

ORDINARY MEN

RESERVE POLICE BATTALION 101
AND THE FINAL SOLUTION IN POLAND

Christopher R. Browning

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THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE: INSIGHTS AND LIMITATIONS

When I was researching and writing *Ordinary Men* in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I asked several archives about relevant photographs. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, YIVO in New York, and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw all kindly made available the small number of photographs (sometimes duplicate copies) that they had, and these photos were included in the first edition with my brief captions but no further comment or analysis. In part, this was because the archives themselves had provided so little information about these photographs.

Twenty-five years later the situation has changed significantly in three ways. Photo archivists have researched their collections with greater care and corrected some of the erroneous captions they previously offered. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archive has obtained a collection of private family albums, one compiled by a member of RPB 101 during its second tour of duty in Poland in 1940–1941. And photographs collected by the Hamburg prosecutors in the RPB 101 case, authenticated according to legal standards of evidence, have now become available. As a result, a number of photos have been added for this edition, additional commentary has been provided for some of the earlier photos, and one major error has been corrected.

Sadly, iconic photos are often the most carelessly used.⁵¹ A prime example is provided by the photograph I chose for the cover of *Ordinary Men* from a sequence of three photographs held in multiple copies and vaguely identified by site—namely Łuków in Poland—in three different archives: the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and YIVO in New York. (Copies are now also in the photo archive of the USHMM, which had not yet opened at that time.) The photos were undated, and none of the Germans were identified. According to YIVO, the first photo in the sequence was donated in the late 1940s by someone from the Bronx

who claimed that the man standing center-left with the white beard was a family relative, Motl Hershberg of Łuków. According to Yad Vashem, the kneeling Jew of the third photo was identified as Rabbi Izek Verobel of Łuków, and that this photo was found in Łuków after the war and given to returning Jews. However, the photo archive in Yad Vashem also now notes that there is an equally valid, rival claim that these photos are from Tarnow, and that it has insufficient evidence to determine the site of the photos either way.⁵²





In the illustration section of *Ordinary Men*, two photos of this sequence were cautiously labeled: “Łuków, probably in the fall of 1942.” But the sequence of the three photos was not further analyzed, as ought to have been done.⁵³ The photos were not used as evidence in the Hamburg court case against RPB 101. No one from the battalion was identified in the pictures. Let us examine the photos as a sequence. The first photo⁵⁴ is especially interesting because, in addition to the men in great coats, there are two men clearly in Wehrmacht uniforms (far right and third from left). Several of the men are not yet looking at the camera or smiling, and one German seems to be pointing his hand—as if he were holding a pistol—at one of the kneeling Jews and feigning a mock execution. In the second photo⁵⁵ the two obvious Wehrmacht men have disappeared, and only the men in great coats remain in the picture. Clearly the photographer has alerted the men that he is about to take the picture, since they are all looking directly at the camera and one is smiling. It

is the obscenely wide grin on the face of the German on the left that riveted my attention and caused me to select this particular photo for the book cover. Whether this was a smile of *schadenfreude*, of expressing ghoulish pleasure at the humiliation of the Jews, or simply a reflex action of smiling at the camera, I do not know, though at the time of my selecting the photo for the cover I incautiously assumed the former. The third photograph⁵⁶ was taken as the staged scene was breaking up. Most of the Jews and several of the Germans are turning away, only one Jew in his finery remains kneeling, and only one German is still looking at the cameraman. We do not know what happened between the second and third photos, other than that the kneeling Jew is no longer wearing his head cover, suggesting that he may have been physically roughed up. Six different copies of this photo were donated to Yad Vashem, and YIVO holds multiple copies as well. Most macabre, one of YIVO's copies is a postcard, with a place for address, stamp, and writing on the back. Clearly the third photo had "iconic" status and was in open circulation in Poland after the war.

The rival claim of Tarnow is only one possible reason why no one in these photos was identified as an Order Policeman from RPB 101. Studying with enhanced technology the emblems on the berets of the men in great coats, previously assumed to be members of the Order Police, the archivists at Yad Vashem have now concluded that they were members of the Wehrmacht instead.⁵⁷ In short, possibly by time (unspecified), place (Tarnow rather than Łuków), and unit involved (Wehrmacht, not Order Police), these pictures have nothing to do with Reserve Police Battalion 101 at all. These photos illustrate what we already know, namely that the Germans in Poland often conducted rituals of humiliation and staged trophy photos of their exploits. But they do not provide evidence of individual participation much less the world view and anti-Semitic convictions of members of RPB 101. They also provide a salutary lesson on the careless and

casual mistakes that frequently characterized the archival filing and historians' use of photographic evidence a quarter-century ago.

Let us now turn to the three photo albums acquired by the USHMM that were compiled by the Hamburg family of Bernhardt Colberg, born in 1900 and a member of PB 101 during its second tour of duty in Poland in 1940–1941. Family scenes dominate the first two albums, but many photos in the third volume were taken by Bernhardt during this tour of duty in Poland and suggest that he was an enthusiastic photographer.⁵⁸ A few photos of the pre-1933 period show demonstrations of the Reichsbanner, a SPD affiliate supportive of the Weimar Republic. By the mid-1930s, his son is in the Deutschen Jungvolk (the Hitler Youth level for ten- to fourteen-year-olds). This suggests that members of the Colberg family, like many other Germans, may well have made the transition from social democratic affiliation to accommodation with the Nazi regime

Colberg was sent to serve in PB 101 in Poland from October 1, 1940, to April 7, 1941. In many posed photographs, he proudly displayed himself in uniform.⁵⁹

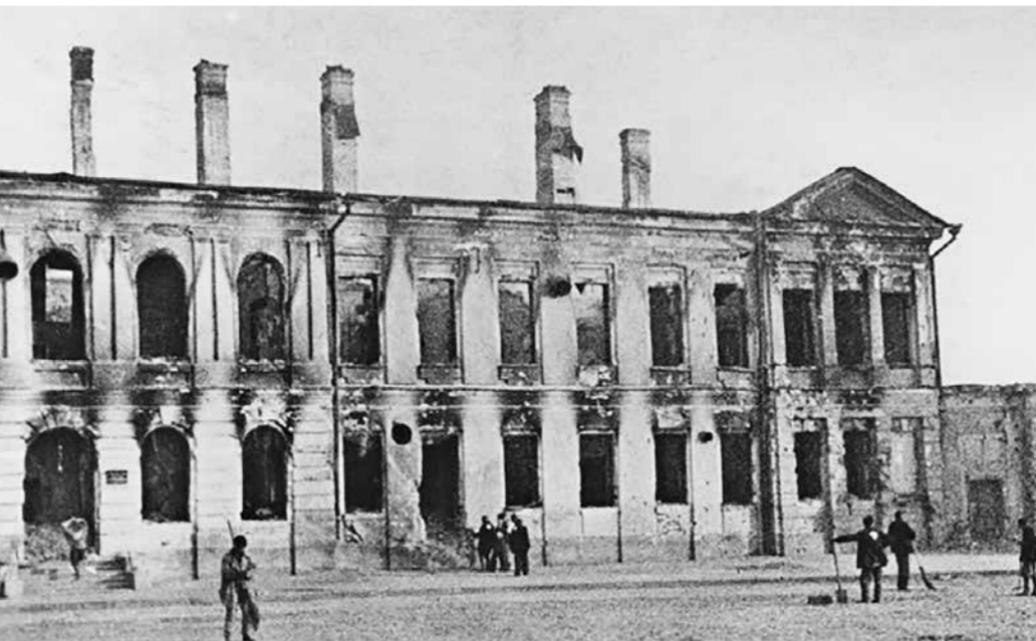




On one occasion only he recorded German repressive measures, in this case one photo of a public hanging in progress with many spectators, followed by another of the bodies left hanging after all the spectators have departed—a not uncommon sight in Nazi-occupied Europe.⁶⁰



He seemed fascinated with pictures of war-damaged buildings, which seemed incidentally to show, at a distance, Jewish workers involved in cleanup work.⁶¹



The few close-up pictures of Jews did not negatively portray them as the stereotypical Ostjuden of Nazi propaganda. One portrays a strong, handsome Jewish worker; another a Jewish family in repose by the roadside.⁶²





Most interesting, perhaps, are Colberg's photos of the Łódź ghetto, where PB 101 members served external guard duty. Rather than examples of "ghetto tourism" recording unattractive Jews living in filth and hunger that confirmed Nazi stereotypes, Colberg deliberately photographed a ghetto without Jews. He was interested in using the night lighting and ghetto fencing for photographic effect and composition, not in recording ghetto life.⁶³



In one case where Jews appear in his photographs of ghetto fencing, it does seem to be the rare case of a staged scene, in which uniformed Jewish ghetto police are kneeling in the snow across the fence from German police.⁶⁴



Ironically, the last photo in the Colberg album is of himself once again in uniform, serving as a policeman in the postwar British occupation of northern Germany. The man who accommodated himself to the Nazis after 1933 did likewise for the Allied occupation after 1945.



Let us turn now to the photographs from the photo collection or *Lichtbildmappe* in the prosecuting attorney's files for the trial of RPB 101 in Hamburg. Some of these photographs were provided by battalion members summoned for interrogation. Others were obtained from photo archives, particularly in Poland, and authenticated during interrogation. These photos can be divided into four categories: (1) official head shots of the officers and noncommissioned officers; (2) informal "buddy" pictures of groups of men from the battalion; (3) informal snapshots recording various seemingly innocent, "normal" activities of the battalion; and (4) snapshots—both single and in sequence—documenting aspects of the battalion's participation in its destructive mission against the Jews.

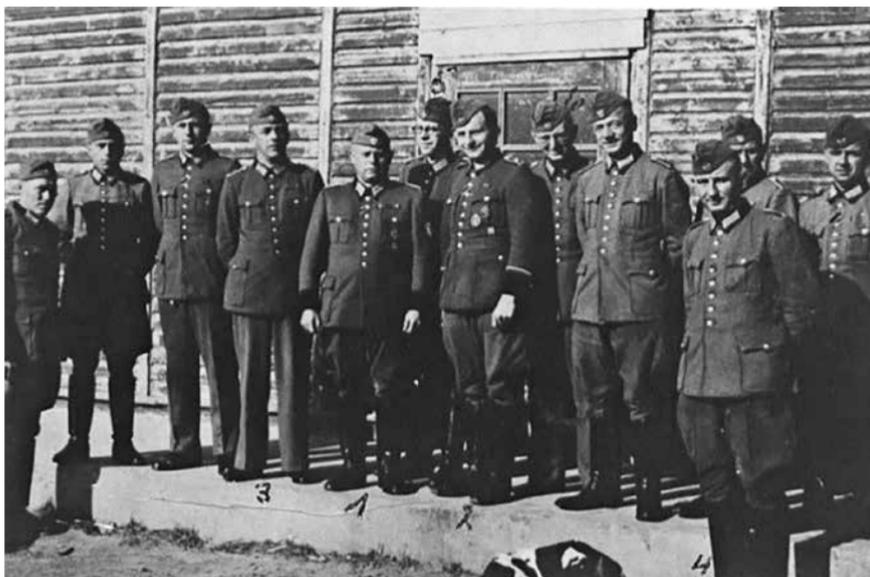
Both typical and most important of the thirty-two official head shots are three senior officers of the battalion: Major Wilhelm Trapp, Captain Julius Wohlauf, and Lieutenant Hartwig Gnade.⁶⁵



Among the various group “buddy” pictures, there is an extensive collection of seven of Gruppe Bekemeier from Lieutenant Gnade’s Second Company stationed in Łomazy in August 1942.⁶⁶ Of the two examples here, the second is rare in showing fraternization with the local population. Two of the four men are holding two children, with a couple who are presumably the parents—one of whom is identified in another picture as the Polish cook for the unit—standing behind. This is on the site where the battalion either was going to carry out or had already carried out one of its most ferocious massacres of local Jews on August 18, 1942. The *Lichtbildmappe* does not identify the photographer of this Gruppe Bekemeier sequence, though a number of the men in the pictures are identified.



Among other group pictures is a more formally composed collective portrait of Major Trapp and his staff at Radzyń.⁶⁷



Of the “normal activity” pictures of the battalion, the single most striking one is an outdoor officers’ dinner that includes the wives of Captain Wohlauf and Lieutenant Brand, Vera and Lucia.⁶⁸ In the rear area of the Lublin District, wives of officers were able to visit their husbands. The presence of Vera Wohlauf at the marketplace during the first massive and deadly ghetto-clearing of Międzyrzec Podlaski (during which close to a thousand Jews were killed on the spot and some ten thousand were dispatched to Treblinka), on August 25–26, 1942, disturbed many of the men.⁶⁹ And Lucia Brand provided one of the more revealing testimonies concerning the brutal mentality that had developed within the battalion by the time she visited her husband.⁷⁰



Also among the “normal activity” photos are a sequence of four pictures (two shown here) of men assembled for an outdoor concert that is being given by musicians in uniform using the flat roof of a low building as their stage. The odd assortment of instruments—including two accordions, one base, one violin, and one guitar—would suggest that this was a performance given by an improvised group of battalion members and not some more professional traveling entertainment unit.⁷¹ Neither date nor location is given. In yet another single photo, the battalion’s truck drivers are led in singing.⁷² For historical purposes these photos attest to the attempt to create a certain “normalcy” for men who we know from other evidence were engaged in anything but “normal” behavior. In Himmler’s extraordinary memorandum of December 12, 1941, the Reichsführer-SS himself explicitly recommended quiet evenings of cultural activity as a soothing antidote to the stresses of mass killing and the preferred alternative to heavy drinking. It was a “sacred duty” (*heilige Pflicht*) of the officers, Himmler wrote, to ensure that none of those

“who had to fulfill this difficult task were ever brutalized or suffered damage to their soul and character” (*die diese schwere Pflicht zu erfüllen haben, niemals verrobt oder an Gemüt und Charakter erleidet*). For this purpose “comradely get-togethers” (*kameradschaftliches Beisammensein*) were to be held on the evenings of such difficult tasks, which were never to involve “alcohol abuse” but rather were to be devoted to music and presentations that would lead the men back to “the beautiful realm of German spiritual and inner life” (*die schönen Gebiete deutschen Geistes-und Gemütslebens*).⁷³ These photos indicate that Himmler’s exhortation was taken to heart and acted upon in RPB 101.





That did not, of course, preclude the more normal forms of raucous evening entertainment that included the heavy use of alcohol, the Reichsführer's wishes to the contrary notwithstanding. Such an evening is captured in the photo of members of First Platoon, Third Company, in Czemierniki.⁷⁴



Of greatest interest for both prosecutors and historians are the photos of the battalion in action, carrying out its lethal task. The most striking set of photos in this regard are a sequence of five of the Łomazy *Aktion* on August 18, 1942, in which seventeen hundred Jews were collected on the sports field in town, marched to the forest, and murdered in a mass grave.⁷⁵







Of the five photos, the first two provide distant and close-up pictures of Jews sitting on the ground in the sports field. The third shows additional seated Jews assembled in a field partially shaded by trees. The fourth shows nine shirtless, strong young men digging a large rectangular pit. The fifth shows seventeen women, still fully clothed, being rushed forward toward the cameraman, with the capped face of a German policeman just visible behind the group. An armband with the Star of David is fully visible on the lead woman. The strained expressions on the women's faces indicate the frenetic pace of the forced march from the sports field to the killing pit. In all the photos, the focus is clearly on the victims and the *Aktion*, with individual Germans included only incidentally and distantly in the first, third, and fifth photos.⁷⁶

If the Łomazy photos depict events leading up to the mass shooting, one single photo from Międzyrzec Podlaski—a “collection ghetto” that was repeatedly cleared and refilled—confirms the description of a mass shooting that took place there on October 6, 1942.⁷⁷ On this day thousands of Jews were deported to Treblinka. Despite their utmost efforts, the Germans could not cram all of the intended victims into the inadequate number of available train cars, and Lieutenant Gnade ordered the remaining 150 Jews—mostly women and children—to be taken to the nearby cemetery and shot by the cemetery wall.⁷⁸ This photo—the only one in the entire collection that actually shows the bodies of murdered victims of the battalion—provides gruesome confirmation of an improvised execution, in which no preparations had been made beforehand to either dig a mass grave or collect the clothing of the victims.



Following the ghetto clearing operations in the northern Lublin District in the fall of 1942, members of RPB 101 engaged in repeated “Jew hunts” for escaped and hiding Jews.⁷⁹ Once again it is Lieutenant Gnade and men of the Second Company for whom two photos have survived that record them on patrol in the forest and fields outside Międzyrzec.⁸⁰



Following a long pause over the winter of 1942–1943, the ghetto of Międzyrzec Podlaski was subjected to the “fifth” and “sixth actions” of May 1 and 26, 1943. In the “sixth action” some one thousand Jews were sent to the concentration camp at Majdanek on the outskirts of Lublin rather than to Treblinka. By this time Gnade had constructed an undressing barracks outside the city, where the deportees were deprived of their valuables and most of their cloth-

ing before being loaded into the waiting train cars.⁸¹ Numerous photos capture four distinct stages of the deportation *Aktion* from Międzyrzec: collection on the town square, the march from town, the strip search at Gnade's undressing barrack, and loading the train. Two sequences—whether from one or two different photographers is uncertain—can be dated to the “sixth action” of May 26. They were not recovered from the private possession of members of the battalion but rather sent to the prosecution by the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland and verified during subsequent interrogations. Some of the other photos may also date to this action, but some of them also appear to have been taken at an entirely different time.

A single sequence of four photographs was taken on the town square in Międzyrzec, as the Jews are collected and marched off on May 26, 1943.⁸²







An additional photograph, seemingly taken with long shadows early in the morning, shows heavily clothed Jewish women sitting in the town square without any Germans in the picture and may well date to the previous fall.⁸³



Four additional photographs document the march out of town. Two seem to be taken by the same photographer.⁸⁴ A third, in which the Germans are dressed in a similar manner, was probably taken on the same day.⁸⁵ In a fourth, showing some Jews being taken out of town on peasant wagons, the sole German guard is dressed in heavier clothing, suggesting a deportation action the previous fall.⁸⁶





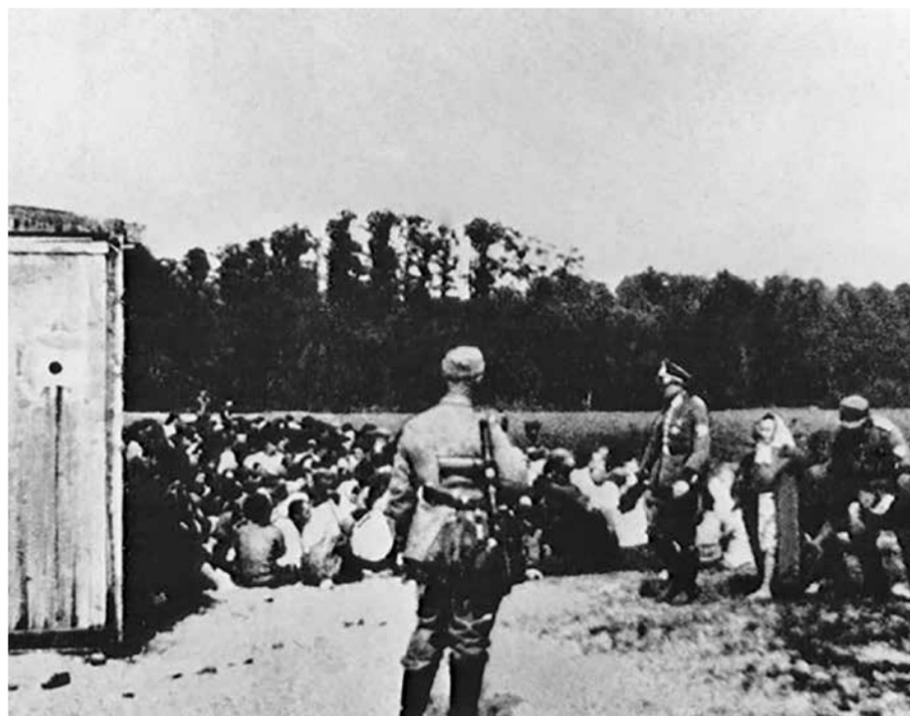
An extensive set of six photographs captures scenes at Gnade's undressing barracks. It seems very likely that all six were taken by

the same photographer at the same time, namely during one of the May 1943 actions. Five of these photos portray the most direct and intimate interaction between German policemen and their Jewish victims.⁸⁷ Clearly the photographer's focus is on Jewish women, not men, including: (1) one of a fully-clothed woman facing three Germans in front of the barracks; (2) two of a women clad only in a white undergarment that she holds to her body while talking directly to German officers (identified as Gnade and a Bavarian gendarmerie officer); and (3) one of a solitary, short, and somewhat hunchbacked Jewish woman surrounded by German policemen (Gnade in profile; the Bavarian facing the camera) who tower above her, to the side of the barracks. The photographer seemed to have no interest at all in taking pictures of Jewish men.⁸⁸









The final stage of the deportation process was the loading of the train cars. There are three surviving photographs that were not included in the prosecutor's collection for the Hamburg trial of RPB 101 but which were sent to the USHMM from the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland at a later date. The archival caption at the USHMM states that it is "likely" that these are photos of the "sixth action" in Międzyrzec Podlaski on May 26, 1943.⁸⁹ I find this dating quite dubious. The Jews are mostly women and some children, while the other photos show many men and no children at this late date. And the Jews are wearing far heavier clothing than seems likely for a late May deportation following a strip search at Gnade's undressing barracks. Moreover, none of these photos was used in evidence in the Hamburg trial, which suggests that none of the German personnel was identified as definitely from RPB 101.





The lack of framing of these pictures, the shaky focus of the first, and the fact that no one is looking at the photographer sug-

gests the possibility that this series of three was most likely taken surreptitiously, perhaps by a Polish railway worker or some other non-German observer. As with the Łuków photos, therefore, we are left with photographs for which the precise time, place, and circumstances of the events depicted—to say nothing of the identity of the photographer—are difficult to corroborate.

The last major killing action in which RPB 101 was involved was the great *Erntefest* massacre of the Lublin labor camps in November 1943. RPB 101 participated in the liquidation of the Jewish prisoners of Majdanek on November 3 and of Poniatowa on November 4. There is a sequence of ten photos from Poniatowa that shows no Germans and no killing, but once again ominously documents the preparatory stages.⁹⁰ They show in succession the factory where the Jews worked, Jews standing outside wooden barracks where they were lodged, a column of Jews carrying their bundles and marching down a road with high fences on each side and a watchtower in the background, and finally Jews sitting and standing in an open compound surrounded by a high wire fence and overlooked by a watchtower. The sequence seems to have been taken by someone who was free to move about and openly photograph the people whom he was guarding. The Jews are in civilian clothing, not concentration camp garb since Poniatowa was a “forced labor camp” (*Zwangsarbeitslager*), not an official concentration camp (*Konzentrationslager*), and only the last three photos—with wire and watchtower—make clear that the photos were taken inside a camp. The sequence tells an ominous story only because we know the context and outcome from other sources.





Dan Porat argues that “in order to understand a historical event as presented in a photograph, narration is essential.”⁹¹ One very positive benefit of photos collected for judicial proceedings is that they join together the photographic image, the narrative historical back-

ground, and verification of specifics by witnesses. Concerning historical photographs, Judith Levin and Daniel Uziel have suggested that, in addition to the time and place they were taken, it is desirable to know the photographer, the people in the photograph, the provenance of the photograph, and whether it is a single shot or part of a collection or album.⁹² Few photographs from the Holocaust are so amply documented, but at least in this collection some of these questions can be answered some of the time. In the judicial process, history illuminates the photos, and the photos illuminate history in a reciprocal and reinforcing manner. Historians almost invariably work with imperfect and problematic evidence, and photographic evidence is no exception.

Levin and Uziel also write, “We would expect a German photographer imbued with Nazi ideology to focus his lens differently than an ‘ordinary’ German would. . . .” But even concerning “ordinary Germans” taking pictures in the occupied east, Levin and Uziel “assumed as a point of departure that the anti-Semitic climate and propaganda had an immense impact on the entire population,” and hence that “the shutters were pressed by people whose ideological consciousness manifested itself in the photographs they took or collected.”⁹³ Taken as a whole, do the photos in the Colberg album and this judicial collection broadly reflect the impact of a pervasive anti-Semitic climate and even an unconscious Nazi ideological framing on the part of the perpetrators?

Unquestionably there are numerous photographs, especially ones like the staged ritual humiliation at Łuków or Tarnow with which we began the discussion in this section, that reflect the anti-Semitic attitudes and sense of racial superiority of those having themselves photographed. But such staged photographs explicitly reflecting a Nazi outlook are not found in the collection of photos that can be clearly identified as pertaining to RRB 101.⁹⁴ Indeed, it is possible that some of these photographs were taken by Poles as

evidence of Nazi crimes in Poland, not by Germans as trophies of Nazi accomplishments. I suspect that the photo of the dead Jewish women by the cemetery wall in Międzyrzec, with no Germans visible in the picture, was taken after the German killers had departed. I suspect the loading of the train at Międzyrzec was also taken surreptitiously by a Polish photographer. And some of the other photos reflect a seeming “normalcy” of military life that we know not to be normal only because of additional knowledge that we as viewers bring to our viewing of them.

But what of the Łomazy and Międzyrzec photos? In the remarkable Łomazy sequence, the Jewish victims, not the German killers, are at the center. These are quick snapshots, not staged scenes, and the one caption simply identifies the subjects factually as “condemned Jews” but without further derogatory comment. The assembly of Jews on the Międzyrzec town square and the march out of town shows many Germans, but again these photos are quick snapshots that record the scene. They are neither staged nor captioned, nor are they particularly triumphalist, celebratory, or ideological in their framing. The ease with which the photographer could move about and take these pictures seems to indicate he was a German. These photos portray men not in staged celebration but simply at work. It is the matter-of-factness of the photographer’s recorded preparations for the mass shooting at Łomazy and the deportation from Międzyrzec that is perhaps most disturbing.

The sequence taken at Gnade’s undressing barracks again is stunning in that several of them capture groups of German officers and individual Jewish women in unusual proximity and interaction. The photos certainly capture the asymmetry of power between Germans and Jews. There is also a clear gendered dimension, with individual, small Jewish women being confronted by groups of big, bullying men. These photos are very revealing of how the Germans treated the Jewish women of Międzyrzec. That someone took

these photos to preserve a suitable record of the battalion's activities demonstrates a severely stunted sensibility.

One of the controversies surrounding RPB 101 has been whether the eager, ideologically driven, anti-Semitic killers within the battalion constituted a zealous minority or the vast majority of its members. And Levin and Uziel have argued that the photographs even of "ordinary" Germans would reflect the pervasive anti-Semitism and propaganda of the regime. We do not know, of course, how many highly incriminating photos were taken that have been kept secret or were destroyed. But what does this collection of recovered photos of the battalion indicate? The photos of the Colberg album from 1940 to 1941 are remarkable for their general lack of reflecting a nazified outlook. The pictures that record the destructive work of the battalion on its third tour of duty in Poland seem devoid of the explicit ideological or propagandistic framing that can be seen in the staged and celebratory Wehrmacht photos from Łuków. But they do reflect a moral numbness, a routinization of destruction as everyday work that speaks less to the motivation of the policeman than to the impact of their actions on themselves.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF JEWS SHOT BY RESERVE POLICE BATTALION 101

Location	Mo./yr.	Est. # Jews shot (minimum)
Józefów	7/42	1,500
Łomazy	8/42	1,700
Międzyrzec	8/42	960
Serokomla	9/42	200
Kock	9/42	200
Parczew	10/42	100
Końskowola	10/42	1,100
Międzyrzec	10/42	150
Łuków	11/42	290
Lublin district (misc. roundups)	from 7/42	300
Lublin district ("Jew hunts")	from 10/42	1,000
Majdanek	11/43	16,500
Poniatowa	11/43	14,000
TOTAL		38,000

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF JEWS DEPORTED TO TREBLINKA BY RESERVE
POLICE BATTALION 101

Location	Mo./yr.	Est. # Jews deported (minimum)
Parczew	8/42	5,000
Międzyrzec	8/42	10,000
Radzyń	10/42	2,000
Łuków	10/42	7,000
Międzyrzec	10/42-11/42	
Biała		4,800
Biała Podlaska county		6,000
Komarówka		600
Wohyn		800
Czemierniki		1,000
Radzyń		2,000
Łuków	11/42	3,000
Międzyrzec	5/43	3,000
TOTAL		45,200

NOTES

ABBREVIATIONS

BA	Bundesarchiv, Koblenz
BDC	Berlin Document Center
BZIH	<i>Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego</i> (Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute)
G	Investigation of G. and others, Office of the State Prosecutor, Hamburg, 141 Js 128/65
HW	Investigation and trial of Hoffmann, Wohlauf, and others, Office of the State Prosecutor, Hamburg, 141 Js 1957/62
IMT	<i>Trials of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal</i> , 42 vols.
JNSV	<i>Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung Strafurteile wegen Nationalsozialistische Tötungsverbrechen 1945–1966</i> , 20 vols.
NO	Nürnberg document relating to party organizations
NOKW	Nürnberg document relating to the military
YVA	Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem
ZStL	Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen, Ludwigsburg