

“The mind is its own place,  
and in itself can make a heaven of hell,  
a hell of heaven.”  
J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*

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## **ORDINARY WOMEN OR RUTHLESS KILLERS. A CRIMINOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF CRIMES COMMITTED BY FEMALE CONCENTRATION CAMP PERSONNEL**

### **Summary**

The goal of the work was to find the motives of female supervisors from German Nazi concentration camps in committing brutal crimes. The author analyzes cultural and biological factors hindering women's use of violence and reviews criminological theories on women's crime. It showed that female supervisors did not come from pathological backgrounds, and looked for factors that affected all women recruited to serve in the camp. The author concludes that while young age or economic hardship were important elements, the most significant role was played by the system, which with its aggressive indoctrination, legalization, and glorification of violence against specific groups, and the creation of a network of camps, created situations conducive to the commission of crimes. In addition, the author, citing social experiments, proves that the phenomenon of the Holocaust can be repeated, as it is due to the nature of man.

**Keywords:** perpetrators, motives, genocide, criminological theories, concentration camps

### **Introduction**

The crimes of genocide, including the Holocaust, are widely recognized as a shameful blemish on human history. These tragic events cannot be undone by anyone. All we can do is learn from this painful lesson so that

such a tragedy never happens again. The following paper is an attempt to draw the aforementioned conclusions. Using the example of women supervisors from Nazi concentration camps, it sought to find the factors that made a person capable of inflicting such unimaginable harm on another. Despite the continuous development of criminology and related sciences, the analysis of women's crime, especially concerning acts against life and health, mainly focuses on the disproportion in quantitative cases to men as perpetrators<sup>1</sup>. Acts against life or health committed by women cause much more sensation because they are a contrast to their features and image. It's not just the obvious physiological conditions that make it easier for men to commit crimes, especially those involving physical force. Men are much more likely than women to give in to impulses, to manifest uncontrollable fits of aggression, which, combined with the lack of internal brakes found in the opposite sex, often results in tragic consequences. The frail physique, greater capacity for self-control, and better-developed awareness of punishment in women result in greater difficulty in committing crimes, especially against life.

This paper analyzes existing theories on the background of violence in women and relates them to the crimes of female camp crew personnel. They sought answers to the question of why so many female supervisors at Nazi camps committed horrific crimes, despite the arguments cited. The recruitment and training of the female camp staff were analyzed. It also looks at the question of whether the most degenerate individuals were selected to serve in the camp, and if not, what processes influenced the transformation of these women. It also sought to find the reason for the lack of remorse in many war criminals.

### **Criminological theories on women's crime**

Theories attempting to explain the reasons for the use of violence, which would help understand the basis of cruelty in female supervisors, can be classified into four groups: psychological, biological, social, and economic<sup>2</sup>. The first of the above includes all kinds of trauma and psychological injuries acquired during childhood as a result of growing up in a pathological family. This can include harassment, physical and emotional abuse, tethering, as well as bullying by peers, humiliation, or sex-

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<sup>1</sup> J. Brzezińska, *Women as perpetrators of crimes in Poland: An analysis from a statistical perspective*, "Studia Iuridica Lublinensia" 2021, vol. XXX (1), pp. 12–14.

<sup>2</sup> I. Dembowska, *Profilowanie kryminalne sprawczyń seryjnych zabójstw*, "Acta Erasmiana", vol. 1, Wrocław 2001, p. 358.

ual abuse by teachers. It can also be added that growing up in an abnormal environment most often results in the developing child adopting the viewed deviations as the norm, the natural consequence of which will be the false formation of a distorted morality that diverges from accepted social standards.

In the case of biological theories regarding female perpetrators, one can go in two directions – analyzing factors that act as an inhibitor for criminal behavior or others that act just the opposite, a catalyst, so to speak, for aggression and violence. The first aspect to look at is the role of hormones. On the one hand, a popular view in criminology, described more extensively by psychiatrist James Gillian, is that male sex hormones, particularly testosterone, trigger or amplify aggression<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, female hormones, the levels of which change dramatically during menstruation, pregnancy, or menopause, have also been shown to affect the level of aggression in women. While the above cycles are a physiological state and do not cause pathological reactions, a correlation has been observed between them and crimes committed by women. L. de Saule, J.B.A. von Gudden, and C. Indeed, Lombroso showed that the majority of women were menstruating at the time of committing the criminal act, at the same time J.H. Morton, H. Addition, R.G. Addison, L. Hunt and J.J. Sullivan found that 62% of female prisoners surveyed committed the crime in the week before menstruation<sup>4</sup>. It should be noted, however, that the above factors can only intensify the reaction to an external stimulus, as they alone do not have sufficient causal power to push a person down the path of crime. Biological aspects also include considerations of the physiological constitution, in which men, with their physical robustness and massive build, facilitate violence, while women, with their frail stature or small strength, make it more difficult. Therefore, as studies have shown, the majority of women convicted of murder achieved their goal through the use of poison, the others used firearms, and sharp or blunt instruments<sup>5</sup>.

Another thread worth citing is the findings of evolutionary psychologists, who have detected that a natural inhibitor preventing women from using violence is the importance of the mother's survival and her role in the sur-

<sup>3</sup> R. Hale, A. Bolin, *The female serial killer*, in: R.M. Holmes, S.T. Holmes (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Serial Murder*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks – London – New Delhi 1998, pp. 36–37.

<sup>4</sup> K. Sitnik, *Teorie biologiczne w procesie wyjaśniania etiologii przestępczości kobiet*, "Folia Iuridica Universitatis Wratislaviensis" 2012, vol. 1(2), pp. 198–199.

<sup>5</sup> M. Krasowska-Lis, *Criminal and psychological profiling of female perpetrators of serial killings*, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Olsztyn 2017, p. 224.

vival of her offspring. Indeed, it has been shown that females of almost all primate species are less inclined to show aggression than males<sup>6</sup>. So it can be concluded that evolution has developed natural inhibitors to keep women from using violence. In addition, studies have shown that girls experience feelings of fear earlier than boys, and adult women experience them more intensely, which, combined with a better-developed so-called consciousness of punishment, causes girls to learn faster and more effectively to control their emotions and not resort to aggressive behavior<sup>7</sup>.

Social theories regarding women's motives for committing crimes are numerous, as an individual's environment undeniably has a significant impact on his or her behavior, while the social structure almost mirrors the level and characteristics of crime in a community. One of the most famous is R. Merton's concept called tension theory. It assumes that society has clearly defined goals that all individuals strive to achieve and that the fact of social stratification means that some achieve them more easily and quickly, while others are at risk of failure. On top of this, how a certain ideal is achieved, which everyone chooses for themselves, is divided into those that are permitted, and socially acceptable, and those that are prohibited and criminalized. All this causes the mentioned tension, which results in deviation<sup>8</sup>. Here, however, a distinction must be made, as in practice the same goal will have a different dimension for the two sexes. Material status, which is one of the main human goals, for men will be associated with professional success and obtaining higher and higher levels of living comfort, which is inherent in a higher position in the social hierarchy. For women, on the other hand, material status will mean financial stability and broad economic security<sup>9</sup>. Most often, they achieve this goal by getting married, which is combined at the same time with another, equally important goal of starting a family<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, women are socialized to build and maintain social ties to a much higher degree than men, which in turn acts

<sup>6</sup> M. Grzyb, E. Habzda-Siwiek, *Płeć a przestępczość. O problemie dysproporcji płci wśród sprawców przestępstw z użyciem przemocy*, "Archiwum Kryminologii" 2013, vol. XXV, p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> D. Woźniakowska-Fajst, *Przestępczość kobiet i dziewcząt – wybrane teorie kryminologiczne*, "Archiwum Kryminologii" 2007–2008, vol. XXIX–XXX, p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The above state of affairs is changing dynamically, as currently many women, influenced by feminist movements, are setting goals equal to those of men. The feminization of working life, contrary to appearances, also carries many risks. One of them is precisely the equalization of ambitions for both sexes, which often leads to an increase in the aforementioned tension associated with the difficulty of achieving them. Another negative effect is the sharp increase in female crime compared to the last century.

as another natural inhibitor against criminal behavior. At the same time, one can also see here the intertwining of social and economic motives, which are essentially interdependent. Perhaps for this very reason, the social-financial factor is the most common substrate for deviant behavior in women and, consequently, many criminological theories have been developed around it.

The above review of theories explaining women's resort to violence was done for three reasons; the first was to lay the groundwork for later attempts to explain the motives of women concentration camp crews. The second reason, inextricably linked to the previous one, is to systematize knowledge regarding the motives typical of women, so that in the subsequent analysis we can discern which acts should be viewed through the prism of female supervisors as women, and which motives were gender-neutral. The third reason was to show that crimes, especially against life, are generally, for a variety of reasons, more difficult to commit for women than for men. This, in turn, is an additional point in considering female supervisors, who were not inferior in cruelty to male members of SS units, and often even surpassed them in brutality and sophistication in the crimes they committed.

### **Women in the service of the Third Reich**

The present discussion, concerning female supervisors, should undoubtedly begin by systematizing the knowledge available today about female personnel and their location in the structures of the Nazi organs. Post-war feminist currents created an image of women in Nazi Germany as apolitical and innocent victims of the regime, who suffered the consequences as part of a collective responsibility while shouldering the burden of rebuilding the ruined state. Completely overlooked was the not inconsiderable role in the criminal machinery played by millions of female volunteers, volunteering for various types of service. The myth persists to this day. Among other reasons, this is why today so many people are shocked by information about the scale of crimes committed by Nazi women.

In 1939, 13 million women were active in the ranks of the NSDAP, almost a third of the population at the time<sup>11</sup>. Half a million were sent to the East, to serve. Some 400,000 women trained by the German Red Cross worked in Wehrmacht and SS hospitals. Immediately, one can make the accusation that being a nurse is not a crime, and it is difficult to argue with this. However, it should be noted that these women, in addition to providing medical assistance to wounded soldiers, were also actively involved in the mass killing

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<sup>11</sup> W. Lower, *Furie Hitlera*, Czarne Publishing House, Volowiec 2015, p. 25.

of people<sup>12</sup>. It is worth mentioning at this point that the highest number of victims is attributed not to female supervisors, but to nurses. Even before the immediate extermination camps were built, children displaying some kind of disability were dying at the hands of nurses. It is estimated that more than 200,000 people died at the hands of German medical personnel in the Reich alone, as part of the widespread purification of the race implemented through euthanasia, abortion, and brutal experiments<sup>13</sup>. Subsequently, the program was expanded, and the bloodiest toll of sick or disabled people was taken in the territories of Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine.

In addition, the Wehrmacht trained more than 500,000 girls to serve as radio operators, conduct surveillance in air defense, or work on the staff. Some of them had real power over life and death, as on more than one occasion the receptionists were responsible for typing up people doomed to extermination, an example being the female employees of the Warsaw Gestapo, who on many occasions themselves selected prisoners to be shot<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes the executions were coordinated by secretaries, such as during the 1942-1943 massacres in Lidia. The pivotal role of women in the Nazi Reich is evidenced by Heinrich Himmler's creation of the *SS-Frauenkorps*<sup>15</sup> in 1942. On the other hand, women serving as *SS-Aufseherin* (German for supervisor) in the concentration camps were just part of the *SS-Gefolge* institution, the so-called SS auxiliary personnel. After successfully passing a special course, candidates would sign a service and professional contract with a particular *SS-Totenkopfverbände* unit<sup>16</sup>, staffing a specific camp<sup>17</sup>. It is estimated that a total of up to 4,000 female volunteers received special training, and then served in women's concentration camps<sup>18</sup>.

Female personnel did not have military distinctions, while their structure was hierarchical in terms of the functions they held. Although the guards had the status of civilian employees, they moved around in the special uniforms they were entitled to, with summer and winter variants, and were subject to the SS judiciary. The aforementioned uniform consisted of a gray

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> G. Aly, *Obciężeni. „Eutanazja” w nazistowskich Niemczech*, Czarne Publishing House, Volowicz 2015, pp. 9–10.

<sup>14</sup> W. Lower, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> *SS-Totenkopfverbände* – SS troops on guard duty in Nazi camps.

<sup>17</sup> T. Fedorszczak, *Aufseherinnen – kobiety personel w obozach koncentracyjnych SS i ich odpowiedzialność za zbrodnie wojenne (1937–1945)*, in: S. Rogowski (ed.), *Legal position of women in history*, Kolonia Limited, Wrocław 2010, p. 202.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

wool uniform blouse with a five-button placket, two parallel pockets at hip level, and an embroidered emblem on the left sleeve. In turn, a white or light gray shirt was worn underneath. The bottom of the uniform consisted of so-called skirts created specifically for female supervisors<sup>19</sup>. On the one hand, they did not restrain movement, on the other hand, they exposed the uniqueness of female supervisors to the other women employed by the SS. In addition, it was assumed that the outfit would be gender-neutral, so as not to equate the appearance of female staff with male staff, and at the same time to protect female guards from courtship, which was undoubtedly not conducive to maintaining discipline. The uniform was complemented by a fur coat with an eagle and officers<sup>20</sup>.

*SS-Aufseherinnen* had the right to carry small arms, but they did not always or even rarely exercise it. Few accounts or documents testifying to its use against prisoners are known. One of them is the memoirs of former prisoner Tatiana Targalskaya, who testified before the Düsseldorf court that supervisor Hermine Braunsteiner, known as “Mare,” shot a boy who was escaping from loading<sup>21</sup>. Another example was the mistaken shooting of a kapo by *Aufseherin* Anna David. The perpetrator explained the incident by her lack of gun handling skills, while others interpreted it as a consequence of playing with the fate of prisoners, while others saw the cause as “female hysteria”<sup>22</sup>. This may also have been one of the reasons why female supervisors shied away from carrying or using firearms, as they were theoretically trained in the principles of their use, but completely unfamiliar with them. Another may have been its weight<sup>23</sup>, which was undoubtedly taking its toll after being carried on the hips all day. Instead, they were eager to enjoy another privilege, that of being able to use the assistance of a dog, a trained German Shepherd, which, by the way, the Germans had a weakness for<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> It was unacceptable for women to wear pants, which were reserved exclusively for men, while at the same time there was a need for clothing that did not restrict movement.

<sup>20</sup> K. Sulej, *Rzeczy osobiste: opowieści o ubraniach w obozach koncentracyjnych i zagłady*, Czerwone i Czarne Publishing House, Warsaw 2020, pp. 229–230.

<sup>21</sup> S. Kania, *Proces zbrodniarzy z Majdanka*, Wydawnictwo Prawnicze, Warsaw 1987, pp. 44–45.

<sup>22</sup> K. Sulej, op. cit., p. 227.

<sup>23</sup> The P-38 pistol, which was the primary small arms weapon of the German army during World War II, weighed less than a kilogram (34 ounces, 0.96 kg) without a loaded magazine. The magazine including eight cartridges is an additional about 0.4 kg (see more: [https://www.shootingtimes.com/editorial/handgun\\_reviews\\_the\\_walthers\\_p38\\_102510/99823](https://www.shootingtimes.com/editorial/handgun_reviews_the_walthers_p38_102510/99823)).

<sup>24</sup> This was due to symbolism, to which the Nazis attached great importance. On the one hand, dogs, as even synonymous with obedience, were valued in a society for which one of the highest values is loyalty and discipline. On the other hand, wolfdogs are one of the breeds most similar to wolves, so you could say they are of the purest blood. The wolf, on the other hand, is



The use of quadrupeds against prisoners confirms many accounts. Lucina Domb, who was a witness in the aforementioned trial in Düsseldorf, testified in the courtroom that, assisted by Hermine Braunsteiner, she and other female supervisors took mothers away from their children during selection<sup>25</sup>. In turn, Irena Marszałek described an incident seen in person involving *Aufseherin* Hildegarda Lächert “Bloody Brigid” – that is, she had fastened her sheepdog on a pregnant prisoner, who yanked the baby out of the woman’s belly, as a result of which both suffered immediate death<sup>26</sup>. This is just one of many such incidents for which the guard became famous.

It seems that the most popular and also the most frequently used tool of terror was the whip, which allowed the infliction of pain without the need for both great force and touching the prisoners, which the “aufzejerki,” as the female overseers were called in the Polish jargon, frankly abhorred. In addition, it emphasized the attribute of authority, thereby further cementing the authority of the female guards.

### **Hypothetical reasons for bestiality of female supervisors**

Consideration of the motives behind the criminal actions of the women of the camp crews, as mentioned earlier, can be divided into three main categories. The motives typical of women perpetrators, and gender-neutral factors should be analyzed, and a biographical reconstruction should be performed at the outset since all decisions made are a consequence of events shaping the reality of the individual.

Economic and social factors were included in the analysis of the motives for female crime, and should also be cited. Losing the war was economically disastrous for the newly established Weimar Republic. In addition to the massive destruction of the economic infrastructure, the loss of 14.6% of arable land, the reduction in reserves of such fundamental deposits as iron by as much as 75% and zinc by 68%<sup>27</sup>, or the obligation to pay war reparations, there was also hyperinflation and the worsening of the food deficit that had existed in Germany for decades. Therefore, the younger generation grew up not only in the shadow of defeat and a sense of injustice but also largely in abject poverty and a concomitant lack of prospects.

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the epitome of strength, predation, and the pack – a perfect reflection of a strong, hierarchical society in which there is no room for dysfunction or imperfection.

<sup>25</sup> E. Fechner, *Proces: obóz na Majdanku w świetle wypowiedzi uczestników rozprawy przed Sądem Krajowym w Düsseldorfie*, State Museum at Majdanek, Lublin 1996, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> S. Kania, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

<sup>27</sup> C. Łuczak, *Dzieje gospodarcze Niemiec 1871–1990*, vol. 1, Scientific Publishing House of the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2004, p. 101.



Teenage people were mentioned, for the vast majority of female supervisors were not even thirty years old at the outbreak of the war, meaning that they grew up during Germany's historic economic collapse. Hermine "Stomping Mare" Braunsteiner became a supervisor at the age of twenty, Hildegarda "Bloody Brigitte" Lächert at twenty-one, Maria "Beast" Mandl at twenty-six, Elsa Ehrich also at twenty-six, and Irma "Beautiful Beast" Grese began her career as an *Aufseherin* when she was only nineteen. In the analysis for this paper, the age of the perpetrators plays a large role in understanding the motives of the young women who enlisted voluntarily to serve in the camps. The first factor related to life expectancy is the aforementioned economic considerations. Girls growing up in a ruined country very often had no education, and their only work experience was manual labor on a farm or as domestic help. A great example of this is the previously mentioned Elsa Ehrich, *Oberaufseherin*<sup>28</sup> at *Frauenkonzentrationslager Lublin*. While in prison with an adjudicated death sentence, she addressed a request for clemency to Boleslaw Bierut; in it she explained that when she volunteered, she did not know the realities of future work, and was motivated by material conditions<sup>29</sup>. It was no different with her faithful helper Hermine Braunsteiner, who, like Ilse Koch, after failing in her attempts to obtain a nursing education, motivated by high salaries and guaranteed housing, decided to apply for a position as an "aufzejer"<sup>30</sup>. The case of the 16 female supervisors from the Bergen-Belsen camp tried in 1945 was no different, as none of them had a profession, and the oldest of them was born in 1918, the youngest in 1923<sup>31</sup>.

In the example above, the aforementioned difference between the priorities of the two genders can be observed. While men joined the SS motivated ideologically, hoping to serve in an elite unit with prospects for advancement, women, on the other hand, volunteered for positions as female supervisors, seeking financial stability.

Another aspect due to his young age, yet gender-neutral, was the role of Nazi indoctrination. Girls, although in a different way than boys, were also subjected to strong propaganda from an early age. Female students were removed from school subjects such as Latin to be lectured on duties to the Reich, the purity of the race, how to choose a candidate for a good

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<sup>28</sup> The senior overseer or first overseer – the supervisor of the female staff of the camp.

<sup>29</sup> Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek, *Odpis prośby o ulaskawienie, Lublin, Więzienie-Zamek, 11.06.1948*.

<sup>30</sup> I. Müller-Münch, *Die Frauen von Majdanek*, Rowohlt, Rowohlt bei Hamburg 1982, pp. 89–100.

<sup>31</sup> K. Kompisch, *Sprawczyni*, Prószyński Media, Warsaw 2012, pp. 292–293.

husband, or the role of the woman-mother, the foundation of National Socialist society<sup>32</sup>. In addition, the ubiquitous anti-Semitic propaganda also reached women, portraying Jews as enemies and seeing them as the cause of all of Germany's disasters and failures. Goebbels' indoctrination machine presented a utopian world, a society of strong and healthy people. To achieve this ideal state of civilization, it was necessary to take the trouble and "purge" humanity of weak, sick, or racially "dirty" individuals who did not conform to the ideal of a superhuman. Antoni Kepinski, in his book *Refleksje oświęcimskie* (Reflections of Auschwitz), cites a phenomenon that occurs in biology, which is that a virus<sup>33</sup> that attacks a bacterium infects it with its DNA. The attacked microorganism loses its structure and begins to produce the genetic material of the aggressor. Seemingly the same structure in reality already has a different identity. The above mechanism is transferred by the author to the human-ideology relationship, when an individual possessed by an idea takes it over as his own, at the same time shedding his personality and adopting values or norms coming from outside<sup>34</sup>. When you are dealing with a larger group of people "infected" with a particular philosophy, you can see the disappearance of individuality and the formation of a community with twin goals and views. This, in turn, gives rise to two further dependencies. The first is the desirable sense of being part of a community, to which man as a social being aspires. The second is that when one is a member of a larger community, one's motivation increases, as does one's efficiency in pursuing one's goals.

The adoption of Nazi ideology as one's view was undoubtedly the result of massive propaganda, but also the fertile ground into which Goebbels' seeds fell, while the phenomenon of the takeover of views is one possible factor explaining why, after the war, many of the perpetrators had no remorse. Standing before the court, they explained that it was not their views, but everything was even blamed on a top-down imposed idea that enslaved their way of thinking and, consequently, their actions. On the other hand, after the fall of Nazism, they became again the good, honest people they were before the war as well. Undoubtedly, the instilling of Nazi values in children, who were particularly susceptible to the formation of morality, in many cases resulted in the fact that the only values the maturing man knew were those preached by Nazi agitators. This also explains the attitude of the young "aufzejer", about eighteen years old, who, when asked why

<sup>32</sup> W. Lower, op. cit., pp. 41–43.

<sup>33</sup> Bacteriophage.

<sup>34</sup> A. Kępiński, *Refleksje oświęcimskie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 2005, pp. 11–12.

she whipped a Jewish girl to death with a whip, replied with undisguised sincerity that, “she is not a child after all.”<sup>35</sup>

The ideology also developed moral relativism in the citizens of the Third Reich, which at the same time was another factor that made the criminals blind to their guilt and considered the fact of being tried as an outright injustice. Killing was wrong unless it involved particular socio-ethnic groups, in which case it appeared justified and even desirable. During the trial, one of the nurses accused of killing patients in Poland countered that she knew stealing was wrong and would never have committed it, but that she treated administering lethal injections as her professional duty, which she could not refuse. At the same time, when asked by the prosecution whether she would have carried out the theft if she had been ordered to do so, she answered emphatically that she would not<sup>36</sup>.

Another typical motive for women to volunteer for service in the camp was undoubtedly prestige and the chance to advance in the social hierarchy, since until now their role in society had been marginalized. Although they were not given the right to vote<sup>37</sup>, the assumption of such a position came with many privileges not previously available. In addition to the right to walk around in the uniform described above, the female overseers, although theoretically subordinate to the camp’s chief commandant, enjoyed a degree of autonomy, for the actual authority over them was exercised by the first overseer. This state of affairs did not suit the SS officer stratum. Heinrich Himmler himself repeatedly intervened in disputes between the camp command and the female staff, interceding on behalf of the female staff and ordering that their autonomy be respected<sup>38</sup>. Nazi policy opened up new career paths for women in the administration, not in subordinate positions as before, but allowing them to hold leadership positions from now on as well.

Another motivating factor for cruelty was the desire to prove that women would perform no worse than men at the tasks assigned to them. Therefore, to prove themselves and earn respect from the male crew, it was not enough to match their brutality, but even surpass them. The same motives drove Erna Petri – the wife of a Nazi criminal. On one occasion, having spotted six

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<sup>35</sup> A. Lundholm, *Wrota piekiel: Ravensbrück*, Ośrodek KARTA, Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw 2014, p. 276.

<sup>36</sup> W. Lower, op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>37</sup> In practice, this did not matter, as the NSDAP soon after coming to power introduced a one-party system, outlawing all other political parties.

<sup>38</sup> W. Lower, op. cit., pp. 117–119.

Jewish children aged 6 to 12 in the woods who had escaped from a transport to the Sobibor death camp, she took them home, fed them, then led them outside and killed them with a shot to the back of the head, as if she were carrying out an execution. Before the court, she testified as follows: "I did not want to stand behind the SS men. I wanted to show them that I, a woman, can act like a man. So I shot four Jews and six Jewish children. I wanted to prove myself in the presence of men. Besides, at that time in that region, one heard everywhere that Jews and [Jewish] children were being killed, and this also prompted me to kill them."<sup>39</sup>

In the above testimonies, one can also see another reason why both men and women committed cruel crimes with such ease. The talk is of public acquiescence to such activities. Another equally important aspect for both genders was the aforementioned sense of belonging to a larger group. As mentioned above, individuality is lost in the community; this is particularly evident in uniformed structures, in which each individual, in addition to having the same views, is visually similar to the others. This in turn offers an awareness of a kind of anonymity, which in turn offers a sense of impunity. At the same time, the above regularity also conditions the perception of oneself as a "cog" in the machine. The Nazis, by introducing a "machine" society in which everyone (though in practice only the healthy and strong) was a necessary link for the proper functioning of the Third Reich, achieved two effects they desired. First, the individual felt the pressure, as he influenced the social apparatus, and his dysfunction would have negative consequences for the general public. At the same time, it provided a sense of mission, which was an additional motivator. Second, this perception of society eliminated the sense of guilt in individuals, as they became just a small part of the whole, who only obeyed orders and on whom nothing depended. Interestingly, the same argument was used by SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann, claiming that he did not influence anything, as everything had been decided at higher levels, and he was merely following orders from his superiors. So if the chief coordinator of the holocaust, euphemistically called the final solution to the Jewish question, perceived his role in this way, how understandable is the same explanation in the mouths of lower-level soldiers or supervisors?

The system played a not insignificant role in the sadistic guard-prisoner relationship. After all, thanks to him, reality has taken such and not other courses, if it were not for him, the vast majority of the situations that have

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 162–163.

occurred would not have happened. When an individual shows a predisposition to aberrant behavior, the state, through the law and the services that enforce it, has a preventive effect on such an individual. The real danger comes when the threat comes from the system, which becomes the creator of these situations, so to speak. The Nazi machine, with its competence and potential, streamlined the extermination process by building concentration camps or immediate extermination camps. Hitler's power created opportunities, provided resources, justified, and gave institutional support to the barbaric bestiality carried out on many levels, both by camp crews and civilians taking the lead in, "cleansing" society.

To maximize their effectiveness in achieving their goals, the systems use tools of various specifications and sizes. Such an apparatus will be both indoctrination, pointing out the goal and demonstrating its attractiveness – a network of camps that are essential on the road to success – and the reality prevailing in these camps.

Every aspect of daily life in the "death factory" was deliberate and directed at facilitating or even motivating the staff to use violence, which would accelerate the extermination. Aggressive dehumanization, in addition to breaking the will to fight in prisoners, was also intended to facilitate their killing, as it is easier to eliminate a number than a person<sup>40</sup>. Prisoners shorn and dressed alike merged into a uniform mass in which individuality and identity, indicative of humanity, disappeared. The very term used to describe the extermination plan, viz: "the final solution to the Jewish question," presented the Jews not as people, but as a problem to be solved, to be removed. The attire of the torturers was also not insignificant. The cut of Nazi uniforms accentuated the role of strength, emphasized superiority and membership in the elite, which undoubtedly gave soldiers confidence. The same mechanisms also worked against women donning a uniform. It wasn't long before the uniformed girls underwent a metamorphosis – from normal, that is, not showing signs of aggression, arrogance, or a sense of superiority, sometimes even frightened by their new living situation – into confident, proud, and power-hungry officers. In addition to boosting the morale of these women, the new outfit itself already provided an opportunity to paste prisoners. Hermine Braunsteiner, mentioned several times, would not have earned the infamous nickname "Mare" had it not been for

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<sup>40</sup> The process of dehumanization is still present in the military training system almost all over the world. The soldier does not kill, but disables the enemy's living force. Such practices essentially have the same goal – to take away remorse and reduce uncertainty before pulling the trigger, which can cost the life of both the hesitant soldier and his comrades-in-arms.

the military, shoe-shod boots that enabled her to ram emaciated prisoners, something she undoubtedly would not have undertaken in flat slippers. The transformation under the influence of costume is not an incidental phenomenon, as people subconsciously synchronize their behavior with their clothing, which is synonymous with a specific role. An example of this is Vera Wohlauf<sup>41</sup>, who, having decided to participate in the liquidation of the ghetto in Międzyrzec Podlaski, dressed in a coat and SS fusillade, personally whipped her victims. It was no different with the Nazi secretary, twenty-two-year-old Johanna Altvater, who, while taking part in the ghetto liquidation operation in Vladimir Volynsky, when she had to throw newborn babies out of hospital windows or smash them against the sidewalk, was dressed in typically male attire – pants, military boots and a brown sweatshirt with a swastika<sup>42</sup>. In the case of female overseers, however, in addition to clothing, the guardian function was also a major influence. This, coupled with uniforms and armaments, brought these women into the role of uncompromising caretakers, a role demanded of them by the state and, as they thought, society.

An extremely important fact was the sense of superiority and the belief in the mission to purify the world. Heinz Thilo, an SS staff doctor at Auschwitz, described the camp as *anus mundi*, which literally means *anus* of the world<sup>43</sup>. The phrase, on the one hand, is an expression of disgust with both the camp itself and its inmates, which was the case with most of the camp crews. This is why, among other things, the whip was a favorite tool of sentinels, as it offered the opportunity to inflict pain with their own hands without physical contact. On the other hand, the above formulation presented the institution of the camp as something that, although abhorred, was necessary in the process of cleansing the world, explained the legitimacy of creating places where unwanted “waste” would be “expelled”, thus making the world cleaner and society healthier<sup>44</sup>. The above worldview stemmed directly from an overgrown sense of self-worth; when mission-consciousness was added, the result was a host of loyal, ready-for-anything soldiers, often taking the lead in bestiality.

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<sup>41</sup> Wife of the commander of the 3rd company of the 101st. Reserve Police Battalion, notorious for carrying out mass executions of civilians.

<sup>42</sup> P. Zychowicz, W. Lower, *Panie życia i śmierci*, “Rzeczpospolita”, July 7, 2010, <https://archiwum.rp.pl/artykul/968783-Panie-zycia--i-smierci.html> (accessed: 20.08.2022).

<sup>43</sup> A. Kępiński, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



The effect on the individual of suddenly being given full control over others is perfectly reflected in the so-called Stanford experiment, during which students were divided into a group of guards and prisoners, imprisoned in a makeshift prison located in the basement of Stanford University's psychology department. As with the female supervisors, participation was entirely voluntary, with volunteers coming forward without knowing whether they would end up in the inmate or caretaker group. An important factor in the experiment was the fact of selection so that only mentally healthy students with no previous conflicts with the law were admitted<sup>45</sup>. The study was completed on the sixth day – that's all it took for the students, who had never shown sadistic tendencies before, to cross the line in physically and mentally abusing their peers who owed them nothing. The experiment provided clear conclusions about how strongly the mental health of an individual functioning normally in society is affected by a sense of power, anonymity, and acquiescence to violent action. The staff of the experimental prison, as well as the young female supervisors, were put in a specific situation, providing specific opportunities that they had not had before; moreover, the students likewise had a new role to play and were not reprimanded by their superiors for abusing their authority. In the case of the Nazi camps, as has been repeatedly mentioned, sadism towards prisoners was even welcomed and rewarded, as only ruthless terror allowed hundreds to enforce the obedience of thousands. This, in turn, leads once again to the conclusion that the decisive role is played by systems that, through the situational factors they create, influence the individual in such a way that the latter is capable of behavior that he would never suspect himself of.

The explanation for the abnormalities, manifested by exceptional sadism and cruelty, is often sought in the individual characteristics of the individual that motivated his behavior - pathological relationships in childhood, genetic predisposition, or, finally, diseases are taken into account. This is convenient thinking, for it throws off the burden of feeling that the atrocities were committed by quite sane people who did not show criminal inclinations, and more importantly, that any of us would be capable of similar acts. The validity of Wislawa Szymborska's thought "We know as much about ourselves as we have been tested" is attested to by a series of experiments conducted by Dutch researchers on a group of 500 volunteers. The respondents were tasked with keeping an eye on a job seeker (a statistician substituted by the organizers) solving a competency test, and giving her

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<sup>45</sup> In the case of female supervisors, no such selection existed.



fifteen stressful comments during the test, which they received from the study administrator. At the same time, the participants were informed that the result of the test would determine whether or not the person would be hired, and that the ability to work under pressure was not necessary for the position, while their mischief was to be used solely for the test. Thus, making someone uncomfortable and hindering their source of income was of no other use than for the scientist to collect data, since the experiment was designed to test the scale of obedience to authority, which people of science undoubtedly are. Importantly, the participants were able to stop insulting the test-solving applicant at any time, and most significantly for this study – a separate group of respondents was asked whether they would have said all the comments from the set under the above circumstances. 90% of the respondents said they would not comply and did not complete the task, while in practice 91% completed it to the very end. This level was also maintained when the experiment was repeated with different social groups<sup>46</sup>.

Another experiment brilliantly captures the mechanisms involved in superior-subordinate relations, which naturally occurred in the heavily hierarchical SS apparatus. Twenty-two nurses were surveyed; they were instructed by telephone by a doctor working at the same hospital, whom they did not, however, meet in person, to administer 20 mg of the indicated drug to patients. The written order was to be signed by the doctor as soon as he arrived at the ward, while the bottle of the drug stated that the maximum allowable dose was 10 mg. At the time, 12 other nurses from the hospital were asked a hypothetical question about how they would behave in such a situation. Ten of them unhesitatingly countered that they would not have followed the order, while as many as 21 nurses put in an actual stressful situation in a real-life situation chose to administer twice the allowable dose of medication, while only one refused<sup>47</sup>. Two conclusions can be drawn from the above study - the first is the aforementioned discrepancy between an individual's prediction of his theoretical response to specific situational stimuli and practice, which turns out to be quite different. Secondly, it has been demonstrated the power of the fear of exposing oneself to the wrath of the employer, and thus of losing one's job, which undoubtedly included

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<sup>46</sup> The Nazi decision-makers also knew about the power of scientific authority, so they strenuously tried to prove the superiority of the Aryan race over others by carefully studying the physiology of people of different skin colors, from different parts of the world. See P. Zimbardo, *Efekt Lucyfera*, PWN Scientific Publisher, Warsaw 2009, pp. 289–290.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 288–289.

female supervisors, who, as mentioned, overwhelmingly volunteered to serve in the camp as they sought financial stability.

To recapitulate, it can be considered that the analysis of individual resumes is fundamental in an attempt to explain the motives for action, and also serves to eliminate several factors from the array of potential sources of deviancy. Genetic factors, growing up in a pathological family, experiencing abuse or persecution as a child, while decisive in many cases, are statistically present in too few cases concerning female supervisors to see them as the source of the horrors of the concentration camps. The most likely reasons for women crossing all boundaries of humanity can be summed up in a dozen sub-points:

- Economic factors; serving as an “aufzejer” offered financial stability at an attractive level. In turn, this creates a fear of losing one’s position, which motivates one to harden one’s position by trying to prove oneself. On the other hand, where brutality and terror were glorified, this is how they tried to distinguish themselves.
- The young age of the female supervisors determined that their adolescence was saturated with Nazi propaganda, which in turn resulted in many women believing in the rightness of their actions.
- Lack of education and work experience, which was a consequence of both age and the fact of living in an economically ruined country. Two more correlations arise from this, namely, restrictions on education made people more susceptible to indoctrination; moreover, work in the camp, which required no qualifications, seemed extremely attractive.
- An ideology that first and foremost took away the burden of having to decide how to behave in a particular situation, while at the same time reducing the uncertainties associated with the consequences of those choices.
- The role-playing of the *SS-Aufseherinnen*, compounded by military cut attire, weaponry equipment, and daily residence in the brutalized reality of the camp as if imposed by law by the Nazi apparatus.
- The sense of anonymity that comes from being in uniform and being part of a whole community also generated a sense of impunity and minimized remorse.
- Dehumanization, permeated every plane of camp reality, combined with a sense of superiority, making it so that people were not murdered, but a threat to the nation was eliminated, and the “problem” was solved.
- Receive unlimited power along with clearly defined goals and a premium on terror policies.

- The division of labor created by the Nazi apparatus blurred responsibility for crimes, which made it easier to commit them and also eliminated guilt.

It can be assumed that women exhibiting sadism had a dormant predisposition that was triggered by the situation they found themselves in. However, it should be remembered that, as the cited social experiments show, such muted inclinations lie dormant in practically every person and are released in the form of temptations when favorable circumstances arise. This relationship has been more extensively described by Philip Zimbardo, the director of the aforementioned prison experiment, who called the phenomenon of a person's transformation under the influence of a situation, the temporary, "switching off" of his morality, the "Lucifer effect"<sup>48</sup>.

As the above examples show, external conditions are key, and these are determined by the systems that shape both societies and, through them, individuals as well. This is because the criminogenic features of society reinforce or even stimulate the criminogenic features of the individual, and vice versa. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the key role is played by both the system that created the possibility of prisoner abuse for the students of the experimental prison, the one that gave total power to the camp guards while streamlining and legitimizing mass extermination, and the same one responsible for the Rwandan genocide<sup>49</sup> and many others.

## Summary

In post-war trials, accused Nazis were subjected to thorough psychiatric examinations. By looking for mental illnesses or special sadistic predispositions of the perpetrators, it was hoped to get answers as to why these people committed such horrific crimes. The results, however, surprised both scientists and the public. One of the psychiatrists examining for the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the main coordinators of the "final solution," was said to have shouted after leaving his cell: "Half a dozen psychiatrists considered him normal. In any case, more normal than myself after the tests I subjected him to."<sup>50</sup> This is because he was not found to have any abnormalities and did not show signs of fanaticism. Researchers, on the other hand, were struck by its thoughtlessness, superficiality, and simplicity. This, in turn, shows that participation in crimes was most often

<sup>48</sup> See more: P. Zimbardo, *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> The massacre of people by extremists from the Hutu tribe against the population of Tutsi origin, which occurred in Rwanda in 1994; it is estimated that more than a million people may have been killed.

<sup>50</sup> P. Zimbardo, *op. cit.*, pp. 299–300.

motivated by obedience, which at the same time was self-inflicted. Very often, soldiers who took part in mass murders despite the possibility of refusing to follow orders, when asked about it after the war, could not answer why they did it<sup>51</sup>.

It is extremely convenient to look for mental illnesses or special predispositions in the profiles of the perpetrators. It enables belief in man's good nature or offers a (false) sense of security derived from the belief that mass atrocities were a folly characteristic of a past war. The reality, however, turns out to be quite different. The greatest crimes, and on their own initiative, were committed by loving parents, husbands, wives, and law-abiding citizens who never had problems with the law. At the same time, subjected to specific situational stimuli, placed in the brutal reality of war, and deluded by ideology, they committed acts they did not think they were capable of.

The above attempt to find factors to explain why women, the givers of life, committed cruel crimes in defiance of biological and cultural conditions, is in no way intended to justify them. While the cited circumstances had an impact – some smaller, others larger – the final decision was always up to the man anyway. The cases of those who broke out, whether participants in social experiments or functionaries of camp crews, show emphatically that people always have a choice. Neither social pressure nor the most favorable circumstances created by the system pull the trigger – it is always done by a person, bearing full responsibility for the act.

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<sup>51</sup> Ch. R. Browning, *Zwykli ludzie. 101 Rezerwowcy Batalion Policji i „ostateczne rozwiązanie” w Polsce*, Rebis Publishing House, Poznań 2019, pp. 348–353.

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