

Proposal

Jan Hendrik Issinger, M.A.:

Military Group Culture during the National Socialism

Reserve Police Battalion 61 and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe

1. Introduction

The project is focused on the German Reserve Police Battalion 61 as an occupation force in Poland and Russia during the Second World War. The study is not only aiming to reconstruct the deeds of this unit, but is more concerned with the dynamics and structures of violence in a military compartmentalized Police entity during the Holocaust. How did these form the ways men from the middle of the German and Austrian society acted during their deployment to Eastern Europe.

Unlike in many other studies, the patterns of behavior of these men are not analyzed under single motivational factors such as peer pressure or ideologies. Instead the project is aligned to a multifaceted analysis which is intended to accommodate the complexity of human room to maneuver in military units. Therefore the informal dimensions of face to face interactions and their interplay with formal organizational structures are of highest importance as they strongly influenced the framework of options in the battalion. The constantly changing group culture can only be understood in combination with other analytical dimensions like the social and cultural imprint of the police soldiers or their self-perception and the victim's perspective on the policemen's behavior.

2. Approach and Structure

Apart from an approach characterized by the methodology of cultural history, the project makes use of the sociological understanding of organizations developed by Niklas Luhmann.¹ Only by doing so can the connections and dynamics between actors of the holocaust and the structures they were embedded in be brought in touch for an historical and empirical analysis. Therefore, in my work military groups are understood in a historical perspective as the framework in which factors that influenced human behavior in a sustained manner were bound and formed. This notably happened through each unit's vertical and horizontal trust structures which interconnected the single factors.

To decode this procedure, several analytical strategies have to be interwoven. For example, only if the cultural principles and processes within the perpetrator group are brought into context with the policemen's relationships to their later victims, can a deepened understanding of the actors as part of the national socialistic rule in Eastern Europe be reached. To carry out such an analysis, in which the actual motives of single mostly independent actors play an important role, a restricted peer group like the Battalion 61 is essential. Only this allows the revealing of the unit's informal structures alongside their formal counterparts. As informal structures in groups are particularly bound to the respectively involved actors, the unit's personnel structure has to be made visible before beginning the actual analysis.

¹ For this understanding see as well **Kühl**, Stefan: *Ganz normale Organisationen. Zur Soziologie des Holocaust*, 2014.

The fact that most of the enlisted men of the unit came from the northern Ruhr area's working class and were about 35 years old, that meant that they were not serving because of the military draft but as police reservists under the *Notdienstverordnung* with a different set of rules, has to be taken into consideration. Apart from that, their connection to the NS-system has to be evaluated. This is equally important when looking at the unit's influential commissioned and non-commissioned officers, who were recruited from a pool of active duty policemen. Almost all of them were members of organizations like the SS or NSDAP. Apart from the different backgrounds of the battalion members the exact reconstruction of their deeds is highly relevant, as it shows the unit's official tasks as well as the way in which their everyday life was constructed, especially when in interaction with the local population. Only by doing so does an analysis become possible which allows us to actually broaden the „understanding of individuals and structures in the National Socialism“². The analysis proper will consist of several parts:

The first step will be to explain how Battalion 61 functioned, formally as well as informally. How were trust networks connected with existing command structures and how could they be undermined? The functioning of asymmetric as well as symmetric loyalties made it possible that enlisted men could be free from punishments for deeds which were illegal under NS-standards. At the same time these structures gave the officers the security to have a pool of men willing to cooperate without being forced to. This was especially important as many not entirely legal duties were requested from the men, which lay in the border region of their zone of indifference.

As additional factors the value of mentalities and epistemes shouldn't be underestimated when figuring out the men's deeds. Their sociocultural and generational background made them accept violence as a medium for solving any kind of face to face problem. But even if the trust networks gave the men options to act violently without being punished, this does not explain the intensity of their behavior. Their assumption that the Eastern European population as well as the deported Jews were “inferior” and the additional criminalization of these groups gave the actors greater room to maneuver concerning violence without having the feeling that they were doing something wrong. In this section, not only the views of the battalion members are considered, but also the population's perception of the demonstrative behavior of the unit is necessary for the larger picture of the structures of violence.

Another part of the study will then consider the influence of personal benefits like money, career opportunities, and a more pleasant lifestyle in the unit on the men's deeds. As these advantages were achieved and secured by informal deals between enlisted men and

² **Mommsen**, Hans: Die Grenzen der Biografie. Prozesse und Entscheidungen: Ein Sammelband über die „Täter der Shoah“ wirft die Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Individuum und Struktur im Nationalsozialismus auf, in: FR 26.11.2002,

their superiors, this chapter mainly deals with the battalion members' opportunistic reasons to participate in violent actions and even to commit crimes like theft on their own.

As such deeds were in obvious conflict with the official NS-laws as well as the image of a "decent" police, they had to be kept secret from the world outside of the unit. This is why the last analytical dimension is concerned with the general secrecy efforts of the unit, the internal psychological pressure to keep secrets and the general relationship of tension between options and constraints to participate in violent actions. The main question is how was what the men were allowed to do and what they were forced to do brokered and personally negotiated in the battalion's everyday business. It is argued that the existence of substantial room to maneuver for the men constituted an important reason for their participation in violence.

After unfolding the analytical dimensions, the study will then investigate how the different factors that influenced human behavior in the unit were interconnected. The trading of favors between enlisted policemen and officers as well as between persons of the same rank because of different motivations can serve as a particular example. It shows how factors were interwoven by trust structures because of the polycratic informal design of the unit. As a result the deeds of Battalion 61 have to be understood as a consequence of the historical and cultural praxis inside the relevant group culture. In the broad majority of cases the deeds are clearly not a result of pathological core characteristics of the policemen. By contrast the deeds resulted from the decisions of independent actors in an organization which can be considered as the "interface of intentional will to annihilation and its structural conditions"³.

3. State of Research and Sources

Since the ground breaking study of Christopher Browning on "ordinary men"⁴ of Reserve Police Battalion 101 a couple of studies have been published on the deeds of German Police units and their role in the Holocaust. What they all have in common is that their approaches are fairly monocausal. In 2005 Edward Westermann published a book which dealt with the uniformed police's overall organizational culture. This was an interesting attempt to deepen the understanding of the genocidal tasks of the German police, but it failed to deepen the understanding of the concrete decision making in actual units as its concept was not based on an actual case study.⁵ A multifaceted analysis of a police battalion's group culture and the resulting structures and dynamics of violence is still missing. Battalion 61 which is used as

translated into English by the author.

³ Wildt, Michael: *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, 2002, p. 23, translated into English by the author.

⁴ Browning, Christopher: *Ganz normale Männer. Das Reserve-Polizeibataillon 101 und die "Endlösung" in Polen*, 1994.

⁵ Westermann, Edward: *Hitler's Police Battalions. Enforcing Racial War in the East*, 2005.

reference group for such an approach here has been the subject of the more „journalistic works“⁶ of Stefan Klemp. In 1998 his short book “Freispruch für das ‘Mord-Bataillon’”⁷ dealt primarily with the failed post war investigations against the unit. In 2013 he reused parts of it for another book on the uniformed Police’s deeds in the Ghetto of Warsaw. Both volumes have a very limited analytical perspective, which fails to go further than explaining all crimes with a simple teleological perspective founded on the ideas of Daniel Goldhagen.⁸

To avoid such a perspective, multiple types of sources have to be used. The majority of materials used for a perspective concerned with the insides of Police Battalion 61 are of course the “classical” sources of perpetrator research. The files of the post war prosecutions against the unit which can be found in German and Austrian Archives allow us to take a closer look at the relevant group culture. Nevertheless it is highly important to pay attention to nuances within the texts. In particular, it must be borne in mind that the testifying persons tried to keep up their “Self-image as a person of integrity”⁹ which continued to be important for them in their post-war lives. But as long as they linked their actions to allegedly anti-Bolshevistic measures in Eastern Europe and left out deeds which were not accepted by the post war society, such as sexual violence or cruelty to children, they obviously hoped for acceptance. In addition, acts of violence and abusive behavior which were not considered murder or complicity to murder had already fallen under prescription when the investigations started. Also members of Battalion 61 were the first former uniformed police members to be accused for their deeds. Most of them were not aware that they could be sentenced for their service in a police battalion and made very open and shocking statements, relying on the myth of “superior orders”. So from an overall perspective, the statements of members of Police battalion 61 are relatively accurate concerning the unit’s inside structures but still have to be considered as a heavily filtered source.

Therefore dealing with structures and dynamics of violence in Battalion 61 makes it mandatory to use a wider frame of sources. Documents from the time prior to 1933 as well as materials from the NS-era allow us to complete the images of actors and group drawn by the investigation materials. Regulations, recommendations for medals, preferment texts, training instructions, journals published by the police and personal files with confidential reports etc. make it possible to close “gaps” from the prosecution material and show the unit’s individuals and its structures relative to each other. Such sources, which can be found in archives in and outside Germany, by chance survived the uniformed police’s attempts to

⁶ Klemp, Stefan: „Nicht ermittelt“. Polizeibataillone und die Nachkriegsjustiz, 2011, p. 16.

⁷ Klemp, Stefan: Freispruch für das „Mord-Bataillon“. Die NS-Ordnungspolizei und die Nachkriegsjustiz, 1998.

⁸ See *ibid.*: Vernichtung: Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Judenmord im Warschauer Ghetto, 2013 and Goldhagen, Daniel: Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, 1996.

destroy them at the end of the war. They illustrate cooperation, noncompliance, rewards, punishments and the negotiations about the men's room to maneuver and so allow a more detailed analysis than one which only relies on the interrogation protocols.

Apart from materials which are mostly concerned with the internal procedures of the unit, my archival research has shown that the perspective of the local population that came in touch with the unit also has to be included in the analysis. The current German perpetrator research makes hardly any use of these materials. But it cannot be doubted that the perspective of the victims has to be taken up for an adequate analysis of the deeds of Battalion 61. For example Polish and Israeli archives, as well as the relevant memory literature, contain extensive descriptions of the situations and places where the Battalion 61 acted in Poland and northern Russia. The texts show a perspective on the behavior of the unit as part of the German occupation force, which can't be found in German materials. Only by taking up the victims' statements on the actions of the members of Battalion 61, can deeds like sexual violence, which otherwise wouldn't have been mentioned because of the above mentioned taboo, be integrated into the analysis.¹⁰

In closing, only a synthesis of the available sources, mindful of their problematic aspects, allows us to reliably analyze the Police Battalion's dynamics and structures of violence during their deployment to Eastern Europe in a multifaceted way.

⁹ **Welzer**, Harald: Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden, 2009, p. 29.

¹⁰ I highly agree with: **Snyder**, Timothy: Commemorative Causality, in: *Modernism/Modernity*, Volume 20 (2013) Nr. 1, S. 77-93, that German academia shouldn't blind itself for the materials in Eastern European archives which have become accessible in the last decades.