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Sönke Neitzel & Harald Welzer, *Soldiers: German POWs on Fighting, Killing, and Dying*. Random House, First Vintage Book Edition, USA 2013, 437 σελ.

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‘I don’t know why I am here, and you
don’t know why you are here,
but let’s try our best to do a good job
and stay alive’

Lifton 1988: 336

AFTER discovering a collection of long-forgotten documents in the British National Archive and the Washington National Archive in 2001-2003, international historian Sönke Neitzel and social psychologist Harald Welzer jointly evaluated some 150.000 pages of surveillance protocols of German soldiers held prisoners during the Second World War.

Some of the material consisted of interrogation of German and Italian soldiers, yet most of it was made up by conversations held among the prisoners in their cells, unaware of being recorded. They talked carelessly about their experiences, thoughts and feelings, providing a picture of their basic attitudes very unlike that which was going to be interpreted in hindsight. In historical retrospective it seems to have been obvious how reality was changing, but in real-time people remained strikingly indifferent as long as they

weren’t directly affected by the turning of events.

The book’s main preoccupation is to show war and its inhumanities through the soldiers’ eyes. The first two chapters are dedicated to the description of the soldiers’ world, presenting different frames of reference as the basis for justification of their behavior during wartime. The authors approach the source material by analyzing the second and third order frames of reference, defined as compromising ‘... a sociohistorical space that, in most respects, can be clearly delimited –for instance, the length of a dictatorial regime or the duration of a historical entity like the Third Reich. [...] They consist of a concrete constellation of sociohistorical events within which people act. They include for example a war in which soldiers fight’.

The third and last chapter, which takes up about three-fourths of the book, presents various examples taken from the recorded conversations among German inmates to illustrate their attitudes regarding ‘fighting, killing and dying’. Here the original German version¹ differs from the English

1. *Soldaten, Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*, Fischer Taschenbuch 2011. Has been published also in Spanish, Portuguese, Polish and French.

edition, in which the original material has undergone several cuts.

The soldiers were expected to abide to their unwritten rules, relieved of personal responsibility. Their goal was to do the job that was asked from them the best way they could, according to social criteria that were cherished also during times of peace: diligence, endurance, persistence, duty, obedience, and voluntary subordination.

The growing readiness to commit violent acts was determined not so much by the individuals' social and psychological background, as by conditions, mandates, and expectations of the frame of reference based on the underlying ideology in force at that time. Regardless of their social position or of their level of education, officers, simple soldiers, as well as tacit followers and supporters, were all convinced of the message constantly repeated by the State's propaganda machinery about the superiority of their own Aryan race, and thought to be doing the right thing in view of the future generations, striving for the vision of the pan-German Reich.

The crimes of dehumanization were perpetrated in the name of Germany, the motherland. 'Aryans' felt inherently superior to what they deemed to be 'subhumans': people deemed 'antisocial', gyp-

sies, homosexuals, the mentally or physically disabled, and finally the Jews. With cynicism and the arbitrary acting out of sadism and power, they were not only granted permission, but also expected to kill, without having to fear any legal consequences. The only thing that mattered was the building of a purely Aryan pan-Germanic Empire.

The frame of reference for the soldiers' behavior stayed mostly the same as in World War I. They were expected to behave according to the principles of honor, toughness, and self-sacrifice. The Wehrmacht encouraged bravery, obedience, devotion to duty and emotional hardness. The soldiers had the power to rape and kill without having to be convinced by ideological warriors. To a large extent, they were even apolitical, and perceived events according to the military system.

From the transcribed conversations, it becomes apparent that normal, peace- and family-loving people became mass-murderers largely out of the aspiration to be seen as heroes, and because of the dynamics involved in their belonging to a group. They justified their horrendous deeds by means of unquestioning acceptance of the duties imposed on them by the frame of reference. It was not the moral aspect be-

hind the killing of Jews that pre-occupied them, but rather the way in which it was implemented. They thought of themselves as being upright and decent people, sacrificing themselves for an ideological vision of the higher good.

The killing of enemies and the extermination of Jews had become a patriotic duty. The Waffen SS with their own worldview became the object of a religious devotion. Soldiers that demonstrated particular strength of character and willpower killing for the pursuit of military objectives could expect a high award. Yet, there were more trivial reasons for killing as well. An example (from SRA, 1945):

Zotlöterer: ‘I shot a Frenchman from behind. He was riding a bicycle’.

Weber: ‘At close range?’

Zotlöterer: ‘Yes’.

Weber: ‘Did he intend capturing you?’

Zotlöterer: ‘Certainly not, I just wanted the bicycle’

This kind of cold-bloodedness and unscrupulousness is explained by the normality of war.

The role distance, as mentioned in Harald Welzer’s earlier book *Täter* (2005), enabled the soldiers to couple murder and morality.²

2. Further reading, mentioned in Harald Welzer’s book: Willy Peter Reese:

As a thrilling example there is a comment in this book: a member of the police battalion 101, which executed about 3500 people and deported 4500 to Treblinka, tried to kill only children while they were holding the hand of the mother; the comrade next to him killed the mother and afterwards he himself killed the child. To calm his conscience, he saw it as a salvation of the child, a good moral act, as it would not have been able to survive without the mother. As the frame of reference of war did not permit empathy, the soldiers could live in a moral universe in which they felt like good people, by taking distance between being and acting. They did not kill as person but as a bearer of a historical task. Based on the frame of reference, they wondered how possibly others could see their deeds and atrocities in a different perspective.

‘They call us “German Swine”. Look at our great men, such as Wagner, Liszt, Goethe, Schiller, and they call us “German Swine”. I really can’t make it out’.

Mir selber seltsam fremd: Russland 1941-44, List Taschenbuch, 2004. This is a diary of his experiences during the war in Russia between 1941 and 1944 by a young German poet, a desired future writer, who describes intimately his metamorphosis to a ruthless soldier. He is supposed to have died in a battle in 1944.

‘Do you know why that is? It is because the Germans are too humane and they take advantage of this humaneness and abuse us’ (27.1.1942 SRM 30)

A phenomenon which the German troops were often confronted with was that of the supposedly prohibited ‘execution tourism’: it was common for the civilian population to express their wish to actively participate in the execution of Jews. They were handed guns and given permission to shoot Jews with impunity.

The order to fire was usually given at the very last moment. The commander would set the example by killing the first arriving Jews, and from there on the soldiers assigned to killing duty could follow through with the order they had been given, without much of a conflict of conscience. The observing public would facilitate the deed with its curious participation and acceptance, demonstrating thereby the social consensus with regards to acts that in normal circumstances would have been considered to be savage and criminal. The description provided of these events corrects the image of the brutal single individual committing atrocities. The expectation of the group translates into a peer pressure that drives the individual to comply with what the group

expects from him. The soldier didn’t choose the group, and once in he is left with no real alternative.

The authors also make reference to hunting, particularly with regard to airborne units. The pilots took pride, like hunters, in their dexterity, their intuition and their infallible killing instinct. As if it were a sports competition, their objective was to kill as many victims as they could. From his birds-eye view, a Luftwaffe pilot could be proud of the ‘sinking’ of a convoy carrying children, (from SRX 1941).

The view of man that comes through from the transcribed recordings is a frightening one that contradicts the widespread assumption of man’s fundamental goodness. Man’s self-ideal of being inherently righteous, kind, and good-willing is crushed, with chilling ease, by the implementation of a new frame of reference. As Eric Hoffer expressed in one of his interviews: ‘Goethe said, that he never heard of a crime, that he couldn’t commit ... Be acquainted with yourself, and you know the whole world’. (interview pt. 1 of 5; 08min50sec)

The authors reveal to us statements registered in real time, which give a very different understanding than the judgments after the war, when the frames of reference had drastically changed.

They give an explanation to the various conversations on the basis of psychosocial knowledge and lead the reader to an understanding of how ordinary people could possibly become mass murderers by uncoupling the sources of evil and the true nature of human beings. Evidently, the book's value is not only historical but of high actuality. Thinking of the political and social situation of today, we are confronted with the cruelty of ongoing conflicts on the bases of the frame of reference of a holy cause, which could mean a justification for any kind of atrocity in the behavior of the warriors.

Deeper psychodynamic insights into the subject matter can be found in Volkan's writings but mostly in his *Blind Trust* (2004), where he treats the dynamics of large groups and their leaders. He talks psychoanalytically about the regression of groups, political, religious or groups of any kind, and their leaders, e.g. Adolf Hitler, who condition the frame of reference of their time. There were two collectives, the Nazis as the master race, and the so called sub-human; the latter had to be destroyed for the survival of the former. In this context Volkan points out the malign narcissism of Hitler as the leader, who asked complete and devoted submission of

his followers. Hitler created an enemy to maintain his belief that he himself was absolute and infallible. Under social or political threat, the regressed group is more prone to political propaganda and manipulation and willing to fight for a holy cause.

As a conclusion, a final quote of this highly recommended book:

'If we cease to define violence as an aberration, we learn more about our society and how it functions than if we persist in comforting illusions about our basically nonviolent nature. If we reclassify violence in its various forms as part of the inventory of possible survival, we will see that such groups are also always potential communities of annihilation. Modernity's faith in its own distance from violence is illusionary. People kill for various motives. Soldiers kill because it's their job'.

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Abbreviations of the sources:

SRX: special report mixed

SRM: special report army

SRN: special report navy

From the National Archives, Kew Gardens, London

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>