

Resisting Tyranny Depends on the Courage to Not Conform

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Social psychologist Roy Baumeister begins his book [Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty](#), with a proposition that will be counterintuitive to many: “Evil usually enters the world unrecognized by the people who open the door and let it in. Most people who perpetrate evil do not see what they are doing as evil.”

Dismissing evildoers as “insane” is an attempt to absolve both them and you of responsibility. Baumeister observes, “People do become extremely upset and abandon self-control, with violent results, but this is not insanity.” If only “insane” people commit “evil” acts, you might reason there is no need to strengthen spiritual and moral muscles. You might skip the reflection, study, and practice that builds spiritual and moral strength.

Would you, Baumeister asks, “obey orders to kill innocent civilians? Would you help torture someone? Would you stand by passively while the secret police hauled your neighbors off to concentration camps?” Baumeister writes, “Most people say no. But when such events actually happen, the reality is quite different.” Today, to the point, will you obey orders to fire upon people who refuse to comply with mandates?

In one of the most instructive books about Nazi Germany, [Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the](#)

[Final Solution in Poland](#), historian Christopher Browning explores why most people say yes and commit heinous acts even when given latitude to say no.

The men of Police Battalion 101 were not specially selected psychopathic killers. Initially, the Battalion was set up to enforce Nazi rule in occupied Poland. Eventually, their mission changed, bringing them to be the genocidal murderers of Jews they were charged with rounding up. Browning explains, "The bulk of the killers were not specially selected but drawn at random from a cross-section of German society, and they did not kill because they were coerced by the threat of dire punishment for refusing." Mostly they were "middle-aged reserve policemen." Battle had not driven these men to depravity, "they had not been fired on nor had they lost comrades."

Browning explores one of their initial murderous actions, "shooting some 1,500 Jews in the Polish village of Józefów in the summer of 1942." Major Wilhelm Trapp addressed his men before the shooting began: "Pale and nervous, with choking voice and tears in his eyes, Trapp visibly fought to control himself as he spoke. The Battalion, he said plaintively, had to perform a frightfully unpleasant task. This assignment was not to his liking; indeed, it was highly regrettable, but the orders came from the highest authorities."

Trapp provided a "justification" for the coming slaughter—Jews were damaging Germany and threatening German troops—but then Trapp "made an extraordinary offer: if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out." The task, Trapp outlined, was the immediate killing of all women, children, and the elderly.

Only twelve of the approximately 500 in the Battalion initially took Trapp's offer to "step out." Browning estimated "10 to 20 percent of those actually assigned to the firing squads" extricated themselves "by less conspicuous methods or

asked to be released from the firing squads once the shooting had begun.” Yet for most of the police, killing became second nature: “Many reserve policemen who were horrified in the woods outside Józefów... subsequently became casual volunteers for numerous firing squads and ‘Jew hunts.’”

Browning’s research provides insights into the mindsets that fueled obedience: “Who would have ‘dared,’ one policeman declared emphatically, to ‘lose face’ before the assembled troops.” Another said, “No one wants to be thought a coward.”

Not all who followed orders lacked moral consciousness: “Another policeman—more aware of what truly required courage—said quite simply, ‘I was cowardly.’”

Some rationalized their atrocities: “It was possible for me to shoot only children. My neighbor then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer.”

To escape moral culpability, others offered the excuse of what difference could they make: “Without me [shooting] the Jews were not going to escape their fate anyway.” How many managers are saying today, what difference can I make? *If I don’t fire the unvaccinated, someone else will.*

Browning explains, “The men’s concern for their standing in the eyes of their comrades was not matched by any sense of human ties with their victims. The Jews stood outside their circle of human obligation and responsibility.” Today, hospital administrators are firing workers with robust natural immunity who faithfully served during the pandemic and refuse the vaccine. Like the men in the Battalion, these administrators are just following orders.

What would have happened that terrible day in 1942 if more policemen recognized the humanity of the “other” and had the courage to not conform? Today, what would happen if more

businesses, like In-N-Out Burger, [refuse to obey government edicts](#)? In October, Stephen Davis, a Florida fire battalion chief, "[was fired](#) for refusing to discipline department employees listed as unvaccinated." What would happen if more managers had the courage of Chief Davis? Without obedience, tyranny fails.

During this time of Covid, we can learn lessons from Browning's book about how we treat people who make choices different from our own. We can notice when we fail to see the humanity in others. We can become aware when we justify an us vs. them mindset. We can question our perceptions. To wait for Biden or Fauci to change first is to ignore our power of choice.

Lessons Learned

Browning reflects on the actions of the Battalion and asks, "If obedience to orders out of fear of dire punishment is not a valid explanation, what about 'obedience to authority' in the more general sense used by [Stanley Milgram](#)?"

Browning wonders if there is "a 'deeply ingrained behavior tendency' to comply with the directives of those positioned hierarchically above, even to the point of performing repugnant actions in violation of 'universally accepted' moral norms." Browning explains,

The notions of 'loyalty, duty, discipline,' requiring competent performance in the eyes of authority, become moral imperatives overriding any identification with the victim. Normal individuals enter an 'agentic state' in which they are the instrument of another's will. In such a state, they no longer feel personally responsible for the content of their actions but only for how well they perform.

Browning recounts, "Milgram made direct reference to the similarities between human behavior in his experiments and

under the Nazi regime. He concluded, 'Men are led to kill with little difficulty.'"

Importantly, "Milgram himself notes that people far more frequently invoke authority than conformity to explain their behavior, for only the former seems to absolve them of personal responsibility." Yet, in the Battalion case, "Many policemen admitted responding to the pressures of conformity—how would they be seen in the eyes of their comrades?—not authority." Based on his research, Browning concludes, "Conformity assumes a more central role than authority at Józefów."

The Covidocracy demands we all conform and shames those who make different choices. Browning explains the dangers of a culture of shame: "The shame culture, making conformity a prime virtue, impelled ordinary Germans in uniform to commit terrible crimes rather than suffer the stigma of cowardice and weakness and the 'social death' of isolation and alienation vis-à-vis their comrades."

The segregation of Jews was an enabler of evil actions. Browning points to pervasive banishment of Jews from German society "and the resulting exclusion of the Jewish victims from any common ground with the perpetrators made it all the easier for the majority of the policemen to conform to the norms of their immediate community (the battalion) and their society at large (Nazi Germany)."

For some policemen who did not shoot, their commercial ties shaped their view of human beings. One said, "Through my business experience, especially because it extended abroad, I had gained a better overview of things. Moreover, through my earlier business activities I already knew many Jews."

Harvard social psychologist Gordon Allport developed his famed [contact hypothesis](#) in the 1940s: "Increasing exposure to out-group members will improve attitudes toward that group and

decrease prejudice and stereotyping.” Commercial ties bring people together.

Today, politicians work overtime [demonizing, mocking, and punishing](#) “out-group members” who won’t obey their dictates.

A Story of Nonconformity

Recently Tim, a reader and business owner from New Zealand, sent me his powerful testimony in an email:

Fifty odd years ago, as a young child I went to Ranui Primary School in suburban Auckland. There were two Māori boys in my class of 9-year-olds. Sometimes through the day they would make short comments to each other in Māori.

If the teacher heard them do it, he would keep our entire class in detention after school for 15 to 30 minutes. I always hated it because one of the boys was my friend, and a regular playmate of mine after school. The other one, used to walk home from school with me too, they were my friends.

But most of the class blamed these two Māori boys for us all being locked in after school. The majority of the kids disliked and bullied them in my class.

I couldn’t do it; I couldn’t dislike them because they were my friends. Perhaps even then as a boy I could see what our teacher was doing.

Our teacher was using the rest of the class as a weapon against those two young boys by encouraging the spiteful and discriminating attitudes towards them.

Tim’s choice to not conform to social pressure made all the difference to his Māori friends. Did Tim’s ability to see the humanity in others help him become a successful entrepreneur? After all, entrepreneurs succeed when they help serve the needs of others.

Tim continued his testimony:

Today, 50 years later, I am again feeling the same way as I did back in my Ranui Primary School class. The teacher is telling us all that we will continue to be locked in until 90% (or whatever) of the country is vaccinated. And further, we are told that it is the fault of the 20% (or so) that have so far chosen not to accept the two shots in the arm.

As a country, we are all encouraged to heap blame and hate towards anyone who has decided to not vaccinate.

Regardless of my own vaccination status, I have friends and family who I refuse to hate or blame.

I lay the blame exactly where it belongs. At the feet of my Primary School teacher for our detentions, not my two boyhood friends.

And at the feet of our Prime Minister for her lockdown rules, not my friends and family who have chosen to decline an injection that they don't trust, rightly or wrongly.

Be like Tim. Be like the 10-20% of Battalion 101 who didn't conform. Our scorn should be towards those who demand our obedience and split America into an in-group and an out-group. Become more aware when you allow your thinking to be hijacked by propaganda.

Many in the Battalion didn't understand their crimes until decades after the war ended. Don't wait to reflect until a future historian writes a book about how you supported tyranny by placing conformity above human rights.

Today [Charles Eisenstein points out](#), "Many people trust the authorities and willingly comply with their rules. They face no dilemma, no initiatory moment, no self-defining world-creating choice point, not yet."

Conforming, lacking courage, will not spare you from choices that life will demand of you. Eisenstein challenges us: “As the authorities’ narratives devolve into absurdity and their rules devolve into oppression, more and more of us face this choice: ... To do what you know is right, or to cave in to the pressure, consoling yourself with words you don’t believe. ‘I had no choice.’”

We all have a personal responsibility for preserving freedom. The price of abdicating our responsibility is high. As Browning puts it, Germans paid a high price for “placing uncritical trust in the ‘firm leadership’ of seemingly well-intentioned political authority between 1933 and 1945.”

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