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Negotiating Murder: A Panzer Signal Company and the Destruction of the Jews of Peregruznoe, 1942

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In September 1942, members of a Panzer signal company murdered thirty to forty Jews near the tiny Soviet town of Peregruznoe. A case study of the unit reveals that individual soldiers faced a twisted terrain of choices, pressures, and organizational cultural norms. The author argues that the “perpetrators” among these Wehrmacht soldiers can be placed along a continuum of response: the commander led the activist core, followers went along, and individual soldiers evaded participation. Investigation of the complexities of participation and non-participation in spontaneous acts of violence such as this helps us to understand why some men (and units) killed while others did not.

Introduction

I believed that it would be better for the victims as well as for the participants not to see the others lying at that place, that a mass shooting was taking place. Those were my thoughts at the time, to my recollection.

—Statement of Sergeant Fritz Puls¹

The war in the East was carried out with reckless cruelty by the Russian side. I endeavored always—together with the leadership of the company—to spare the blood of my men. For this reason, I had to treat the members of the Russian civil population harshly. I had to presume that they could become dangerous to the unit and especially to my men.

—Statement of First Lieutenant Fritz Fischer²

One day in September 1942, just outside the town of Peregruznoe southwest of Stalingrad, a small group of German soldiers congregated in the pre-dawn hours in the dusty motor pool of their unit. Sergeant Fritz Puls,³ an officer candidate and the leader of this group, nodded to the roving sentries who had been guarding the unit's vehicles, relieving them. One cargo truck had its tarp tightly closed; soft cries and moans emanated from the stifling interior, where thirty to forty people had been crammed together in the truck overnight. After checking their weapons, the twelve to fifteen soldiers, led by Puls, climbed into a few vehicles and drove slowly out of the town as the sun rose.

The small convoy drove only a kilometer or so outside the town and then pulled off the dirt path into the steppe. Puls and his men opened the flaps and the tailgate and forced a group of approximately ten people—women, children, and elderly persons—out of the back of the truck. These Jews were forced to walk or run away from the vehicles while the German soldiers walked behind, shooting them with rifles and submachine guns. When none remained standing, another soldier walked among the victims, shooting any who were still alive. As the men walked back to the trucks, the remaining Jews, having realized what fate awaited them, screamed in fright and pleaded for their lives. The soldiers got back into the trucks, drove several hundred meters farther, and repeated the process. When all the Jews were dead, the small convoy returned to the motor pool. The killing, it seems, was finished before breakfast. As the men cleaned out the back of the truck and began weapons maintenance, Sergeant Puls went to the company commander, First Lieutenant Fritz Fischer, to report the successful completion of the mission. In this manner, the entire Jewish population of Peregruznoe was exterminated by a small group of signal soldiers whose usual military mission was laying and maintaining communication wires between the headquarters of advancing units.

Yet, of the almost two hundred men in the 4th Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Panzer Army Signal Regiment, only a small minority actively participated in atrocities. Some men volunteered, some participated only when ordered to do so, some made themselves scarce when killing units were being assembled, and some refused to participate. This study examines the question of how these men made their choices.

The case of this German Regular Army unit is instructive for several reasons. First, it concerns a military unit that was not tasked directly with the execution of Nazi racial policy in the East. This was not an SS, police, or other supporting unit required to kill or assist in the killing of Jews. Second, in a short span of time, members of this unit committed individual acts of violence against Soviet civilians *and* mass murder of Jews. The case thus brings to light several modes of response to the prospect of committing atrocities and shows that these responses were mutable depending upon the situation and the designated victims. Last, since it appears that all of the atrocities were carried out at the initiative of the unit commander, the case also demonstrates the importance and relevance of both leadership and unit dynamics to our understanding of how genocide was carried out on the Eastern Front.

Understanding Wehrmacht Atrocities

Historiography has moved well beyond a view of the Wehrmacht's actions as those of a purely military organization conducting a conventional war.⁴ Many Wehrmacht crimes have been documented, though historians are continuing to bring to light new areas of culpability and modes of complicity. This exploration has raised

fundamental questions: Why did the German army participate to such an extent in Nazi racial policy? How willingly did soldiers participate? What roles did ideology, the combat environment, leadership, and group dynamics play? The debate over these questions appears far from settled.

Historians have attempted to answer these questions in a variety of ways. Indeed, the intense emotional and academic reactions to the 1995 Wehrmacht exhibition demonstrate the importance of this question for both the German public and historians of the Holocaust. Omer Bartov, for example, has written extensively on the Wehrmacht, arguing that, as “primary groups” of comrades were destroyed in the harsh combat conditions on the Eastern Front, soldiers increasingly clung to the propaganda-imparted idealized view of the war. Bartov concludes that this intense indoctrination, combined with the draconian discipline of the German army, created an increasingly brutal and violent force.⁵ The most extreme version of this contention is, of course, Daniel Goldhagen’s conception of an “eliminationist” antisemitism, according to which soldiers—and most other Germans—were eager to kill Jews and simply waiting for the opportunity to do so.⁶

Others have sought a more psychological explanation.⁷ Christopher Browning argues convincingly that social-psychological factors within the context of group dynamics played a pivotal role in motivating middle-aged reserve policemen to commit atrocities and that, at least in the case of these men, ideology was not the primary motivating factor.⁸ Harald Welzer, too, argues for a social-psychological approach. He writes that “even when we examine ourselves, substantial discrepancies appear between our moral demands and actions; depending on the situation, we are capable of extremely different ways of thinking, acting and speaking.”⁹ Welzer also contends that a new Nazi “morality” governed the behavior of these men. Thomas Kühne goes a step further in his study of comradeship, maintaining that “the threat of social death, exclusion from the mutual welfare and communication network, was the cement of military group culture.” That is, the atrocities themselves served to cement group bonds.¹⁰

Just as explanations for the behavior of the Wehrmacht have varied, so too have the methods used for studying it. Some historians, such as Stephen Fritz, have attempted to reconstruct the daily life and mindset of the typical soldier through letters and diaries.¹¹ Similarly, Peter Lieb uses letters and diaries effectively in his important study of a regimental commander’s attitudes toward Jewish policy and the anti-partisan war.¹² Such an approach can tell us much about the attitudes of rank-and-file soldiers as well, at least insofar as they recorded them. Unfortunately for researchers, soldiers do not often refer to atrocities or to their motivations for participating in them. Moreover, it is extremely rare to find series of letters from members of units whose atrocities can be documented by other sources. The sheer volume of letters sent from the Eastern Front also makes the

search for such letters extremely difficult. In the absence of a sample of letters from a single unit written at approximately the same time, a clear understanding of the dynamics of participation remains elusive.

Some historians have focused instead on the institutional level, examining orders, reports, training guidelines and methods, and so on; Bartov, for example, used this methodology in his study of three German divisions on the Eastern Front.¹³ Such projects tell us much about organizations and their leaders; however, they rarely shed light on the behavior of soldiers at the lower levels. In his expansive study of the 117th Jäger Regiment, H.F. Meyer relies heavily on military records and describes the unit's actions in great detail. He uses perpetrator and witness testimony not to explain complicity, but to detail events.¹⁴

Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer write that “the very best accounts of the Holocaust . . . stay close to the ground.”¹⁵ This holds true for studies of Wehrmacht actions during the Holocaust as well; a unit-level approach of the type that Jarausch and Geyer propose can best help explain how and why soldiers killed. Yet, a new, more nuanced theoretical framework is required. Most responses to orders to commit murder represent the individual's attempt to navigate the terrain of various group pressures, risks, and psychological stressors, as well as his own set of moral codes and beliefs. In other words, when confronted with the prospect of participating in atrocities, each soldier has to consider a number of factors: the risk of punishment from his superiors, the risk of ridicule or isolation from his fellow group members, the rewards to be gained for compliance, and the internal discomfort that would result from following or ignoring one's moral inclinations. The interplay of these forces results in a wide range of responses, from complete compliance to outright refusal, and categorizing these responses can tell us much about complicity in atrocity.

Postwar Testimonies as Historical Source Material

Pre-trial interviews conducted in preparation for a postwar case against the 4th Company's leaders allow us to piece together a narrative of the crimes that the unit perpetrated between September 1941 and September 1942. The crimes of 4th Company came to light as a result of former company member Helmut Ortlepp's attempt to extort money from Fischer and Puls; when it became clear that funds were not forthcoming, Ortlepp reported Fisher and Puls (who ended the war as captain and first lieutenant respectively) to the authorities.¹⁶ The two were tried in Düsseldorf between April 27 and May 13, 1964.

The pre-trial investigation records of this court case offer the researcher insight, but also present challenges. The investigatory nature of the interviews placed the subjects by definition in an adversarial relationship to the questioner. Apparently concerned about the possibility of self-incrimination, the interviewees often gave ambiguous responses to questions about certain events. Likewise, they

frequently hesitated to implicate former comrades and may have omitted mention of crimes that were not explicitly under investigation.

But a careful reading of the texts can, in fact, yield valuable information about both the events themselves and the mindsets of the men involved. In his discussion of Adolf Eichmann's statements during trial, Christopher Browning elaborates four tests of the validity of perpetrator testimony. In general, such testimonies can be considered more reliable:

- (1) When a witness makes statements against his self-interest or where telling the truth is not in his self-interest (the self-interest test);
- (2) When the witness describes events with "an unusual attention to details of visual memory" (the vividness test);
- (3) When a witness's claims "are not contradicted or proven impossible" (the possibility test);
- (4) When the accounts "coincide with or fit a pattern of events suggested or established by other documentation" (the probability test).¹⁷

According to these metrics, former 4th Company soldiers volunteered many statements that in all likelihood approached "truth." While their statements at times may be contradictory, self-exculpatory, or simply false, the general narrative of the company's violence in the occupied Soviet territories is confirmed by multiple corroborating testimonies.

The words the soldiers used to describe a situation are important, whether they were true or not. For instance, when a witness refers to all of the victims, including the children, as "partisans," such a word choice is significant. The manner in which interviewees tell their stories or obfuscate thus provides insight into their thought processes—even in the case of those who might be expected to be most clearly motivated to make self-serving statements (the accused or those who feel they may be prosecuted). Finally, in some instances, what is *not* said can be a useful tool in understanding responses to the prospect of committing atrocities. For example, an important silence exists concerning the Jews of Peregruznoe: not a single member of 4th Company reports having attempted to help the Jews or alleviate their suffering—even though such a statement clearly would have been in their best interests. That none of the soldiers mentions giving the captives water or food, allowing them access to latrines, or even opening the flaps on the truck to give them air, gives us great insight into how this action was viewed by the members of 4th Company.

The General Climate: Training and Mission

German soldiers were exposed to Nazi propaganda messages both before and after their entrance into the Wehrmacht. Indeed, the authorities made a concerted

effort to continue the soldiers' "education" as they served.¹⁸ Previous scholarship has shown that German soldiers were "exposed to a massive indoctrination effort by the military authorities."¹⁹ An examination of "knapsack books" issued to the troops, as well of the main military periodicals *Unser Heer* and *Die Wehrmacht*, reveals that exhortations to cruelty, dehumanizing depictions of the "enemy," and antisemitic messages about the "Judeo-Bolshevik threat" appear frequently in materials directed at soldiers.²⁰ A reading of letters from soldiers to their families, friends, or former co-workers brings to light a set of beliefs that reflect these themes. Although it is impossible to determine whether these attitudes resulted from the propaganda effort or pre-dated it, we can say at least that soldiers were exposed to a wide variety of messages—propaganda that may have influenced their mindset regarding the war they were fighting and the atrocities in which they were asked to participate.

In addition, the Army itself issued specific guidelines for the behavior of German soldiers. The so-called "Commissar Order" of June 6, 1941, directed that all Soviet political officers be executed upon capture, in direct contravention of existing laws of war.²¹ More important, the "Führer Decree" of May 13 authorized "collective forcible measures" (reprisals) against local populations and emphasized that soldiers would be punished for crimes against locals *only* when such punishment was necessary for the maintenance of discipline.²² These two guidelines—and myriad other, similar directives from lower headquarters—were passed down from commanders to soldiers along with exhortations to fight a "racial war" without rules. Clearly, the war in the Soviet Union was to be fundamentally different from the war that had been fought in the West, despite the fact that German soldiers already had behaved brutally toward the civilian population during the invasion of Poland.²³

The 4th Company was a Feldfernkabelkompanie, a wire-laying unit whose primary mission was the construction and maintenance of wire communications. With approximately 200 soldiers, the company had three wire-laying platoons of about forty men each in addition to a headquarters and other sections. During the advance into the Soviet Union, such companies followed immediately behind combat units.²⁴ As the advance slowed, these communication lines were handed over to the responsible Army Signal Regiments. This, Hans-Georg Kampe writes in his study of German signal units, resulted in the "regular detachment of Panzer Group Signal Regiments for new missions in forward areas."²⁵ In all likelihood, 4th Company was employed in these new tasks. After the attack on Moscow in late 1941, the company was removed from frontline duty and tasked with securing major supply routes between Smolensk and Moscow.²⁶ These security missions no doubt entailed patrolling major roadways and repairing lines damaged either by normal wear and tear or by partisan action. In short, 4th Company was not formed as a killing unit.



Unidentified members of 4th Company with a truck of the kind used to confine the Jews of Peregruznoe before they were murdered. Courtesy of Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf.

The 4th Company's Descent into Violence, 1941–1942

Having participated in both the French and Polish campaigns, 4th Company, 4th Panzer Group Signal Regiment crossed the border between Poland and Soviet-held Lithuania on June 22, 1941, as part of Panzer Group 4, Army Group North. The company's march east farther into the Soviet Union would be marked by increasingly violent acts against the civilian population, culminating in the atrocity at Peregruznoe in September 1942.²⁷

In September 1941, 4th Company was stationed in the vicinity of Roslavl in modern-day Russia. One night, a German sentry caught a Russian civilian among the trucks in the company's motor pool. According to Lieutenant Fischer, the man was violating the standing curfew that forbade the citizens of the town to leave their homes except during daylight hours. After questioning the Russian through an interpreter, Fischer determined that the man was guilty of attempted sabotage. Fischer stated that he "saw in [the Russian's] demeanor a clear violation of the given order and gave him to understand that he was going to be shot."²⁸ The evidence of sabotage here—the man's presence in the vicinity of the unit's vehicles—is weak. Indeed, it seems that the only "act" this civilian was caught in was being out after curfew.

Nevertheless, without further deliberation Fischer sent for Sergeant Heinrich Pehle, whose squad had captured the Russian. Fischer then ordered Pehle to shoot the captive. Pehle testified that at first he refused, and that Fischer then drew his pistol and pointed it at him. Pehle stated that he then "felt

threatened and shot as ordered.”²⁹ The fear of being executed for failing to obey orders is a common trope in perpetrator testimony. In this instance, however, Fischer’s previous actions make it seem plausible that he did indeed brandish his weapon as a means of intimidation. In any case, it seems unlikely that Fischer actually would have shot Pehle for refusing his order. Fischer freely admitted having ordered Pehle to shoot the civilian, but denied having forced him to do so.³⁰

In the winter of 1941–42, 4th Company was billeted in the town of Klemiatio and was tasked with securing a portion of the main supply route between Smolensk and Viaz’ma. Sometime in January or February 1942, Fischer ordered the execution of another civilian. This time the civilian in question was suspected of belonging to a partisan group, in part because he had been wearing a Soviet military coat.³¹ Fischer ordered Sergeant Justus Huber to oversee the man’s execution. Huber later reported that he was told that this Russian had been involved in the disappearance of three members of a neighboring unit.³² The fact that Fischer had ordered an execution previously with scant justification calls into question the validity of the charge in this instance as well. Sergeant Huber first approached enlisted man Wilhelm Ormann, who refused to shoot (or more precisely, later testified that he refused). According to Ormann, Huber then ordered enlisted man Bernhard Grackel to carry out the execution.³³ Sergeant Huber gave his service pistol to Grackel and the group (Grackel, Huber, Ormann, and the civilian) began to walk into the countryside outside the village. After approximately fifty to 100 meters, Grackel shot the Russian in the back of the head, killing him. The soldiers then returned to their quarters.³⁴

Klemiatio bore the burdens of an increasingly violent 4th Company. One Russian civilian was hanged in February and another in March 1942.³⁵ In his later statement, Fischer reported that in February, the *starosta* (village elder) had given him information regarding a Russian who supposedly had been involved in attacks on the Germans’ main supply route. The starosta alleged further that this Russian secretly left the village at night.³⁶ First Sergeant Bollmann, who was present at the execution, appears to have concurred with Fischer’s judgment; he stated that “[the Russian who was hanged] was known to us as the chief liaison officer for the local partisan group.”³⁷ Fischer himself admitted to having ordered the hanging as a way “to warn the Russian population, to serve as a deterrent.”³⁸ Soldier Clemens Hahn was on guard duty some 200 meters away and witnessed the hanging. He later described how 4th Company soldiers, followed by a crowd of the town’s inhabitants, led the condemned Russian to a local barn. A German soldier read something from a document before the Russian was hanged. When the victim was motionless, another member of 4th Company shot him in the heart.³⁹ The identity of the shooter is known; First Sergeant Bollmann admitted that he shot the man in the heart “when he could no longer see his death throes.”⁴⁰ Hahn went on to

report that the body was left to hang in the open barn for several weeks—a statement that is confirmed by other testimonies.⁴¹

A month later, a second Russian was hanged in the vicinity of Klemiatino. In his postwar statement, soldier Wilhelm Kappel testified that the men of the company “repeatedly observed blinking light signals” outside the village.⁴² These suspicious lights were reported up the chain of command. Johann Halter explained that “it was suspected that these signals would have been seen by partisans.”⁴³ In a slightly different explanation—though one still related to partisan activity—Fischer reported during his interrogation that these lights were understood to be “release points for Russian planes dropping supplies to the partisans.”⁴⁴ He then ordered First Lieutenant Sauer, leader of the 3rd Platoon, to conduct a raid on a neighboring village. During the raid, all the inhabitants of the town were rounded up and assembled in the center of the village.⁴⁵ A flashlight had been found in the home of one of the inhabitants, and Fischer ordered its Russian owner hanged. Once again, 4th Company used excessive force. A flashlight could not have been strong enough to be mistaken for the type of lights allegedly seen, and, in any case, possession of a flashlight does not in itself indicate partisan activity. Soldier Bernhard Olker recalled that Fischer had said—presumably as justification for the hanging—that “one must believe.” Olker also remembered having heard that the Russian was supposed to have been a soldier dressed in civilian clothing.⁴⁶ Shortly after the hanging, the 3rd Platoon left the town. Olker reports ironically that, some days later, the Germans discovered that the so-called “blinking signals” were in fact the headlights of passing trucks on the main supply route as they went behind a small hill and then reappeared.⁴⁷

Having progressed from individual shootings to public hangings to mass roundups, 4th Company entered the realm of mass murder while stationed in the small Soviet town of Peregruznoe, approximately 80 km southwest of Stalingrad. According to Fischer and Puls, the unit was engaged in anti-partisan operations there. One late afternoon in September 1942, Fischer ordered his men to round up all the Jews in the town. He later claimed that the starosta of the town had pointed out to him a group of people who moved back and forth between the German and Russian lines during the night, bringing the Soviets reports on German positions.⁴⁸ Fischer argued that it was necessary, therefore, to have his men round up these “unsafe people” (*unsicheren Personen*).⁴⁹ This argumentation must be taken as purely self-serving. It is highly unlikely that Jews, especially women, children, and the elderly, having made it to Soviet lines, would return to German occupation.

The rationale of military necessity is brought into question by other testimony as well. August Möller later testified that he had heard “through hearsay that the reason for this round-up was supposed to have been that a Jewish woman refused to accept German soldiers [who were to be billeted in her home].”⁵⁰ Günther Lehmann, the company clerk, had heard that, “due to many

telephone lines being cut in the town, Fischer had ordered that all the Jews . . . be rounded up in order to be shot.”⁵¹ Company cook Sergeant Kurt Lange reported that he had heard rumors that the local Russians were accusing the Jews of having “squatted” in the town.⁵² Karl Rothe supported this claim, stating that returning Russian refugees had approached Lieutenant Fischer “with the request that the people who had settled in their homes during their absence be removed”; Fischer had ordered the round-up in response.⁵³ Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the murdered Jews of Peregruznoe had been refugees from larger towns west of Stalingrad.⁵⁴ Thus, witnesses present a damning set of alternative motivations for the murder of the Jews of Peregruznoe. In any case, it seems clear that the decision to round up the Jewish residents of the town had little to do with any real “threat” they might have posed to 4th Company.

Regardless of the reason, the Jews of the town were gathered together under guard in the vicinity of Lange’s field kitchen. They were guarded by three or four men and stood tightly packed in the hot sun in the town square.⁵⁵ At some point on this afternoon, First Lieutenant Fischer ordered Technical Sergeant Puls to arrange an execution detail to carry out the shootings. Perhaps owing to the late hour, these thirty to forty Jews were loaded onto a company truck, with the tarp down, and left in the motor pool overnight. Throughout the night, members of 4th company guarding the truck heard the cries and moans of those packed inside. Sergeant Lange best described the situation that night, saying, “the cries and wails—above all those of the children, which could not be ignored—generally lasted the entire night. One could not think of sleep in the immediate vicinity.”⁵⁶

Early the following morning, Sergeant Puls organized a firing squad of approximately twelve to fifteen men. He and his men drove the Jews of Peregruznoe into the steppe a few kilometers outside the town, where they executed them.⁵⁷ The firing squad returned to Peregruznoe, where Sergeant Puls reported the completion of the mission to First Lieutenant Fischer.

Had it not been for the murderous initiative of Lieutenant Fischer, the Jews of Peregruznoe most probably would have survived the war. The Red Army reached the town by mid-December. Unfortunately, no documentation exists concerning the fate of 4th Company or its actions after it left the town; in all likelihood, the company was largely destroyed in the desperate fighting that characterized the Eastern Front from 1942 through the end of the war.

Cogs in a Machine: The Men of 4th Company

When called upon to participate in murder, the men of 4th Company reacted with varying degrees of willingness. An analysis of company members’ postwar statements concerning their own and others’ motivations reveals three broad categories

of response: initiative-takers, compliers, and non-compliers. *Initiative-takers* are those who willingly or eagerly participate in atrocities. In many cases they volunteer. Such individuals could be motivated by ideology, careerism, self-interest, or other factors; what is important is that they act almost entirely of their own free will. This group must be divided further into the *true believers* and the *role-players*, as the motivations, though equally strong, can be markedly different. As the label suggests, true believers are ideologically driven to participate. They are dedicated to the goals and doctrine of the regime. These individuals need not subscribe entirely to the dominating ideology, but need only find enough commonality so that they can devote their full allegiance to it. Role-players appear equally motivated in their actions, yet their underlying reasons are more professional than ideological. They need not be deeply dedicated to the regime's ideological aims (though they may exhibit more than a tacit acceptance). They are committed to executing whatever tasks fall to their position and to displaying the characteristics most commonly expected of such a position.

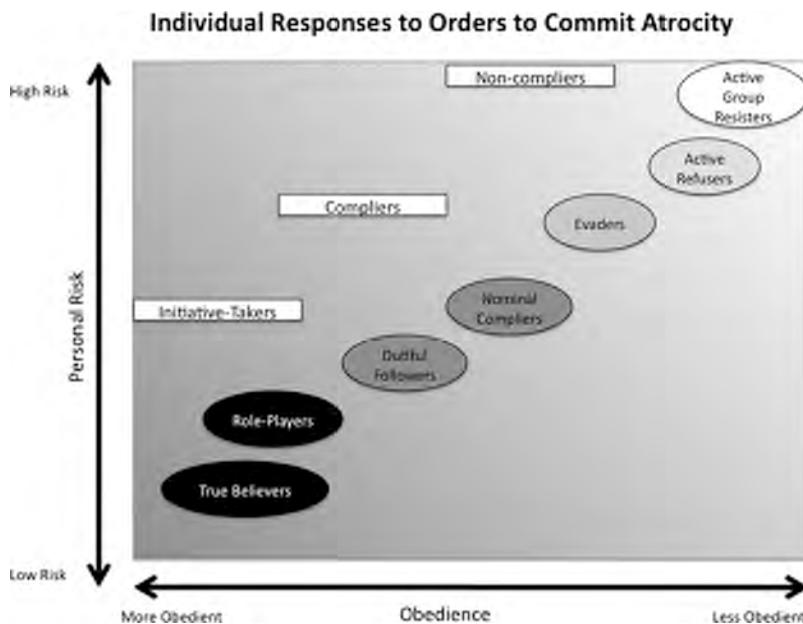
In keeping with previous scholarly research and case studies, this case study suggests also that a large percentage of perpetrators fall into categories characterized by obedience or "following." However, there seem to be at least two distinct types of followers: *dutiful followers* exhibit a willingness to participate fully when asked or ordered, but do not necessarily have any intrinsic motivation to do so and do not act on their own initiative. These men function within a hierarchical and military structure, doing what they "must" do. They can be counted on to execute orders when given. *Nominal compliers* will execute orders they are given, but may cease to comply when not under supervision.

Finally, some individuals choose not to comply. There are many possible reasons for non-compliance. Some individuals may refuse out of a sense of moral repugnance: they simply believe the acts to be wrong. Others may fail to comply out of revulsion for the violence and bloodiness of the acts. While we cannot always determine the reasoning behind non-compliance, the forcefulness of the refusal allows us to infer the depth of belief behind it. *Evaders* attempt to avoid participation. They may decline to carry out orders, but may also participate if pressed to do so. Often they will attempt simply to withdraw from the situation. Such individuals seek to avoid situations in which their hands might be forced, but are just an order away from nominal compliance.

Active refusal requires greater commitment than does evasion. It does not go unnoticed; refusal therefore entails the assumption of increased risk of social alienation and military punishment. But active resisters can be divided into two groups as well: *individual refusers* are those who simply will not comply. They may express their refusals verbally or non-verbally, but in either case their decisions are final; these individuals cannot be further coerced. Individual resistance is thus characterized by commitment. *Active group resisters* are individuals who not only

refuse to participate personally but also attempt to intervene to prevent others from participating. This is the rarest form of resistance and carries with it the greatest risk of punishment.

Employing a typology such as this helps us to understand the various forces at work behind the killing. However, these groups—which are defined by behaviors and actions—are neither fixed nor impermeable. Even within these categories, there are ranges of behavior. Personality plays a role insofar as it, along with other forces, affects this behavior. This distribution of behavior in social groups is not a new concept. Indeed, the landmark Milgram and Zimbardo experiments demonstrated that human behavior relative to authority tends to fall along a spectrum ranging from initiative-taking to refusal, with the majority of individuals participating to a large extent.⁵⁸ Moreover, a single individual can fall into different categories at different times depending on his attitudes and reactions to specific situations.



“One must believe”: 4th Company’s Initiative-Takers

The transformation of this communications company into an organization characterized by brutality and violence may well be explained by the presence within it of a group of like-minded believers. First among these was the commander. First Lieutenant Fischer began his service in the Wehrmacht in April 1935 as an officer cadet, attaining the rank of first lieutenant in 1939.⁵⁹ He took command of 3rd

Company (4th Company's original designation) shortly before the French campaign in 1940 and continued to command the unit until 1943.⁶⁰

By all accounts, Fischer was a dedicated National Socialist. One company member described him as a "staunch Nazi."⁶¹ His company clerk, Günther Lehmann, who was in a position to know him well, testified that "based on our working relationship over several years, I can say that he was an absolute adherent to Nazi ideas."⁶² One of Fischer's platoon leaders, Franz Scherer, called him an "über-Nazi" and a "radical Jew-hater."⁶³ Scherer went on to say that he was familiar with "statements by Fischer which made it clear that he wanted most to eliminate all Jews."⁶⁴ The cook, Lange, termed Fischer "the type of Jew-hater who once made the remark that he would love to drive out all the Jews and hunt them with bullets."⁶⁵

Fischer's antisemitism and Nazi ideological attitudes were not simply abstractly held beliefs, but, the evidence suggests, were guiding influences on his own decision-making. Sergeant Lange claimed that during the advance into Latvia, Fischer punished him with three days' confinement because he had spent the night in a Jewish home and had given the family food.⁶⁶ In another example of Fischer's ideology in practice, Lieutenant Scherer reported that in Roslavl in 1941, Fischer had ordered Sergeant Pehle to execute a Jewish civilian who was not a Russian partisan; it appears that the man was executed simply because he was a Jew.⁶⁷ Other testimony did not describe the victim as Jewish, but given Fischer's predilections, it is not unreasonable to lend some credence to Scherer's statements. Most telling is the fact that, in his numerous statements, Fischer never once claimed to have received any order from a higher headquarters for the mass murder in Peregruznoe. His order to round up and murder the Jews seems to have derived solely from his earnest desire to kill Jews.

Even a commander as fanatical as Fischer would have had difficulty enacting his plans without a group of other motivated actors to support him. Most notable in this context was Technical Sergeant Puls, whom one 4th Company member described as a "zealous soldier."⁶⁸ Another soldier recalled that it "was clear from his words" that Puls was an antisemite.⁶⁹ Moreover, Puls had, by his own admission, joined the SS-Sportsgemeinschaft (SS Sports Club) in 1939 as a long-distance runner.⁷⁰ Curiously, he could not explain later how his application to join the Allgemeine-SS came to be filled out in his own hand, or how he came to be listed in 1939 SS membership statistics.⁷¹ Despite his feeble objections, Puls' membership in the SS (and later service as a Nationalsozialistischer Führungs-Offizier, or officer charged with the political indoctrination of the troops), in addition to his former comrades' comments, indicate a high degree of ideological belief.

Because the postwar investigation focused primarily on Fischer and Puls, it is difficult—though not impossible—to identify other motivated actors. One soldier

remembered that certain individuals repeatedly were chosen to take part in “individual actions” and, further, that a Private Heinrich König always “volunteered.”⁷² A non-commissioned officer (NCO) recalled that a nineteen-year-old private by the name of Keller had “taken a particularly active role” in the Peregruznoe shooting.⁷³

While names and specifics faded in the witnesses’ memories, it is clear that there was a group of motivated actors in 4th Company who participated repeatedly in atrocities. One soldier, Herbert Bärmann, clearly identified this group. He said, regarding the shooting of the Jews in Peregruznoe, that “these people [the shooters] belonged to the circle . . . that was always on the spot for special tasks.”⁷⁴ He is not alone in this observation. Cook Lange remembered that the members of the NCO corps who took part in the shooting “all had the same attitude as Fischer.”⁷⁵ In addition, he stated that Puls was “always together with the commander” and, as a would-be officer, was assigned special missions to lead.⁷⁶ Puls “carried out all of Fischer’s orders without contradiction” and was a “good helper.”⁷⁷ Another unit member, Alfred Hoffmann, testified that “only volunteers were to be taken” for the assignment to murder the Jews.⁷⁸ Thus, testimonies from members of the 4th Company clearly indicate that there was a core group of individuals motivated to participate actively by common ideological beliefs. These individuals took the initiative and were to a great extent self-selected. That many of these individuals were in leadership positions only enhanced the violent potential of the group.

“I did not interest myself in this matter”: Compliers and Participation in Atrocities

I cannot say today which members of the company rode out when the Jews were shot. I did not investigate this afterwards. I wasn’t interested in this matter. As long as they left me alone.

—Statement of soldier Erwin Garner⁷⁹

While the presence of a group of motivated participants was an important factor in the unit’s increasing brutality, the presence of a much larger group of soldiers willing to follow orders—however distasteful they might have found them—was perhaps more vital. The lack of concern that unit member Erwin Garner voiced is echoed throughout the testimonies of 4th Company members.

Maintenance Sergeant Paul Fuchs figures prominently as a member of the firing squad that killed the Jews of Peregruznoe. Four of those interviewed stated that Fuchs had participated in the shooting. Helmut Ortlepp, who claimed to have been a friend of Fuchs’s, encountered him the morning after the execution. “I saw him sitting on a stump with a very downcast expression on his face,” Ortlepp stated. Fuchs told him that he had participated in the shooting and had witnessed a horrific incident. According to numerous accounts from veterans of 4th Company, during the shooting a Jewish woman

refused to surrender her infant child and insisted that they both be shot together. A German soldier shot the mother in the head, killing her but not the child. The child was left to crawl about in the blood and brains of its mother until it, too, was killed. It seems that alleged perpetrator Fuchs was appalled that this child had moved its hands through the mother's shattered head; he told Ortlepp that he supposed he would "never forget this image for the rest of his life."⁸⁰ He did not relate to Ortlepp any attempt to evade participation or to refuse the order. This is a clear example of complier behavior; Fuchs's apparently troubled conscience simply underscores the strength of his commitment to authority.

Bernhard Grackel represents another example of this willingness to follow orders. One may recall that, after Orlmann refused Sergeant Huber's order to kill a Russian civilian, Grackel received the same order and complied. Grackel made no claim in his testimony to have questioned or attempted to refuse this order, even though it would have been in his best interests to make such a claim. Indeed, he expressed a kind of tragic surprise when told by investigators that Orlmann had refused the same order without any negative repercussions. He said at first that had he known about Orlmann's refusal, he, too, would have refused the order.⁸¹ Yet when pressed, he reversed this position, saying that "[even] if I had seen an opportunity to avoid [Sergeant] Huber's order, I would not have done so. Huber told me that the order to shoot the partisan came from the commander. I certainly could not disobey an order from the commander in the field."⁸² Such rationalization is typical of the dutiful follower. What separates Grackel from Orlmann is precisely the fact that they were placed in the same situation, at almost the same time, by the same superior, but responded differently. The simple fact is that Orlmann, for whatever reason, saw a choice and exercised his ability to make decisions. Grackel may not have felt he had a choice or he may have had no moral resistance to the order. In any case, the result was compliance and execution.

Heinrich Klein represents another kind of dutiful follower. On the night before the murders, while the Jews were imprisoned in the LKW (military cargo truck) in the motor pool, Klein had guard duty along with another soldier. In his first testimony, he claimed that he did not know what kind of people were in the truck. In his second testimony, however, he admitted that he "took the noises from the LKW to be the cries of women and children."⁸³ His chilling explanation as to why he did not attempt to help these Jews is indicative of the attitude of the dutiful follower. He stated, "I was not interested in [the cries from the truck]. One was indifferent. I didn't do any more during the war than was absolutely necessary."⁸⁴ The watchful guarding of this truck, in which many others no doubt took part as well, certainly demonstrates a willingness to comply with orders.



Members of 4th Company in Peregruznoe, September 1942. Both Huber (left) and Gasscher (2nd from right) were named as possible shooters in the massacre of the Jews of Peregruznoe. Huber also oversaw the execution of a Russian in Klemiatino. Courtesy of Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf.

Only two former soldiers admit to having taken part in the mass shootings at Peregruznoe: Fritz Puls and Hans-Jürgen Kaufmann. Puls's reasons for participation are fairly clear; by all accounts, he was a believer in National Socialism, a supporter of Fischer's, and possibly a careerist. Unfortunately, Kaufmann tells us almost nothing about how he became involved. In his testimony, he claimed not to remember who told him to participate. He merely stated, "I belonged to the detail that had to drive out with the Jews."⁸⁵ His motives remain a mystery, yet the fact that he does not claim to have been ordered or to have attempted to refuse clearly marks him as a dutiful follower, if not more.

We are left, in the end, with seventeen names: men accused by one witness or another of having taken part in the mass shooting.⁸⁶ In addition to Kaufmann and Puls, fifteen other individuals are named. Some of these were among those interviewed, but some died during the war or were otherwise unavailable. Among these others, whose voices have been lost, there were no doubt both dutiful followers and motivated actors.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Evasion in 4th Company

Evasion enables individuals to avoid participation without drawing attention to themselves or risking punishment; by nature such acts are difficult to identify. Even with this limitation, we can identify at least two examples of evasion in the testimonies concerning 4th Company. Of these, Bernhard Olker's experience was perhaps the most revealing. During the search for the "partisan signaler" in the

town near Klemiatio, Olker was a member of the platoon tasked with searching the village and forcing the inhabitants into the square. He stated that during the search he and a comrade entered a house occupied by an elderly couple and an infant. "My comrade and I did not want to force these two old people into the town square," he said.⁸⁷ The two soldiers stayed in this house for a while and then moved on. In another house, they found some other members of the company drying their socks in front of the stove. Olker stated that he stayed with this group and adds that "we couldn't see what else was happening in the village."⁸⁸ He elaborated: "up to this point, I had taken part in the action as ordered. Finally I and three to four comrades went inside an empty house, because I did not want to have anything to do with this because of my attitudes (Catholic) as I mention in subsequent interrogations."⁸⁹

Olker's words and actions do not strike one as particularly altruistic, but they do indicate intent on his part (and on the part of his unnamed comrades) to avoid participating in whatever the rest of the unit was doing in the village. This form of evasion, simply making oneself scarce when potentially criminal activities were being carried out, was an option that others probably chose as well. This way, they avoided participation in acts they found objectionable without risking the alienation from the group that Kühne terms "social death."

Alfred Hoffmann's testimony brings to light another form of passive resistance: choosing not to volunteer, even when asked to do so by a superior officer. On the day of the shooting, Hoffmann's superior, Technical Sergeant Walter, asked him if he wanted to "take a drive"—meaning drive a vehicle in the convoy taking the Jews to the execution site.⁹⁰ Hoffmann immediately understood the implications of this request. "It was as clear as a light," he said.⁹¹ Walter stressed to Hoffmann that his participation was fully voluntary, and Hoffmann apparently declined. When Hoffmann asked him later what had happened, Walter replied that he had found another driver.⁹² Here, given an opportunity to avoid participation, Hoffmann passively resisted simply by declining to volunteer. He had been given an explicit choice. We cannot know what he would have done had he been ordered to participate. It is possible—even likely—that others took similar approaches, but their decisions are not reflected in the source material.

The Courage to Refuse: Active Resistance in 4th Company

Instances of the purest type of resistance—active intervention to prevent an atrocity from occurring by preventing others from participating—do not appear in the testimonies concerning 4th Company. This form of resistance is rarely observed in case studies of perpetrator activity. However, testimonies on the 4th Company do include several examples of direct refusal to participate. In these instances, unit members received orders from a superior and refused to carry them out, often in

the face of threats or insults. Even if we take the witnesses' self-exculpatory motivations into account, the totality of the evidence suggests that these acts of resistance did in fact take place.

As mentioned earlier, the categories of response to the prospect of participating in atrocities are fluid. Sergeant Pehle is an example of the possible shift between categories, albeit perhaps a problematic one. In 1941, he had complied with First Lieutenant Fischer's order to shoot a Russian civilian—but not until Fischer allegedly threatened him. Pehle claimed that later, when Fischer told him about the plan to kill the Jews of Peregruznoe and ordered him to participate, he refused. He stated that Fischer responded by calling him a coward and dismissing him. Further, he testified that Fischer did *not* exert any pressure on him to comply after he refused.⁹³

Pehle was not the only soldier to defy the commander. Company clerk Günther Lehmann related the following episode: as Lehmann was working in his office one day, First Lieutenant Fischer told him that, in reprisal for the cutting of telephone lines in the town, he had ordered all the Jews of Peregruznoe to be rounded up and shot. Fischer then told him that he could participate; Lehmann replied that such things were not for him.⁹⁴ Clearly, he was not ordered to participate. According to Lehmann, Fischer must have known that he would not willingly participate in the shooting. "I did not understand this to be an explicit, official order," he testified; "I knew Captain Fischer somewhat better as a result of our association of several years. He would not seriously have expected that I would take part in such a shooting."⁹⁵ Why would Fischer invite Lehmann to participate if he knew that he lacked the inclination to do so? Perhaps Fischer was testing his own power, and his lukewarm response to Lehmann's refusal represents his acceptance of its limits.

Fault Lines across 4th Company

In Russia, my relationship with Captain Fischer was ultimately strained. I had good relations with then-Lieutenant Franz Scherer, with whom I had gone to *Gymnasium* in Neheim and whom I knew well from this time. I think that it was a result of strained relationships that prevailed between Scherer and Fischer.

—Sergeant Heinrich Pehle⁹⁶

To summarize, I must say that, as a result of that experience, we as company members knew that Captain Fischer had done something illegal—something in which a portion of the company took part without orders because they were of the same attitude as Fischer.

—Company Cook Kurt Lange⁹⁷

I assumed, however, that this shooting was carried out by troops from the company trains.

—Soldier Bernhard Olker⁹⁸

Regarding Captain Fischer I would like to say that I always respected him as a man and took him to be 100 percent a soldier and an officer.

—Soldier Wilhelm Ritter⁹⁹

Some historians hold a view of German army units as homogeneous groups of “brothers in arms.” For example, in his work on the role of comradeship in the German army, Thomas Kühne relies on just such an overly general interpretation of comradeship. He writes that “immediately becoming ‘the best of friends’ with men one had never known before proved to be a daily experience in the German army.”¹⁰⁰ In attempting to explain soldiers’ motivations for participation in atrocities, Kühne argues that “it was not only about group pressure (or any other pressure) but about—group pleasure, about togetherness, about belonging.”¹⁰¹ Clearly, comradeship contributed to social pressures. However, the idea of a unified “group pressure” can be misleading. In fact, there was no single social group but rather a shifting conglomeration of peer groups, interest groups, and cliques. In all likelihood, many conventional army units on the Eastern Front were characterized by similar divisions.

Investigation of 4th Company’s participation in atrocities reveals that the unit itself was riven by feuds and other social divisions. The idea of a unified “group” appears much more problematic in this context; such an interpretation becomes questionable particularly when it is mobilized to explain participation in atrocities. Soldiers may develop cliques that will sustain them emotionally and physically, even when these cliques’ attitudes may run counter to the approved or desired ethos of the unit. That is to say, for example, substandard soldiers can continue to be poor performers without succumbing to group pressures if there are other substandard soldiers with whom they can socialize. This idea has important implications for the commission of atrocities; it suggests that the presence of discord or competition within a unit may create “space” for various forms of non-participation.

Second, a close look reveals that non-participation in various types of atrocities did not coincide cleanly with membership in particular subgroups, nor did each group influence behavior equally. For example, opposition to Nazi policy against practicing Catholics did not necessarily correlate with opposition to atrocities directed against Jews. And, as we have already seen, at least one soldier was easily coerced into killing a suspected “partisan” but steadfastly refused to participate in the killing of Jewish women and children. This insight indicates that the spectrum of responses discussed earlier must also be filtered through a variety of social groupings and influences.

Finally, how do cliques affect top-down pressure to participate in atrocities? The fact that responses to atrocity do not break out clearly along the lines of conflict leads to an important conclusion: the true believers and role-players can, and

often did, drive genocidal actions, even when they constituted a minority in the group. Without a fairly homogeneous group culture, perhaps the execution of tasks that are unpopular—either because the participants are morally opposed or simply because they found the murder of women and children too messy—is more likely. Moreover, it seems that the presence of multiple subgroups within the unit provides individuals an opportunity to evade or resist, knowing that they still are secure within that subgroup—if not in the eyes of the leadership or the unit at large.

Catholics

Testimony from several members of the unit, including two officers, indicates that many Catholics in 4th Company felt alienated. First Lieutenant Fischer, as a clear adherent to Nazi ideology, displayed a particular distaste for Catholics. Testimonies from the postwar legal investigation contain numerous references to his views. Company clerk Lehmann remembered that Fischer “impressed me with his anti-religious views. He had, in a general sense, told me that I, too, could leave the Church. I inferred then from the conversation that he no longer belonged to the Church.”¹⁰² Fischer brought intra-unit conflict to the surface when he expressed his views to two of his Catholic officers, Franz Scherer and Heinz Hillermann. Hillermann recalled that, at an evening meeting between Fischer and the two officers, “Fischer presumed to condemn Catholics as being the enemies of Germany. I demanded that he take back this comment by the next morning or I would report him. Fischer apologized the following morning.”¹⁰³ Scherer remembers a similar event. He stated: “Here unfortunately I must say that he would sometimes underscore his demands or desires with a drawn pistol. He occasionally threatened Lieutenant Hillermann and me with his pistol during arguments when we were not of the same opinion. Hillermann and I discussed the topic of Catholicism, condemning the dominant view in Nazi circles. Fischer, who had secretly eavesdropped on us, reproached us forcefully and called Catholics “traitors.” When we, as Catholics, protested these obscenities, the aforementioned threat occurred.”¹⁰⁴ Fischer’s behavior clearly united many Catholic members of the company in opposition to his leadership. Indeed, it seems that firm responses such as Hillermann’s had an impact on Fischer. His apology to his platoon leaders seems out of character and demonstrates that he was willing to humble himself to resolve this dispute.

Perhaps more important is the fact that Catholic soldiers evidently bonded as fellow sufferers of Fischer’s ideological attacks. Even so, group members responded variously to the prospect of participation in atrocities. Both Pehle and Lehmann refused at some point to participate in the murder of the Jews of Peregruznoe. Yet Scherer and Hillermann, who were incensed enough by a religious insult to demand an apology from their commander, did not voice opposition to the murder of civilians or Jews. A statement made by Lieutenant Hillermann is

instructive. Regarding one of the “partisan” executions, he remarked: “I was horrified by this event; afterward, however, I didn’t speak of it anymore with Fischer, particularly because my relationship with him was extremely strained.”¹⁰⁵ He elaborated later: “I myself was extremely incensed over Fischer’s ‘speedy trial’ of the suspected partisan, and exchanged thoughts with Lieutenant Scherer on Fischer’s extreme handling of the situation. As I have said, my relationship with Fischer was extremely strained—one could even say antagonistic. In spite of this, however, after consultation with Scherer, I did not take it further.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, it seems that Hillermann felt comfortable standing up to the commander over his religious views, but not over atrocities. Neither he nor Scherer expressed opposition to or condemnation of the killings of “suspected partisans” or of the Jews of Peregruznoe—even twenty years after the fact. Perhaps, given their success in confronting the commander on his anti-Catholic attitudes, Scherer and Hillermann did not want to jeopardize their gains by speaking out against atrocities.

It is instructive that Lieutenant Fischer felt threatened enough by the reaction of his officers that he was willing to apologize. Perhaps he feared a charge that he was undermining morale by attacking his soldiers’ religious beliefs. Fischer clearly felt these expressions of displeasure to be far more important than those of men refusing to participate in the killing of Jews, probably because he felt far more support from his superiors in questions of anti-partisan and anti-Jewish policy.

In any case, the experience of the Catholic group indicates that subgroups could provide comradeship and serve as loci for opposition of varying kinds. Yet it also shows that such opposition was not uniform and did not necessarily cross the bounds of group interest. Catholics in 4th Company seemed content to advocate for their beliefs selectively and remain quiet on other issues.

Sergeants vs. Officers

Conflict between NCOs and officers is present in virtually every unit. It appears, however, that such conflict was particularly bitter in 4th Company. For example, it is clear from his testimony that ex-First Sergeant Heinrich Bollmann intensely disliked his commander. Bollmann describes an officer—already depicted as impetuous—who refused to listen to the advice of his presumably more experienced NCOs.

First Lieutenant Fischer apparently had a Russian “wife” whom he kept in his room in the headquarters building. In Bollmann’s words, “I was especially disgusted that Fischer lived together with a Russian woman in his room the whole winter in Clemjatino [*sic*]. This woman was even pregnant by Fischer.”¹⁰⁷ This relationship was not a secret. According to unit member Heinrich Seiler, “the ‘womanizing story’ . . . generally was known. In connection with this, I told the police [during postwar investigations] that the first sergeant did not agree with

the behavior of the commander.” He added: “In this, the first sergeant was completely correct.”¹⁰⁸ First Sergeant Bollmann could have disapproved of Fischer’s illicit relationship for any number of reasons. First, it clearly violated existing rules about fraternizing with the “enemy” and could have compromised the security of the unit. Second, by blatantly flouting policy Fischer opened himself to charges of hypocrisy and undermined morale. Finally, Fischer’s example may have made it more difficult for Bollmann to enforce rules about relationships with members of the local population. We cannot discern Bollmann’s reasoning from his testimony, but we may reasonably assume that at least some other NCOs shared his views regarding the commander.

Fischer was described by more than a few veterans as a man who made decisions hastily, without much regard for others’ advice. Lieutenant Hillermann described this tendency well: “[Fischer] was an extremely bold man who seemed to me insensitive and unscrupulous. If it concerned ideas and their implementation, he proceeded recklessly and would have stopped at nothing to accomplish his goals.”¹⁰⁹ First Sergeant Bollmann claimed that Fischer was “explosive in his decision-making.”¹¹⁰ Herbert Bärmann concurred, describing Fischer as “a very bold officer, quick to take aggressive actions that sometimes were not appropriate.”¹¹¹

One of the clearest examples of this rash, unilateral behavior was Fischer’s action against Bollmann himself. Bollmann claimed in his statement that Fischer attempted to punish him for stealing a cow. He explained that he had “organized” a total of six cows from the “partisan area” in order to improve the rations of the company.¹¹² Apparently, a hearing of some kind took place. Bollmann claimed that the charges were levied against him because he had opposed Fischer’s living with a Russian woman.¹¹³ As a result of these disputes, Bollmann was transferred to 3rd Company in April 1942.¹¹⁴ Bollmann testified that his new company commander had “worked it so that I was transferred to his company He must have known why I came to his unit.”¹¹⁵

This internal conflict between the commander and his highest-ranking NCO may have had important consequences. NCOs generally stayed in their units for longer periods of time than did officers. For this reason, the soldiers and other NCOs in the company may have felt greater loyalty to Bollmann than to Fischer. Fischer’s actions against Bollmann likely would have created a rift between Fischer and the remaining NCOs. Indeed, the dispute was serious enough that Bollmann was transferred out of the unit—though apparently he suffered no ill effects. Interestingly, the dispute did not seem to impact the actions of the men in the unit when it came to committing atrocities. Bollmann had left the unit by the time of the Peregruznoe shooting, so we can only conjecture about whether he would have participated. But he apparently had no objections to the earlier shootings of civilians. Indeed, by his own admission, he administered a symbolic coup de grace to

the hanging victim in Klemiatino. In any case, the feud between Bollmann and Fischer does not seem to have had any effect on unit members' decisions about whether to participate in the shootings at Peregruznoe.

Fischer Loyalists

The testimonies of 4th Company veterans clearly reveal that some soldiers and NCOs within the unit shared Lieutenant Fischer's attitudes. Most of these men could be categorized as initiative-takers and compliers, and their loyalty to Fischer could have had various origins. Whether this unit gravitated toward Fischer out of ideological agreement, desire for power or acceptance, or simple proclivity for violence is not obvious in all cases. Also unclear is the nature of the interactions between this group and the other cliques within the company. How did these men interact with other members of the company? Here, the sources are of little use, as no one would incriminate himself by claiming membership in this group; thus, we have only second-hand descriptions and identifications. It is therefore difficult to say whether other members of the unit looked down on members of this clique for their participation. However, it does seem likely, based on the testimony available, that they were disliked, if only because they were allied with the unpopular Lieutenant Fischer. Above all, this is the group formation most directly linked to participation in atrocities. The members of this sub-group were defined in many ways precisely *because* they were willing to kill.

Conclusion

It is perhaps an ironic commentary on the German judiciary of the time that the only member of 4th Company to serve time in jail was Helmut Ortlepp—for blackmail. In 1964 both Fischer and Puls were acquitted of the murder of the Jews of Peregruznoe and other atrocities. The court found that the killings did not meet the statutory requirements for a first-degree murder conviction; that is, they were not cruel, they did not arise from “base motives,” and they were not conducted via subterfuge. The statute of limitations for manslaughter had run out. The court wrote in its judgment: “Fischer’s acts exhibit neither in their motives nor in their execution the reprehensible characteristics that distinguish a deliberate and illegal killing as murder (in accordance with [article] 211 para. 3 of the Penal Code).”¹¹⁶ In addition, the court found that because Fritz Puls had acted “as a subordinate in the execution of orders and did not exceed his instructions, he could be punished only if he could have been expected to know that the order of his superior Fischer directed a civilian or military crime or offense.”¹¹⁷

What do we learn from this examination of 4th Company? First, the commission of Nazi genocide at the lowest (and most spontaneous) levels was the sum of individual choices and motivations. The presence of a few dedicated killers and a large group of followers could lead to an increased level of violence. Second, at the

unit level, soldiers displayed a wide range of responses to orders or appeals to participate in atrocities. Each military unit was made up of a combination of subgroups, each with its own special motivations and pressures. Indeed, to a great extent, it was the interaction between these subgroups that determined the manner in which atrocities were committed. Finally, this case study suggests that believers, followers, and resisters are distributed along a bell curve, with the followers making up the majority. Such a distribution highlights, in the final accounting, the great importance of leadership in the commission of atrocities. If the social or organizational power lies at the end of the spectrum occupied by true believers, then it is more likely that atrocities will be committed than if power lies in the hands of resisters. The followers will go in either direction. While we have no “proof” that believers were in power in all Wehrmacht units, this microhistory suggests, at the very least, a new way to understand the relationship of “ordinary” German soldiers to the commission of genocide and atrocity.

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Notes

1. Statement of Fritz Puls, 27 Nov. 1962, in B162/4314 (Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg—hereafter, BL), p. 356.
2. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 6 Dec. 1962, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 341.
3. According to German privacy law, researchers may not divulge their subjects’ real names unless they can establish that the persons in question have been dead for a certain number of years (depending on the institution that holds the documents). Rather than expend the effort to do that, I have used pseudonyms for most. Ortlepp, Fischer, and Puls’ names have appeared in public (in newspapers) in connection to the events described, and so may be used; the names of all other 4th Company members mentioned in this article have been changed.
4. For some of the more recent works in this area, see Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter, and Ulrike Jureit, eds., *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich: Beck, 2005); Hannes Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter: Der Vernichtungskrieg Fand Statt, aber Keiner war dabei*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2004); Christoph Rass, *“Menschenmaterial”: Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision, 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003); Hannes Heer, *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Walter Manoschek, *“Serbien ist judenfrei”: Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993); Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler’s Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die*

sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945, 2nd ed. (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., 1991); Theo J. Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

5. See Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); idem, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave in association with St. Antony's College, Oxford, 2001).

6. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

7. For other social-psychological explanations, see Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber, eds., *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and particularly Roy F. Baumeister's contribution, "The Holocaust and the Four Roots of Evil"; James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

8. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

9. Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005), 22.

10. Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 273.

11. Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

12. Peter Lieb, "Täter aus Überzeugung? Oberst Carl von Andrian und die Judenmorde der 707. Infanteriedivision 1941/42," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 50, no. 4 (2002): 523–58.

13. Bartov, *The Eastern Front*.

14. See H. F. Meyer, *Von Wien nach Kalavryta: Die blutige Spur der 117. Jäger-Division durch Serbien und Griechenland* (Mannheim: Bibliopolis, 2002).

15. Konrad Hugo Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 116.

16. Bernd Huppauf, "Experiences of Modern Warfare and the Crisis of Representation," *New German Critique* 59, no. 2 (1993): 466. The full text of both blackmail letters was included in the court's judgment. See "Court Judgment in Trial of Fischer et al., in B162/4314, BL 466. When he served as commander of 4th Company, Captain Fischer held the rank of First Lieutenant (Oberleutnant). For clarity's sake, he will be referred to as First Lieutenant Fischer throughout this study. Lieutenant Puls was an officer candidate holding the rank of Technical Sergeant (Wachtmeister) and will be referred to as such as well.

17. Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 11–12.

18. For more in-depth discussions of the propaganda effort, see Frank Vossler, *Propaganda in die eigene Truppe: Die Truppenbetreuung in der Wehrmacht 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005); Mikhail I. Tyaglyy, “The Role of Antisemitic Doctrine in German Propaganda in the Crimea, 1941–1944,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 3 (2004): 421–59; Daniel Uziel, “Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops and the Jews,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 29 (2001): 27–63; Jeffrey Robert Willis, “The Wehrmacht Propaganda Branch: German Military Propaganda and Censorship During World War II” (Ph.D. thesis, the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, 1964).
19. Omer Bartov, “German Soldiers and the Holocaust: Historiography, Research, and Implications,” *History & Memory* 9, nos. 1–2 (1997): 169.
20. A large collection of “knapsack” books has been preserved in the YIVO archives in New York. These pamphlets covered a wide variety of subjects and were intended to be passed from one soldier to another.
21. See Jürgen Förster’s discussion of the implementation of the Commissar Order in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, ed., *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 4, *The Attack on the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1,225–35.
22. *Ibid.*, 501.
23. Interestingly, Fischer never cited the Commissar Order or the Führer Order as justification for his actions in Peregruznoe. For a more detailed description of the German army’s behavior in Poland, see Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). More recently, Rafael Scheck has documented Wehrmacht crimes against French colonial troops in 1940. These crimes likewise demonstrated both a brutal approach to prisoners and a racial outlook. See his article “‘They Are Just Savages’: German Massacres of Black Soldiers from the French Army in 1940,” *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 2 (2005): 325–44.
24. Hans-Georg Kampe, *Die Heeres-Nachrichtentruppe der Wehrmacht, 1935–1945* (Wölfersheim-Berstadt, Germany: Podzun-Pallas, 1994), 53, 138.
25. *Ibid.*, 139.
26. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 264.
27. Unfortunately, no archival records concerning the unit’s behavior in Poland have been preserved.
28. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, p. 265.
29. Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 28 Jan. 1963, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 371.
30. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, p. 265.
31. Antrag auf Voruntersuchung gegen die Beschuldigten, 28 Sept. 1962, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 304.
32. Statement of Justus Huber, 12 Mar. 1963, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 419.
33. Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 14 Feb. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), pp. 130–31.
34. Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 16 Apr. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 256.

35. Antrag auf Voruntersuchung gegen die Beschuldigten, 28 Sept. 1962, p. 304.
36. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, p. 267.
37. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 29 Aug. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 47.
38. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, p. 267.
39. Statement of Clemens Hahn, 9 Jan. 1962, in B162/4313 (BL), p. 104.
40. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 29 Aug. 1961, p. 47.
41. Statement of Clemens Hahn, 9 Jan. 1962, p. 104. Statement of Karl Wilhelm Ostermann, 9 Apr. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 238; Statement of Karl Roth, 6 Sept. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 65.
42. Statement of Wilhelm Kappel, 6 Feb. 1962, in B162/4313 (BL), p. 82.
43. Statement of Johann Halter, 15 Feb. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 133.
44. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 6 Dec. 1962, p. 345.
45. Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 3 Oct. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 83.
46. Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 29 Jan. 1963, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 384.
47. Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 3 Oct. 1961, p. 83–84.
48. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, p. 269.
49. Ibid.
50. Statement of August Georg Mahler, 28 Aug. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 51.
51. Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 29 Aug. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 55.
52. Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 23 Mar. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 231.
53. Statement of Karl Roth, 6 Sept. 1961, p. 65–6.
54. In 1962, the investigating judge in the postwar trial wrote in a letter to a World Jewish Congress representative that the Jews murdered in Peregruznoe probably had been refugees. See Letter from Schwedersky to Robinson, 21 Dec. 1962 (World Jewish Congress Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, C227, file 11). Unfortunately, no local census records could be found to verify that the Jews were refugees, though this conclusion is plausible given the circumstances.
55. Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 23 Mar. 1962, p. 231.
56. Ibid., p. 232.
57. Antrag auf Voruntersuchung gegen die Beschuldigten, 28 Sept. 1962, p. 302.
58. In 1961 Stanley Milgram conducted a series of now-famous experiments designed to examine human reactions to authority by asking subjects to administer what they believed were painful shocks to another person. Philip Zimbardo conducted his “Stanford prison experiment” in 1971, creating a mock prison in the basement of the psychology building in order to evaluate how socially imposed roles, peer pressure, and environment affected human behavior.

59. Statement of Fritz Fischer, 10 May 1962, p. 263.
60. Ibid.
61. Statement of Paul Krüger, 15 Nov. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 119.
62. Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 28 May 1963, in B162/4313 (BL), p. 29.
63. Statement of Franz Scherer, 23 Mar. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 235.
64. Ibid.
65. Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 23 Mar. 1962, p. 230.
66. Ibid., p. 229.
67. Statement of Franz Scherer, 23 Mar. 1962, p. 235.
68. Statement of Heinrich Gasscher, 11 Mar. 1963, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 405.
69. Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 14 Nov. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 116.
70. Statement of Fritz Puls, 29 May 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 187.
71. Ibid.
72. Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 14 Feb. 1962, p. 131. Private König was not interviewed during the course of the investigation.
73. Statement of Heinrich Gasscher, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 87.
74. Statement of Herbert Bärmann, 20 Feb. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 154.
75. Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 23 Mar. 1962, p. 234.
76. Ibid., p. 233.
77. Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 8 Mar. 1963, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 8; and Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 14 Nov. 1961, p. 116.
78. Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 5 Dec. 1962, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 336.
79. Statement of Erwin Garner, 19 June 1963, in B162/4313 (BL), p. 9.
80. Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 8 Mar. 1963, p. 401–02.
81. Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 16 Apr. 1962, p. 256.
82. Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 12 Mar. 1963, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 414–15.
83. Statement of Heinrich Klein, 30 May 1963, in B162/4313 (BL), p. 18.
84. Ibid.
85. Statement of Hans-Jürgen Kaufmann, 15 Nov. 1962, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 321.
86. Fuchs, Gasscher, Keller, Walter, Sichtig, Erich, Huber, Kircheis, Janot, Bürger, Dörmann, Unger, Erhardt, Kaufmann, and Grackel.
87. Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 29 Jan. 1963, p. 383.
88. Ibid.

89. Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 3 Oct. 1961, p. 83.
90. Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 5 Dec. 1962, p. 335.
91. *Ibid.*
92. Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 3 July 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 285.
93. Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 3 Oct. 1961, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 79–80.
94. Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 29 Aug. 1961, p. 55.
95. Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 28 May 1963, p. 24.
96. Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 3 Oct. 1961, pp. 79–80.
97. Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 23 Mar. 1962, p. 234.
98. Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 3 Oct. 1961, p. 84.
99. Statement of Wilhelm Ritter, 11 May 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 261.
100. Thomas Kühne, “Male Bonding and Genocidal War: Germany, 1918–1945,” paper presented at the Triangle Seminar in the History of the Military, War, and Society (Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, 2006), 2.
101. *Ibid.*, 5.
102. Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 28 May 1963, p. 29.
103. Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 21 Mar. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 278.
104. Statement of Franz Scherer, 23 Mar. 1962, p. 235.
105. Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 21 Mar. 1962, p. 276.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
107. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 29 Aug. 1961, p. 48.
108. Statement of Heinrich Seiler, 21 Dec. 1962, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 349.
109. Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 21 Mar. 1962, p. 277.
110. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 22 Apr. 1962, in B162/4312 (BL), p. 281.
111. Statement of Herbert Bärman, 20 Feb. 1962, p. 153.
112. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 22 Apr. 1962, p. 281.
113. *Ibid.*
114. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 29 Aug. 1961, p. 47.
115. Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 22 Apr. 1962, p. 282.
116. Court Judgment in Trial of Fischer et. al, in B162/4314 (BL), p. 504–5.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 509.