are executed on the spot. We start with the children, then the elderly, then the women . . . This is how we eliminate the plague [when asked about this sentence in 1947, Hohn replied: "The word 'plague' that I used to refer to the Jews was common at the time"]. From my office window you can see the ghetto five hundred meters away and hear the gunshots. Too bad I wasn't there. 8 p.m. Some Jews try to escape, lots of shooting. Evening—dance!!! in the social center.*[2]

On this occasion, Hohn was a mere spectator. Nonetheless, his journal demonstrates far more clearly than Tögel's interrogation how deeply the Nazi worldview had penetrated contemporary German society. It is hardly surprising to encounter the regime's visceral anti-Semitism in a middle-aged man who had joined the Nazi cause early on, becoming an SA member—from the Nazi Party's original paramilitary wing—in 1933 and a party member in 1937. The shift, without any transition, from the horror of executions to the banality of leisure activities brings to mind the well-known diary of Johann Kremer, a doctor who, in addition to describing the gassings he supervised, discusses the quality of the meals and parties organized for the SS garrison at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Mariot, 2018). Nonetheless—and this is what interests us here—even at the heart of a particularly contemptible passage ("finally," "plague," "dance"), we find a few words that strike us as odd in such a context: "harrowing cries," "grief and lamentation," "farewell." What is there to say about this strange mix of genres?

Dehumanization as a factor that supposedly facilitates participation in mass killings

In the specialized literature on genocide and mass violence, the dehumanization of victims plays an ambiguous role. On one hand, it is one of the most frequently cited factors in the explanations of the onset of genocidal violence (for a general presentation, see Volpato and Andrighetto, 2015). On the other hand, as an explanatory variable, it is rarely viewed as primary or central. Specialists view it as a necessary precondition, but one that is not sufficient in itself: there are societies where minority groups face severe social and legal prejudice and spatial segregation without this leading to genocide (Straus, 2015). Yet it is very rare to encounter massacres that do not involve at least some minimal form of symbolic degradation of the enemy.

In most cases, the dehumanization argument, at a macro level of analysis, relates to the ideological dimension of mass violence. Dehumanization is one of the main ways by which perpetrators of genocide attempt to legitimize the elimination of a minority group. James Waller argues that dehumanization—alongside us-versus-them thinking and blaming "the enemy"—is one of the three mechanisms that encourage the "social death of the victims" (Valentino, 2004: 16–22; Waller, 2002, chap. 8: 236–257). Abram De Swaan (2016) emphasizes the processes of "de-identification" and moral, legal, and psychological "compartmentalization" in the ostracism of "target groups." Helen Fein (1990: 27), who uses dehumanization as a tool for identifying genocides, offers a more precise approach. For Fein, dehumanization includes all those stereotypes, metaphors, and forms of defamation and symbolic degradation spread by large-scale propaganda operations that designate the victims as foreign and inferior—whether as sub- or non-human (as insects, parasites, germs, or viruses),[4] or else as superhuman (as satanic, omnipotent figures).

The most well-known genocides of the 20th century, as well as the majority of the century's wars, involved the metaphorical degradation of the enemy, often in acute terms. This commonly made use of animalization: Germans as pigs during the First World War, Tutsi cockroaches, Jewish rats, and so on. A number of studies of such events have tried to reconstruct the imaginaries of the Other among the promoters of the violence, and to describe the spread of these beliefs and stereotypes among members of the majority group, typically through "ego documents." Like the examples given at the start of this article, the vast majority of studies on Germany's war in the East focus on the letters and diaries of Wehrmacht soldiers, which show the penetration of Nazi ideals in the ranks, in particular, the widespread anti-Semitism among troops.[5] There are frequent examples of ordinary Germans using language related to animals and excrement in their correspondence to refer to Jewish populations in the occupied East (see, for example, Latzel, 1995, 1998).

While this use of the concept of dehumanization is that most frequently encountered in the literature, it is not in this sense, or rather at this level of analysis, that I will discuss the role of dehumanization in the perpetration of mass violence. In this article, I am interested in the concept at a more individual level, at the point of connection between ideology and practices of killing. It is one thing to reconstruct the contours of a cultural imaginary of the enemy and to identify traces of it in letters. It is quite another thing to understand precisely the role that the dehumanization of the victims plays in the completion of the act of killing itself.

What forms does dehumanization take at the moment of participation? In the case of the executioners, dehumanization involves those moments where the processes described above, in which the minority group is excluded, produce their effects and are internalized by those they were intended for. It indicates the presence of a cold, mechanical, unfeeling executioner, whose task, however gruesome, has become routine.

In the case of the victims, dehumanization involves those mechanisms that remove the final traits of their personhood during a massacre: they are held in degrading conditions, waiting endlessly without water or toilets; they are deprived of their last possessions and stripped naked before being stripped of life; finally, their bodies are abandoned. The figure of reference here is the concentration camp prisoner, an image formed in 1945 on the basis of photographs taken during the liberation of the camps: shaven-headed, registered, tattooed (in Auschwitz specifically), clothed in rags, and left to deteriorate until they die (Lindeperg and Wieviorka, 2008; Wieviorka, 2015).

The shift from concentration camps to mass shootings brings together two unrelated processes and raises a number of questions for us. On one hand, the earliest shootings did not require victims to be stripped naked; this only took place in the second stage, primarily in order to facilitate the recovery of their property. On the other hand, the victims of the open-air massacres did not always undergo processes of depersonalization and physical degradation as intense as those in the camps.

As one would expect, these objections have gone unheeded, given the obvious power of the image of the concentration camp prisoner: in terms of practices of violence, it was assumed that dehumanization played a facilitating role for the killers. The central idea in the literature is that the executioners succeeded, quite concretely, in no longer perceiving those they had to kill as fellow human beings. By excluding their victims from the "universe of obligation" that defines our common humanity (Fein, 1990: 36), they did not view their acts as wrong or criminal. By placing their targets "outside the web of mutual obligation" (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990: 28), they were able to "morally disengage" (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1975) and so to feel no pity—stress, perhaps, but not pity—when they had to kill them. Researchers therefore made a significant leap by transferring the concept of dehumanization to the act of killing. They reckon, as Michael Mann, for instance, has argued, that dehumanization plays a fundamental role, helping executioners to overcome their moral inhibitions about taking the lives of defenseless human beings (Mann, 2004: 271). De Swaan (2016) puts it even more directly: it allows them to "ignore the humanity of their victims" by creating "enclaves of barbarism" (pp. 7, 127).

The question, then, is how far this symbolic degradation of the enemy—their reduction to animals, their objectification—in fact played a role, and how literally it was taken, when the time came to kill. In other words, when faced with the individuals they were ordered to kill, did the Germans who took part in the mass killings in the East believe that they were dealing with *things that were less than people*? If so, can we clarify the meaning of this claim?

Killing as though it were nothing

In some cases, we must answer in the affirmative. How else are we to understand the attitude of those mechanical executioners who were able to remain on the job for hours, killing entire families, one after the other, in atrocious conditions, and enjoying a cigarette at the break? (We will encounter a striking example of this below.) How else can we view the conduct of those who volunteered whenever they could to shoot or hunt down Jews? What else can we say about those men who beat women and children to hurry them along to the place where they were to be executed? Or those men, selected for their physical strength, who were tasked with forcibly laying the people who were about to be executed over the bodies of those who had just been killed?[6]

Considering such images, the processes of dehumanization seem undeniably effective, at least from the point of view of the executioners—and especially those who made up the hard core (Kelman, 1973). They seem to have been at best indifferent to their victims' fate, and at worst glad to eliminate people who had effectively been reduced to the status of pests. In one instance, they enlivened their massacre with the playing of an accordion.[7]

Furthermore, the absolute degradation of the victims in the eyes of the executioners is a criterion for identifying genocidal practices, one that goes beyond the traditional interpretative opposition between situation and disposition. In the famous debate between Browning and Goldhagen over the behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in the district of Lublin, the question of dehumanization serves as a rare point of agreement. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning (2017 [1992]) argues "that the men's concern for their standing in the eyes of their comrades was not matched by any sense of human ties with their victims. The Jews stood outside their circle of human obligation and responsibility" (p. 76). In particular, Browning claims that dehumanization played an increasing role as time went on and one massacre followed another. In the first mass killings, which took place at Józefów, the direct physical link between each killer and his victim—executioners had to lead their targets to the place where they were to be killed—made distancing more difficult. Beginning with the second massacre, at Łomazy, this person-to-person connection was broken, enabling greater depersonalization. Strikingly, Browning (2017 [1992]: 86) adds that, among the accounts of the second massacre, only one policeman claims to recall the identity of one of the victims; far more could do so for Józefów.

For Goldhagen, dehumanization plays an even greater role. We might even say that it describes his approach as a whole and that it is an immediate consequence of his theoretical assumptions: since the Germans were long-standing eliminationist anti-Semites (they wanted to kill the Jews), the exclusion of their victims from common morality was a widespread feature of people's thinking long before the killings—a self-evident fact that hardly needs to be recalled (Goldhagen, 1996: 420). For Goldhagen, the strongest evidence is provided by the handful of extracts from interrogations in which rank and file policemen make literal claims about dehumanization: "The Jew was not acknowledged by us to be a human being" or "the category of human being was not applicable" (cited by Goldhagen, 1996: 280). Armed with such citations, which he extends to apply to the whole, Goldhagen argues that the killers were fully convinced of the righteousness of their cause—without ever recognizing that such arguments may absolve the killers of a measure of responsibility.

In summary, the effectiveness of the dehumanization of the victims seems to be proven by the barbarity of the face-to-face massacres that took place. However, if we examine more closely the range and the precise content of the testimonies available—a difficult task, given the horrors involved—the situation appears more ambiguous: we can observe, at the moment of participation, traces of emotional interference on the part of the killers when they had to face their victims. It is this emotional interference that I will now consider.

Humanity in massacres

It is frequently said that our image of mass killings is problematic, since it comes almost exclusively from the killers themselves—whether in private texts produced at the time or during later judicial interrogations. The victims are no longer there to give their account. As we have seen, the difficulty is reinforced by our habit of retaining only the most eloquent parts of the sources, those that best reveal the executioners' logic and beliefs.[8] In other words, the victims' voices are very rarely available to us, and we pay too little attention to those of the least fanatical killers—the ones who killed "nonetheless," and who thereby represent, as I wish to argue in the following paragraphs, a fundamental enigma for scholars.

From this point of view, the monographs dedicated to units specializing in mass killings, which follow from Browning's work, offer a remarkable opportunity. They examine clearly defined groups, rather than scattered traces—a collection of letters, for instance, grouped together for unknown reasons—and therefore typically cover all of the attitudes among members of the group, from the most to the least motivated. I begin with one such study. While recognizing that, once again, our sources are post-war interrogations, I attempt to identify each instance where the hypothesis of dehumanization appears less obvious or well-supported than described above (See Box 2). I then focus on the description of a mass shooting given by a German civilian sent to the East. Based on the differences between this account and the interrogations of the executioners, I argue that more objective descriptions of such situations—descriptions in which, unlike in the case of the former policemen, there is no interest in silence, either for legal reasons or for reasons of self-respect—offer us a clearer perception of what was seen by the executioners. The soldiers were killing entire families, not sub-humans or other animals, and their victims' final acts necessarily provoked feelings of identification, among some of them, at least.

Among the many works on killing units in the East, Harald Welzer (2007 [2005]) has produced a major study on Police Battalion 45. In the book's central chapter, which studies the litany of massacres in which the unit took part, we can identify a number of scenes in which, years later, the killers recall being reminded of their proximity to those they were about to kill—often by the victims themselves. The list makes for difficult reading:

Box 2. Examples of moments of proximity or humanity in face-to-face interactions between executioners and victims.

(All of the following, cited in Welzer, 2007 [2005], come from interrogations of policemen from Battalion 45 during the 1960s. Ludwigsburg federal archives, BA, B162/AR-Z 1251/65 and B162/AR-Z 269/60.)

- Battalion 45's first killing involved the execution of the family of a pharmacist from Dubrovka, one of whose daughters, fifteen years old, served in the battalion's kitchen (p. 133).
- Later, in September 1941, the victims at Berdichev "hid their faces in their hands" during the execution (p. 149).
- At Berdichev, as in most of the killings, the mothers held the hands of those children who were big enough to walk (p. 152).
- At Berdichev, a woman insulted one of the battalion's section commanders, Klamm, and spat on his boots before he killed her himself (p. 156).
- At Berdichev, a policeman could not help but identify with a Jewish father and his son of about four years, who were shot by Klamm: "I remember it because the Jew was as old as me, and I had a boy of about the same age at home" (p. 194).
- At Shepetovka, a young man refused to be shot and had to be pushed into the pit (p. 156).
- In Vinnytsia, the killers recalled "cries for help," in German, from victims who had not died immediately: "Kill me properly, then!" (p. 164). Others unintentionally fell and cried out.
- In Vinnytsia, a woman offered jewelry and money to the killers. The executioner explained to her that there was nothing he could do. It appears that she could speak German, as she then asked to speak to an officer (p. 167).
- In Vinnytsia, several policemen apparently transposed certain scenes into their own lives: Welzer mentions the unusual account of a man named Pfeffer, who described a rumor within the group that the children of a German officer had been carried off with the Jewish victims by mistake, and thrown along with the corpses into the cistern that served as a mass grave (p. 168).
- Elsewhere, a killer remarked about an execution near Kiev: "Some of the Jews came forward very quickly, probably to speed up the execution and so that they didn't have to bear the dread of dying any longer" (p. 179).

Box 2. (Continued)

- At Bila Tserkva, even an ardent Nazi refused to shoot children, arguing that his men were fathers (p. 190).
- At Babi Yar, mothers dropped their children before the killers, asking them to "aim well" (p. 195).
- Again, during a preparatory roundup, one of the killers thought of his children: "Particularly striking to me was the sight of a family who passed by in a line of Jews, and which included a girl of about twelve years. I couldn't help but think of my daughter of the same age, who was also blonde. At the time, I had tears in my eyes—I still do now—because I knew precisely what awaited these poor defenseless people: that they would be shot" (p. 195).
- One of his colleagues, Martin Fasse, describes something that "weighed heavily on him": "I especially remember a little blonde girl who took me by the hand. She was also shot afterward. That is what upset me the most" (p. 195).
- Welzer also quotes a shooter from Sonderkommando 11a: "I myself still remember having to shoot a woman who was trying to protect her little baby from death by holding it to her chest. I can't describe in words what was happening to me at that moment." Further on, the same man mentions a seven-year-old boy who "turned to me, begging for help. At that moment, I felt like I was being made to kill my own child" (p. 196).
- Wolfgang Trautmann, another executioner, remembers being confronted by a girl of sixteen years: "She kneeled before me and asked me why she had to die. I replied that I couldn't explain it to her either, and that I couldn't help her. While I was having this short exchange with the girl, they were already shouting from the pit: Why have you stopped? This girl caused me profound pain, because there was nothing I could do to help her" (p. 196).
- An excerpt from the interrogation of an executioner: "During an execution, I remember that I recognized a Jewish woman, who shouted to one of the German soldiers: 'You need to help me!' It was clear that she had recognized him in the cordon" (p. 327, note 130).

After citing the account of the policeman who identified with the father and son murdered before his eyes by his superior, Welzer (2007 [2005]) suggests that such identifications with the victims are "very rare" in interrogation reports (p. 195). However, if we include within this category all the different forms of reminders of the victims' humanity, as I have done in the list above, they do not seem quite so exceptional. In his second chapter, on the itinerary of Police Battalion 45, Welzer uses depositions by the killers regarding half a dozen massacres. Because he made an initial selection regarding sources, we cannot tell how many mentions of the victims exist in the court records of the proceedings against the unit. The fact that, without having explicitly aimed to do so, he was able to collect more than a dozen in a single chapter, indicates, I believe, that such appeals (on the part of the victims) and projections (on the part of the executioners) are—at least in the eyes of the killers—a recurrent feature of these massacres. They take three main forms, which are not mutually exclusive.

The first involves cases where the victims had had direct interactions with their executioners, whom they knew in person, perhaps intimately—as in the final case mentioned above of a woman calling out directly to one of the executioners. There is the striking example of the Garsden massacre, which took place on 24 June 1941, in the annexed territory of Memel, on the Lithuanian border, where Jewish families had taken refuge (Browning, 2004: 253–256; Kwiet, 1998; Matthäus, 2007: 223). As the unit charged with carrying out the execution had been recruited from the Memel *Schutzpolizei*, some of the killers had to shoot former friends and neighbors. During the post-war trials, two of the executioners reported that one of those killed, a local soap maker, called out to one of the non-commissioned officers: "Gustav, shoot well!"[9] Such face-to-face meetings are not uncommon in the literature. On one hand, the Germans often used local auxiliaries, whether *Volksdeutscher* or not, who may have grown up with those they ended up killing.[10] On the other hand, the Germans who participated in the killings in the East sometimes encountered individuals who had been deported from their own home towns, and whose accents and manners they recognized, if not their faces. Finally, such proximity between executioners and victims also existed in cases where the executioners were ordered to kill people who had done work for them. A Wehrmacht soldier who was asked "Did you know anyone among the victims?" answered:

> *Yes, there was a dentist I spoke with for a little while at the edge of the pit. I knew him because he had treated me once. He had sanded down one of my teeth. At the edge of the pit, the dentist asked me if all this was really necessary. I replied that we were only the little people, carrying out the orders of our superiors . . . The dentist's last words were: "What's happening now, we've been expecting it for a long time."*[11]

As well as these cases of executioners and victims who recognized each other, there are also cases of what I have called direct appeals, situations in which the victims address their executioners through words or actions, as in the case of the dentist. These appeals, which are made in the language of the killers—something we will return to—include requests for their suffering to be cut short, demands for explanation (why are you doing this?), other acts of resistance (spitting on the officer's shoes), and pleas to be spared. They are interesting because they describe behaviors and attitudes that are difficult to invent and about which the executioners do not necessarily state any opinion or judgment when recalling them. In one typical case, a sergeant who kept a diary recalled that:

> *[O]ne of the Jews, while already standing at the edge of the pit ready to be executed, took out a military booklet from the French imperial army [?] from his pocket, held it up, and shouted that he had been a German soldier during the First World War. The SS chief who was watching shouted: "Turn around, you bastard." Right after that he was executed.*[12]

Finally, we can reverse the perspective by including all those instances in which the executioners describe projecting their own personal situation onto that of their victims. As we have seen, this involves cases in which the executioners describe thinking of their own children when faced with children they had to kill, as well as passages where they recall displays of a mixture of tenderness and despair among families. Once again, these traces of humanity appear, although often more ambiguously, in documents describing the killers' reactions during the massacres. This is how Hanns Pilz, a propaganda officer at the Wehrmacht headquarters in Ukraine, describes the extermination of the Jews of Rovno on 7, 8, and 9 November 1941:

> *We heard terrible moans, prayers, and cries. It was mainly the children who cried and wept loudly. Later, the members of the execution unit gave us details of what they had done. I remember they said that the Jewish men were not as brave as the women. Many of the women had apparently gone calmly toward the pits, and they lowered their heads so that the SS only had to pull the trigger. In contrast, the men cried out and resisted, so they had to be dragged violently to the edge of the pit.*[13]

In all the extracts I have cited, even those in which the speaker was among the executioners—in some cases, some of the most enthusiastic of them—the definitions and clichés of anti-Semitic propaganda are largely absent. Even in the last example—hardly unambiguous, since the executioners' interpretative framework leads them to equate courage with docility and cowardice with resistance—they identify moral attitudes among their victims. They see women and children, not beasts or things. Even in their writings produced at the time, they admit that these are defenseless people. And yet they gun them down one after another.

Studies of Reserve Police Battalion 101 confirm this sentiment. In particular, they reveal the relative frequency with which victims addressed their killers in their own language, as well as the various occasions when the victims were deportees who came from the same regions of Germany as the executioners. Browning notes that, during the first massacre in Józefów, several policemen interacted with the Jews, discovering that they had German origins, coming from Hamburg or Bremen, the large Hanseatic cities in which they themselves had been born. At least one of them was a veteran of the First World War, who asked, in vain, for mercy. One of the killers describes the following scene:

> *After I had carried out the first shooting and at the unloading point was allotted a mother with daughter as victims for the next shooting, I began a conversation with them and learned that they were Germans from Kassel, and I took the decision not to participate further in the executions. (Browning, 2017: 71)*

During the transfer from Komarówka to the Międzyrzec transit ghetto, some of the policemen recognized a Jewish woman from Hamburg who had owned a cinema that one of them had often been to, the Millertor-Kino (Browning, 2017: 103). During the liquidation of the Końskowola ghetto, a policeman chatted with the president of the Jewish council, originally from Munich, until he was taken away to be killed (Browning, 2017: 113). Like their colleagues in Police Battalion 45 with the pharmacist's daughter, the members of the second company were ordered to murder a couple who had cooked for them (Browning, 2017: 144). Goldhagen, too, mentions accounts that describe the executioners recognizing their own *Hochdeutsch* (High German dialect) among the voices of the victims, both in Józefów and Łomazy, and the "shock" this must have caused. He also describes two men recalling a veteran from Bremen who begged them to spare him, and another who explained that among the women and children he had to kill was an old lady who asked him: "Will you make it short?" (Goldhagen, 1996: 219–220).

We could spend a long time expanding this list of appeals and interferences. But we must go further, leaving behind the testimonies of the executioners themselves, and attempt to show that the argument of dehumanization appears increasingly fragile, and less relevant, when we give a more complete and more objective description of the behavior of the victims in their final moments. Doing so, it becomes difficult to imagine that the killers could have maintained any fiction of inhumanity while watching the scenes unfolding before their eyes. To illustrate this, I turn to an exemplary and unusual account cited by Welzer of a German, Hermann Friedrich Gräbe, who served in Ukraine between September 1941 and January 1944 as chief engineer and director of the Sdolbunov branch of the Solingen-based construction company Josef Jung. He first described the final stage of the elimination of the surviving Rovno Jews in the summer of 1942 (Burds, 2013: 87–89). He recounted the terrifying violence of the ghetto raid on 13 July, the endless screams of women and children, parents carrying their dead children, and children dragging their dead parents to the train. He then gave the following account of the execution of the Jews of Dubno on 5 October 1942. It should be read in full.

> *My foreman and I went directly to the pits. Nobody bothered us. Now I heard rifle shots in quick succession from behind one of the earth mounds. The people who had got off the trucks—men, women, and children of all ages—had to undress upon the orders of an SS man, who carried a riding or dog whip. They had to put down their clothes in fixed places, sorted according to shoes, top clothing, and underclothing. I saw a heap of shoes of about 800 to 1,000 pairs, great piles of under linen and clothing. Without screaming or weeping these people undressed, stood around in family groups, kissed each other, said farewells, and waited for a sign from another SS man, who stood near the pit, also with a whip in his hand. During the 15 minutes that I stood near I heard no complaint or plea for mercy. I watched a family of about eight persons, a man and a woman both about 50 with their children of about 1, 8, and 10, and two grown-up daughters of about 20 to 24. An old woman with snow-white hair was holding the one-year-old child in her arms and singing to it and tickling it. The child was cooing with delight. The couple were looking on with tears in their eyes. The father was holding the hand of a boy about 10 years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head, and seemed to explain something to him. At that moment the SS man at the pit shouted something to his comrade. The latter counted off about 20 persons and instructed them to go behind the earth mound. Among them was the family which I have mentioned. I well remember a girl, slim and with black hair, who as she passed close to me, pointed to herself and said, "23." I walked around the mound and found myself confronted by a tremendous grave. People were closely wedged together and lying on top of each other so that only their heads were visible. Nearly all had blood running over their shoulders from their heads. Some of the people shot were still moving. Some were lifting their arms and turning their heads to show that they were still alive. The pit was already two-thirds full. I estimated that it already contained about 1,000 people. I looked for the man who did the shooting. He was an SS man, who sat at the edge of the narrow end of the pit, his feet dangling into the pit. He had a tommy gun on his knees and was smoking a cigaret. The people, completely naked, went down some steps which were cut in the clay wall of the pit and clambered over the heads of the people lying there, to the place to which the SS man directed them. They lay down in front of the dead or injured people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching or the heads lying*

> *motionless on top of the bodies which lay before them. Blood was running away from their necks.*

Gräbe gave this testimony in November 1945 during the preliminary examinations of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg.[14] Although he was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 1965 for having saved several hundred people by employing them on his railway construction sites in Ukraine, using false papers, his position on the eastward expansion of the Reich is entirely ambiguous.[15] As the branch manager of a German company, who worked for the *Reichsbahn* (the German National Railway) for most of the Nazi occupation, he was one of the many German colonists sent to administer the newly conquered territories. This is the situation that makes his testimony so compelling in comparison with typical police interrogation reports: although he was a German occupier, his description of the killings is unusual for its poignancy, focusing on the victims' final words and actions.

Reading his words, we have to consider that the heartbreaking attitudes he describes—displays of tenderness and protection among family members, preparation for imminent death, appeals to the killers, all of which are rare but, as we have seen, not completely absent in judicial interrogations—were among the most frequent ones the killers faced as they supervised their waiting victims and led them to where they would be executed. Once again, it is difficult to think that they could have perceived anything "dehumanized" in these caresses and whispers. The killers did not see animals, demons, or anything else. They saw families trying to comfort each other in spite of the immense terror of the moment. They saw parents holding their children in their arms. They saw young adults, old men, defenseless human beings killed with extreme violence. And yet they shot and killed them relentlessly. I am unsure that I will ever be able to fully understand how this was possible. It is particularly difficult to understand precisely because many of the killers carried out their tasks even while recognizing the absolute distress of those they were about to kill.

Killing nonetheless

I have found significant indications of situations in which the killers seemed disturbed by the attitudes and appeals of their victims. There is nothing new in this observation in itself. Specialists have regularly noted the unease among some of the executioners, even the most motivated and senior of them—in particular, some of the officers of the *Einsatzgruppen*— when faced with the horror of the task they were to carry out (e.g. Ingrao, 2010). Often, such accounts of their difficulties in carrying out their mission have led historians to study the ways in which execution policies were adapted to relieve the executors of the burden of the ordeal: first, Himmler gave instructions that the officers were to take care of the killers and that festivities should be organized on the evening of a massacre (Matthäus, 2007: 229); later, and more significantly, industrial killing methods were developed, with abortive "trials" of explosives and mobile killing vans, and the gradual development of gas chambers. (The literature on this is vast. See, for example, Brayard, 2004; Browning, 2004; Longerich, 2010.) Nevertheless, appeals made to the executioners by their victims, the possible interactions between them, and the killers' judgments about the behavior of their victims—which, as we have seen, did not always express unease—have received far less attention in and for themselves. Their connection to the dehumanization argument, in particular, has received little notice. My aim here is to examine this connection further, simply by asking: What are we to do with these traces, these tiny clues that do nothing to change the terrible fate of the Jewish families who were wiped from the face of the earth?

The answer to this question is that these exchanges and these difficulties deserve our attention because they compel us to argue that the executioners killed in spite of having sometimes recognized the humanity of their victims. The fact that they found a child looking at them, or heard victims addressing them personally, only rarely stopped the action, and, with few exceptions, it did not prevent them from killing.

Such an argument (killing nonetheless) has, it seems to me, strong implications for interpretations of extreme violence. Logically, we can compare it to another observation: some executioners killed even when they were opposed to the task. There are numerous examples of such cases in the literature, even within certain groups renowned for their undeniable involvement in massacres.[16] I will provide two examples. The first, which has been much discussed, is Buchmann, a businessman and a lieutenant in Reserve Police Battalion 101, and its most highly placed member to "resist" its murderous policies.[17] He was one of 12 men to refuse to participate on the morning of the Józefów massacre. One day, however, when Commander Trapp was not there to protect him, Buchmann too was forced to participate in the liquidation of the Kock ghetto, under pressure from his superiors and his men, who "made disparaging remarks about me and looked down their noses at me." After this episode, he successfully requested a transfer to Hamburg (Browning, 2017: 100–101).

Another example is the case of the first battalion of Infantry Regiment 691, which was ordered by its commander, Kommichau, to eliminate the Jewish population of the village of Krutscha, near Smolensk. The three company heads reacted very differently to the order. Lieutenant Kuhls, 33 years, the youngest of them and a party and SS member, obeyed without question. Lieutenant Sibille, 47 years, a teacher and a party member since 1933, told Kommichau that he "could not expect decent German soldiers to soil their hands with such things" (Kühne, 2010: 112). He would only do so if it was proven that the people they were to kill were partisans. When his superior asked him if he could be "tough," Sibille replied, "In such cases, never." Finally, Nöll, a First World War veteran, and also a teacher, who was only slightly younger than Sibille, also resisted but did not dare to refuse for fear of being perceived as too "soft." He delegated the task to a sergeant. This sergeant was furious with Nöll and did not hide his anger from his men. Nevertheless, he obeyed: orders are orders. Between 100 and 200 people were murdered. Reactions also differed in the ranks. Some soldiers were enthusiastic—as one of Nöll's men said in 1956: "The Jews were persecuted anyway; they were our enemies, weren't they?" (Kühne, 2010: 112). Most soldiers, however, obeyed only "with reluctance": some were hesitant to do such "dirty work," and some came close to nervous breakdowns, particularly because pregnant women were among those to be killed. One soldier, a theologian, told a comrade about his "spiritual distress." Without being offered the option to stand aside, however, none of these men refused to participate.[18]

The value of these two cases is that they involve men who were demonstrably opposed to their orders, but who nonetheless participated in the massacres. By taking into account this particular type of "figure" of the executioner, we can tackle one of the most difficult things to explain: that "non-believers," that is, Germans who did not fully conform to the model of the Nazified "political soldier," could nevertheless have participated in mass murder—or, more precisely, that the participation of "non-believers" was necessary to ensure complete extermination. Once again, this is not to deny the existence of killers who went beyond their orders, such as Max Täubner, the SS engineer who announced to his men that he wanted to exterminate 20,000 Jews himself, setting about his project on his own initiative until—extraordinarily—he was brought before an SS tribunal (Büchler, 2003; Klee et al., 1991: 196–207). Nor is it to deny the existence of willing killers—a more common sort than the likes of Täubner—who took pleasure in cruelty. My argument is simply that, if all the killers were fanatics of this sort, there would be little left to explain—or, rather, the explanation would be very brief. "The German perpetrators," wrote Goldhagen (1996), "were assenting mass executioners, men and women who, true to their own eliminationist antisemitic beliefs, faithful to their cultural antisemitic credo, considered the slaughter to be just" (p. 393). Welzer (2007 [2005]) echoes this view: the Germans of the 1930s and 1940s "did not have the same moral conceptions as us" and, consequently, had "no difficulty bringing their murderous acts in line with their self-conception" (pp. 74–75). As soon as we accept such premises, explanations become self-evident—even tautological.

The problem is that such interpretations remain at the very least incomplete. It is more difficult and more disturbing, but also more important, to explain the participation of those who were opposed to the killing, or, for the purposes of this article, those who carried out the shootings in spite of their knowledge that they were slaughtering defenseless women and children, rather than non-human monsters. It is characteristic of genocides and mass killings, especially ones that extend over time, that they involve (and implicate), both indirectly and directly, sections of the population who were neither willing nor enthusiastic participants.

Put another way, recognizing that dehumanization is not always necessary for explaining participation in killings leads us to argue that approaches based on dispositions (on beliefs and representations of the world) are insufficient if we want to account for the whole range of executioners. Furthermore, by focusing on the links between an ideology and its adherents, such approaches erase all context effects, making it impossible to refer precisely to the situation in which these actions took place. In concrete terms, this means that, within such narratives, peer groups and the networks of reputations within them disappear; what remains are individuals, social atoms whose key feature is their relationship with a supposedly shared culture. There are no longer any differences among the executioners, and barely any links between them beyond that of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. When historians deprive themselves of the ability to think in terms of peer groups, or when they reduce such groups to masses of identical components, we blind ourselves to reputation effects and to the internal power relations within such living environments. Disposition-based explanations are perfectly suited to interpreting the commitment of the most clearly ideologized executioners, those that freely acknowledged their anti-Semitism and that took pleasure in destruction. But such explanations have difficulty accounting for those who took part in the shootings but who remained aware of the fundamental immorality of their acts, or who participated reluctantly in the killings.

We need other hypotheses to explain the actions of these men, whose participation, however limited in time, is necessary for genocide to take place. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning put forward a number of hypotheses to explain such reluctant participation, highlighting the role played by the absolution of responsibility, the division and standardization of tasks, peer pressure, and conformity—hypotheses that have received little subsequent attention in empirical works. We would include a number of other hypotheses that assume a strong connection between disposition and situation. These emphasize the way in which cognitive dissonance is resolved, for the worst, as individuals adapt their beliefs to expected behaviors, as well as the pluralistic ignorance among the actors, with each individual believing that the others consent to the mission because no one raises any objections. Examining these claims is a lengthy task, one that goes beyond the bounds of this article. I end on this programmatic note in the hope that it will be taken up and developed in the future.

Conclusion

This article has essentially shown, with the use of examples, that dehumanization does not appear to be systematically present in participation in mass killings. Rather, I have argued that some of the killers may have carried out the task demanded of them while recognizing—even at the very moment of the massacre—the humanity of their victims.

This sometimes bewildering state of affairs has led us to three conclusions. First, the argument that individuals participated in massacres in spite of emotional interference allows us to focus more closely on the behavior of the victims: attention to such details almost automatically leads to a denser, fairer description of what happened during the killings. Whatever the watered-down testimonies of the executioners may suggest, these Jewish families did not go to the slaughter without a reaction. Even, and perhaps especially, at this stage of the killing, it is crucial not to leave the last word to the executioners, even if it is their stories that, unfortunately, constitute the main sources available to us.

Next, on the interpretative level, the argument put forward in this article calls for a more determined effort than is typically made to connect dispositional and situational explanations. I suggest that we cannot entirely forego the latter, since only situational accounts appear to be able to explain the participation of those executioners who could not approach the elimination of entire families casually or who, at the moment of action, continued to view those they were about to kill as their fellow human beings.

Finally, the observation that some executioners killed even while recognizing the humanity of their victims pushes us to reconsider the claim, which is increasingly prevalent in the literature, that one of the successes of Nazism was its imposition of a new normativity, a “Nazi morality” (Chapoutot, 2014; Goldhagen, 1996; Gotto and Sterber, 2014; Koonz, 2003; Welzer, 2007 [2005]), which was widely accepted in German society. Once again, I absolutely do not deny that Nazi officials made use of a profoundly altered normative framework. But I question whether it was so dominant, so omnipotent, that it managed to guide the actions of the executioners by making the killings appear natural and self-evident. The way in which some executioners reacted to the words and actions of their victims does not so much encourage a strict opposition between Nazi and Judeo-Christian moralities—as though everything magically returned to "normal" after the end of the war. Rather, it invites us to attempt to better understand how these moralities conflicted and how they were connected, particularly in the management of culpability. In doing so, we avoid the risk entertained by those researchers for whom the internalization of Nazi beliefs explains everything: that of exonerating the executioners by casting them as the mindless playthings of a fundamentally other culture.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Tal Bruttmann, Claire Zalc, Marc Le Pape, Sabrina Melenotte, and the journal's anonymous reviewers for their remarks, criticism, and advice. I am solely responsible for the article's conclusions and for any errors it may contain.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations

1. Interrogation of Richard Tögel, 28 January 1965, Bielefeld, BA/BAL, B 162/1224, 2516 ff., cited in Umansky (2018: 37, 41, and 43), respectively. Part of his testimony was published earlier in Klee et al. (1991: 61). (*Translator's note*: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.)
2. Journal of Paul Hohn, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen (LAV NRW), Gerichte Rep. 10 n°206, 19ff. and 31–40, cited by Umansky (2018: 85–86). The German original was partially published in Gerlach (1999: 684).
3. The literature on the subject, particularly in the German case, is too extensive to be cited here. For Ukraine and Belarus, which I frequently discuss in this article, I refer the reader to Pohl (1996), Gerlach (1999), and Cüppers (2005). For an overview, see Paul (2002).
4. "Sub-humans" do not pose a threat to humanity, and therefore do not become the targets of a widespread elimination, unlike "non-humans," which are seen as dangerous by their very nature.
5. Among the large number of works that use such sources, see the well-known studies by Omer Bartov (1991) and Stephen Fritz (1995). On the problems raised by the use of letters and postal censorship, see Humburg (1998), Latzel (1999), and Manoschek (2008 [2003]).
6. See the account of the Babi Yar massacre given by Höfer, a driver, in Klee et al. (1991): "In addition to the two marksmen there was a "packer" at either entrance to the ravine. These "packers" were *Schutzpolizisten*, whose job it was to lay the victim on top of the other corpses so that all the marksman had to do as he passed was fire a shot." (pp. 65–66)
7. See the case of the small SS logistics unit, led by the engineer Max Täubner, which played music during the killers' breaks (Büchler, 2003).

8. Walter Manoschek (2008 [2003]) notes that, among the 25,000 letters written by Wehrmacht soldiers that make up the famous Sterz collection, the oft-cited ones that “describe the situation of the Jews” make up only 0.5% of the total, or 120 letters (p. 29). Similarly, Ian Kershaw (2012: 591–592, note 44) notes that, for March 1945, a postal censor’s report found that 92% of the letters checked were “colorless,” dealing primarily with private matters (on the use of letters, see also Kershaw, 2012: 526, note 42). The “apoliticism” of correspondence is clearly a more general problem for historical uses of postal censorship, as shown by André Loez (2010) for the First World War.
9. Trial Lfd. Nr. 465a, LG Ulm vom 29/8/1958; Ks 2/57 (*Prozess zu Ulm*), in De Mildt and Rüter (1976: 61, 86).
10. For the killings in Rovno, which I will return to, see the case of Datsiuk, an Ukrainian auxiliary, who worked as an interpreter for the *Schutzpolizei*, and who participated in the killings during the Aktion of 7 to 9 November 1941, in Sosenki Forest, where more than 23,500 Jews from the city were murdered. Datsiuk acknowledged that he had killed a number of young women who, according to a survivor, he had been close to when they were classmates at the school in the city. See the two accounts cited in Burds (2013: 61).
11. Interrogation of Alois Holzhauser (born 1902), 16 August 1966, Saarbrücken, soldier in Feldkommandantur 198, Ukraine, BArch, BAL, B 162/7906, 10ff., cited by Umansky (2018: 92). Holzhauser “specialized” in delivering death blows, in order, he explained, to cut short the suffering of the victims.
12. Sworn testimony of Alois Kräutle (born 1897), 3 July 1961, sanitary sergeant in Feldkommandantur 579, Ukraine, BArch, BAL, B 162/5302, 119ff. and 185ff., cited by Umansky (2018: 197).
13. Interrogation of Hanns H. Pilz, an Austrian, also born in the late 19th century. Pilz kept a journal and photographed the ghetto and extermination sites of the Jews of Rovno, the capital of the Reichskommissariat of Ukraine, where he was stationed from July 1941 to January 1944. Interrogation of 16/3/1965, BAL, B 162/2876, 60ff., cited by Umansky (2018: 239–240).
14. Nürnberger Protokoll II, affidavit of 10 November 1945, document 299-PS, Exhibit USA-494. The description of the Dubno massacre was read during the tribunal session of 27 July 1946 (International Military Tribunal Nuremberg, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the IMT Nuremberg, 14/11/1945-1/10/1946*, vol. XIX, 507–509, 1948 [online]).
15. Gräbe had been an NSDAP member since 1931 but had already been imprisoned for several months in 1934 for challenging the regime’s anti-Jewish policies. He claims to have been thrown out of the party following this, although he was not formally struck off its rolls. See the apologetic biography by the pastor Douglas Huneke (1985: 9–25) based on interviews with “Fritz” Gräbe, as he calls him.
16. See, for instance, the 30 members of the Nowy Sącz border police, based 27 km south-east of Kraków. The group, led by Heinrich Hamann (Mallmann, 2004), carried out a large number of atrocities, returning from them singing the Nazi anthem in memory of Horst Wessel. The same unit, however, included some who were opposed to such actions, such as Paul Denk, a driver, who angered his peers by attempting to hide at home. Similarly, Köster—an assistant to Hamann who quickly became his whipping boy—hesitated, but joined in out of fear for his reputation. He was accidentally killed by his chief, who confused him for a Jew during a raid on the ghetto. See Kühne (2010: 74). Once again, the information comes from post-war judicial testimonies.
17. I have used the term “opposition” and, here, the even more problematic term “resistance” to describe Buchmann’s unwillingness to participate in the killings. Below, I will use the term “non-believer,” in reference to the figure of the “political soldier” often used to describe the attitude of German troops on the Eastern Front. It is not easy to find an appropriate term to

describe those who participated without being fully willing or entirely convinced by Nazism. It may be best to use the expression chosen by the historian Konrad H. Jarausch (2011) to describe his own father's attitude when publishing his war letters: a "reluctant accomplice."

18. See the investigation file, with the interrogations of those involved, Hauptstaatsarchiv Darmstadt, H13 Darmstadt, 979, Ks 2/54, cited in Kühne (2010: 110–113).

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