

## German Police Battalion 101

During the Holocaust, more than a third of Nazi Germany's Jewish victims never boarded deportation trains and did not die in gas chambers. Jewish men, women, and children were murdered near their homes in surrounding fields and forests by German police forces and their local helpers. Historians estimate that these so-called mobile killing units shot almost 2 million people during World War II. After the war, when some of the shooters and their commanders were put on trial, they claimed that they had to follow orders. Decades later, however, historians studying the interrogation files of one of these police battalions made a startling discovery. Not only did many ordinary Germans participate in the mass murder of Jews, they did so voluntarily.

In his book on one group of reserve policemen from the German city Hamburg, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, historian Christopher Browning shows that while the men were expected to follow orders when it came to killing civilians, they could have refused to do so. In July 1942, before their induction into the mass shooting of civilians in the small Polish town of Józefów, their commander gave battalion members a choice. If any of the men were "not up to the task," they would be assigned to do "other duties," such as guarding or transportation. When given the opportunity to opt out, only a very small number of men did. Even though this option remained in the months that followed, the majority of reserve policemen chose to kill—to do the "dirty work" even if just for a short time before being relieved of duty—rather than separate themselves from their unit by refusing to murder civilians.

Most of these ordinary, middle-aged German men became willing, although not enthusiastic, killers. A small minority consistently excused themselves from the task at hand. Those that killed, Browning argues, did so because of "the pressure for conformity—the basic identification of men in uniform with their comrades and the strong urge not to separate themselves from the group by stepping out... [The] act of stepping out...meant leaving one's comrades and admitting that one was 'too weak' or 'cowardly'."



### Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think ordinary men would become willing killers? What was the role of conformity bias in the situation described above? Explain.
2. Although conformity bias refers to our *own* tendency to take behavioral cues from the actions of others around us, in what ways do you think conformity was actively *encouraged* by the political climate or police forces leading the volunteers? Explain.
3. In hindsight, it is clear to see the wrongdoing of the actions of the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101. But given the number of men who willingly killed their Jewish neighbors, the decision to opt out may have been more complicated than simply being "not up to the task."

Beyond conformity bias, what other cognitive biases or situational pressures may have contributed to these men's decision to kill? Explain. How do you think the men could have made different choices?

4. Do you think this dynamic is specific to a militarized culture? Why or why not? In what other contexts do you think conformity bias could play a significant role in shaping people's behavior? Explain.
5. Can you think of examples in other parts of the world or historical periods in which conformity bias may have played a similar role in causing harm on a wide scale? Explain.
6. This case study illustrates an extreme example of the negative effects of conformity bias. On a more routine basis in your own life, in what situations do you think you might encounter conformity bias? Explain. Do you think our tendency to conform could ever produce positive effects? Why or why not?

**Resources:**

*Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/ordinary-men-reserve-police-battalion-101-and-the-final-solution-in-poland/oclc/24010495>

*The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/lucifer-effect-understanding-how-good-people-turn-evil/oclc/70839827>

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