

Ordinary Men

"If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans." - Major Trapp

It is estimated that about one percent of the population is psychopathic; lacking any conscience at all, and another four percent are sociopathic, possessing a weak conscience. Christopher R. Browning sets out to answer the question: If only five percent of us are psychopathic or sociopathic, how is it that 80% of the men assigned to a reserve police battalion in Nazi occupied Poland were capable of carrying out many tens or hundreds of mass murder campaigns and anti Jewish actions, leading directly and indirectly to the deaths of some 100,000 innocent people?

The obvious answer, and the one which we so dearly wish to believe, is that these men were not ordinary; that if put in the same situation we ourselves would not participate in the wholesale slaughter of thousands. We want to believe that these men are evil and fundamentally different from us. "Ordinary Men" is chilling because it dispels this idea by showing that while there were certainly sadists among their ranks, most of the participants were middle class workers from Hamburg with families, friends, and, most strikingly, a strong aversion to their own sinister actions.

Browning offers a multi-dimensional and far more chilling explanation. These men were largely motivated by pressures to conform, pressures to advance their career, the human instinct to follow orders, and desensitization by their earlier participation in far more egregious activities. The first murderous campaign was the killing of some thousand Jews in a single day, an event which many men were not given a chance to prepare for, and only realized the gravity of midway through or afterwards. Even more chilling is that most of the men in the group, around 80%, had grave misgivings about their activities and did their best to avoid killing Jews, yet continued to participate despite the clear violation of their morality. That such a large majority can continue to participate with full knowledge of their moral turpitude is truly frightening. We hope that the morality of our fellow men will prevent them from promulgating such atrocities.

We also see the variety of ways in which we rationalize our behavior. Many men were content to deport Jews since they didn't have to do the killing themselves. They thought that since the Jews were going to die anyways, putting them on the trains was less deplorable than shooting the Jews themselves. A particularly eerie rationalization was the blind embrace of anti-semitism by some members of the battalion. One lieutenant became particularly callous with regard to the humanity of the Jews, and is reported to have started taking satisfaction in the torture and execution of Jews. This lieutenant's behavior was characteristic of some cohort of the battalion who were disgusted by the first murder campaign, but created for themselves a worldview which allowed them to justify their murderous behavior.

Browning discusses the work of the psychologist Stanley Milgram, who ran the well-known Milgram experiment, and Phillip Zimbardo, who ran the infamous Stanford prison experiment. Milgram's experiment showed that in the presence of an authority figure, subjects would be substantially more cruel than without the authority present. He tested this by having subjects administer electric shocks of intensifying voltage to a 'victim'. Milgram also found that subjects would be apt to administer higher voltages in groups of peers, when those peers thought that higher voltages were acceptable.

Zimbardo found that when there are two artificially created groups, the group that is in 'power' quickly begins to mistreat the subordinate group. These two studies together offer an explanation for the behavior of the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101. What I found particularly interesting, and scary, was that in the Zimbardo experiment, the percentage of 'fair', 'moderate', and 'cruel' guards correlates with the percentages of police who refused to participate, begrudgingly participated, and wholly embraced the participation. This means that in any group of people randomly selected from the population, that group could have the capacity to do the same things that Reserve Police Battalion 101 did.

I would like to touch on another point which is less explicitly emphasized by Browning, but which I none the less think is important: courage. About 20% of the men managed to regularly avoid participating in the actions and the general view of the battalion was that these men were cowards and weak. Browning makes the point that the true cowards were the 80% who did not step forward, and instead followed orders. The true measure of a man is his resolve to stick to his morals in the face of adversity, rather than kowtowing to the will of the group. The men who participated in the actions were "moral eunuchs who simply accommodated to each successive regime". Another example of courage was a Polish man who chose to be shot with his wife, rather than sacrifice her and escape, a decision that any noble man should make in the same situation.

This is a hard book to read because of the graphic descriptions of murder and the profound realizations that accompany its reading, but it is a book that I think everyone should read. It is important to realize our own capacity for evil, and realize that atrocities *are* committed by 'ordinary men'. The book also shows the value of being courageous and upholding a moral framework. Knowing what you are capable of is empowering and humbling, and you should never underestimate your capacity for either good or evil. Everyone is capable of incredible things, be they saintly or horrific. It is your responsibility to channel that capacity towards good rather than evil.

"Evil that arises out of ordinary thinking and is committed by ordinary people is the norm, not the exception." - Ervin Staub

Review by Kyle Chickering