

Introduction

The following is a discussion guide for a group-based approach to learning. This guide was developed for use onsite at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and has been adapted for use in classrooms and other educational environments offsite. Multiple possibilities exist for instructors to convey necessary historical background information, to present key facts of the case study, and to ask discussion questions.

In the case study, three company commanders of the Wehrmacht's 1st Battalion, 691st Infantry Regiment responded differently to the same illegal order. The case study provides an important empirical example of how officers making command decisions during armed conflict define their duty in different ways. Their decisions reflect a variety of factors including the command climate, the situational factors, their individual experiences, their leadership style, their moral and ethical compasses, and their social and cultural values. It is therefore a useful platform for discussion of leadership and ethical decision making. The case also reveals the dynamic relationship between command climate, obedience to orders, discipline, and the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Participants understand how orders, ethics, and professional military values relate to each other in an operational setting
- Participants consider the motivations and pressures that can influence command responsibility and decisions



Men suspected of partisan activity sit on the ground awaiting their execution by firing squad in the Soviet Union during September 1941. German Army soldiers and officers are visible in the background. *Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-212-0221-04*

Preparation and Background Materials

This module is particularly effective when paired with contextual information about the Holocaust as well as specific information about the German military. This can be conveyed in advance or as part of the session.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE HOLOCAUST

Providing students with information on the Holocaust guarantees that all participants have a shared basic level of knowledge. This approach also helps students to place the case study in the larger context of Nazi Germany and World War II. The film *The Path to Nazi Genocide* provides relevant background information. It can be shown during the session or students can watch all or part of it in advance. The film outlines the path by which the Nazis and their collaborators led a state to war and to the murder of millions of people. By providing a concise overview of the Holocaust and those involved, this film is intended to provoke reflection and discussion about the role played by ordinary people, institutions, and nations between 1918 and 1945.

Additional resources for instructors:

- [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
- Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009)

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE GERMAN MILITARY

Understanding the events of the case study requires background in the history of the German military. Instructors can ask students to review this information in advance or can provide it during the session.

- **In Advance:**
 - Students read pages 8–16 of *Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership*
 - Students view *The Role of the German Army during the Holocaust*
 - Students read [Context Sheets](#) listed in “Resources” prior to class or during class
- **During the Session:**
 - Instructor provides context using lecture, context sheets, and PowerPoint slides (see Resources)
 - Optional: Instructor shows the film *The Role of the German Army during the Holocaust*

Additional resources for instructors:

- Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014)
- Holocaust Encyclopedia articles listed under “Resources”

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Preparation and Background Materials (continued)

III. CASE STUDY MATERIALS

The situation of the 1st Battalion, 691st Infantry Regiment was featured in the 1995 German exhibition *War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944 (Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944)* created by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. Subsequently, Waitman Beorn conducted significant research on this case, which he incorporated into his 2014 book *Marching into Darkness*. Chapter four, “Mogilev and the Deliberate Targeting of Jews,” and Chapter five, “An Evil Seed is Sown,” of Dr. Beorn’s book provide more detailed information on the events of the case study and the officers and soldiers involved. The Museum’s case study *Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership* provides a consolidated version of these events on pages 8–16 as well as detailed information on the trial of these officers after the war.

Lesson Sequence

The following sequence is timed to take just over one hour.

I. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS (5 minutes)

Write on blackboard/whiteboard/easel:

- Orders and professional responsibilities
- Dilemmas for individuals
- Process of genocide

Explain: “This case study takes place in an environment that has been influenced by Nazi policy, the nature of the war on the eastern front, and, among other factors, the traditions of the German military. The changing context has implications for the responsibilities of the battalion and the individuals within it. The case focuses on one infantry battalion well behind the German front lines in the Soviet Union in the fall of 1941.”

Explain to the class that this lesson allows the:

- Examination of the relationship between **orders and professional responsibilities**
- Consideration of the **dilemmas** that individuals may face upon receiving orders
- Realization that the **process of genocide** requires the participation of many individuals, at all levels of professional institutions, who each make individual decisions

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A. Establishing the context of Nazi Germany (5 minutes)

Background for the instructor:

The Path to Nazi Genocide. The section “Aftermath of World War I and the Rise of Nazism, 1918–1933” (00:58-12:22) is especially relevant. See also, the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) for detailed information on a variety of topics relating to Nazism and the Holocaust.

Discuss the Nazi rise to power using *The Path to Nazi Genocide*.

Ask: “What challenges did the people of Germany and their government face after World War I?”

Possible responses include: dire economic straits, anger about the Versailles Treaty, fear of Communism, loss of territory and population, wounded national pride, unfamiliarity with democracy, massive reparations

Ask: “How did the military respond to the events of the 1920s?”

Possible responses include: uneasy support of Weimar, suppression of revolts from left and right, promotion of the “stab in the back” theory, secretly violating the hated Versailles Treaty

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Lesson Sequence (continued)

Ask: “What was the appeal of the Nazi Party for some German citizens?”

Possible responses: national rebirth, strong leader, national pride, strongly anti-Communist, antisemitism

Key takeaways:

- The limitations of the Versailles Treaty weighed heavily on the military
- Military support for the Nazi Party and, later, the Nazi State, was not automatic

B. Establishing the context of the German military tradition (5 minutes)

Share context: “Before World War II, the German Army, at home and abroad, had a reputation for professionalism, strict discipline, and efficient organization.”

Ask students to read the “Codes of Conduct in the German Military” context sheet and/or view slides 3–5.

Ask: “What types of conduct were valued?”

Possible responses: respect for human life, protection for POWs and civilians, respect for cultural institutions, etc.

Ask: “Any additional comments or reactions?”

Students often note similarities to contemporary codes. Make sure students understand the distinction between [the Wehrmacht](#) and [the SS](#).

C. Establishing the relationship between the military and the Nazi State (5 minutes)

Background for the instructor: View *The Role of the German Army during the Holocaust*. Ask students to read the first page of the “The German Military and Hitler” context sheet and/or view slides 6–8.

Ask: “What were the common interests of the military and the Nazi Party? Why would this professional institution support this government?”

Possible responses: rebuilding nation and national pride, increased resources, counter rise of SA

Ask students to read the two versions of the German military oath located on the “The German Military and Hitler” context sheet and/or view slide 9.

Ask: “What do you notice about the oaths? How are they different? What is the impact of that change?”

Background for the instructor:

The German generals, not Hitler, wrote the new oath.

Possible response: Oath is to an individual, not to a constitution, nation, group, or idea

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Lesson Sequence (continued)

D. Establishing the brutal nature of the invasion of the Soviet Union (15 minutes)

Background for instructor:

There is a great deal of information available on the invasion of the Soviet Union. Summaries can be found in *The Role of the German Army during the Holocaust; Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership* (page 8). Several Holocaust Encyclopedia articles address this topic: [Invasion of the Soviet Union, June 1941](#); [The Soviet Union and the Eastern Front](#); [The German Army and the Racial Nature of War against the Soviet Union](#); [Commissar Order](#).

Share this rationale: “We will be considering how the military’s pre-invasion orders influenced the command climate on the eastern front. We will be considering how the military’s pre-invasion orders dehumanized the enemy, linked Jews to communism, and encouraged brutal warfare.”

Ask students to read the “Planning the Invasion of the Soviet Union” and “Racial Ideology in Practice in the Soviet Union” context sheets and/or view slides 10–12.

Discuss the significance of these orders for understanding the command climate on the eastern front.

Ask: “What do these orders reveal about the conduct of the war in the Soviet Union and the military’s relationship to Nazism?” and/or “How would these orders influence how soldiers would engage in this war?”

Possible responses: direct infusion of ideology, lack of consequences for killing civilians, penal code nullified, extreme treatment encouraged

Remind participants of the myth of German Army non-involvement in the Holocaust, as evidenced by content in *The Role of the German Army during the Holocaust*.

III. CASE STUDY AND ANALYSIS

Background for instructor:

Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership, pages 8–16

Using slides 13–15 and/or the context sheets “Belarus,” “Case Study: Army Group Center Rear in Belarus,” and “Case Study: 691st Regiment in October 1941,” present the basic facts of the case study. Focus on the situation for the battalion (occupation of rear areas far from the front).

Use slide 16 to provide the class with the order given to the three company commanders.

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Lesson Sequence (continued)

A. Individual/small-group work (15 minutes)

Inform the class that they will be using the context sheets and small group conversation to address two questions. Note that some of the information in the context sheets has already been referenced, though perhaps not in as much detail. Students may read highlighted sections only, if time is limited. Individuals review the sheets on their own before small group discussion.

Ask individuals/small groups to discuss the two questions on slide 17:

“What are the most significant factors influencing the changing responsibilities of this military battalion?”

“What discretion do these company commanders have in responding to the order?”

B. Discuss the above questions as a large group (10 minutes)

Ask: “What are the most significant factors that influenced the battalion’s changing responsibilities?”

Possible responses:

- situation—operational area/orders
- legitimization—war appears just and necessary
- no military courts—discretion in the field
- belief in the brutish nature of the enemy
- legitimate war—fight with any means necessary
- Jews seen as agents of the Bolshevik system, linked to partisans, Mogilev conference, racial ideology, etc.

Fill in with answers from the list above if they are not raised by the class.

Ask: “What discretion do these company commanders have in responding to the order?”

Possible responses:

- none, would be shot for not obeying¹
- they would have bought in—this is their mission
- depends on relationship between company commander and major and between company commander and troops (unit dynamics)
- understanding that crimes against civilians will not be prosecuted
- depends on whether they see population as a security threat

Share responses out from groups. Fill in with answers from the list if they are not raised by the class.

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¹ Germans who refused to participate in atrocities were generally not punished, but risked peer, social, and sometimes professional exclusion or disadvantage. They could request other duties, such as guard duty or crowd control. There is no reliable evidence that German soldiers or police officials were killed for refusing to kill civilians. (“Common Questions,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, accessed May 6, 2016.)

Lesson Sequence (continued)

C. Case study results (5 minutes)

After discussing the questions, the instructor reveals the actual actions of the three company commanders using slides 18–20.

Ask: “Are these results, in this context, surprising to you? Why or why not?” “What do these actions reveal about the command climate of this unit?” “What factors may have influenced the decisions in this command climate?”

Comments might include: situational factors, individual experiences, leadership styles, their moral and ethical compasses, and their social and cultural values

D. Contemporary connections (15 minutes)

Use slides 21–23 to present final questions for small-group discussion (10 min):

- How does this case study help us to better understand the events of the Holocaust?
- What are the implications of this case study for military officers today?
- What questions are raised about possible pressures on and motivations of commanding officers and their units?

Discuss with whole group.

Resources

LESSON MATERIALS

- *Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership*
- PowerPoint slides to accompany class discussion
- Guide to the PowerPoint Presentation
- Context Sheets:
 - The German Military and Hitler
 - Codes of Conduct in the German Military
 - Planning the Invasion of the Soviet Union
 - Racial Ideology in Practice in the Soviet Union
 - Belarus
 - Case Study: Army Group Center Rear in Belarus
 - Case Study: 691st Regiment in October, 1941
- Supplemental Context Sheets:
 - Case Study: Einsatzgruppe B in Eastern Belarus
 - Case Study: Army Group Center (Rear) in October, 1941
 - Case Study: 339th Infantry Division Table of Organization and Equipment

FILMS

- *The Path to Nazi Genocide*
- *The Role of the German Army during the Holocaust*

HOLOCAUST ENCYCLOPEDIA ARTICLES

- Röhm Purge
- Treaty of Versailles, 1919
- The German Army and the Racial Nature of War against the Soviet Union
- Commissar Order
- Invasion of the Soviet Union, June 1941
- The Soviet Union and the Eastern Front

BOOKS

- Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014)
- Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009)

EXHIBITION

- *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation 1941–1944* (Hamburg Institute for Social Research, 2004), 28–29