



Resources

Holocaust Unit

Bystander - Resource D

Resource D - The Holocaust

The most repugnant, globally violent disgrace of the reputation of humanity gave rise to the equally infamous use of the phrase “diffusion of responsibility,” as the Nazi officers tried at Nuremberg all claimed the same defense, “We were just following orders.” They argued that if the Holocaust really was as bad as journalists were saying, then someone else must surely have known of it, and thus it was not necessarily their responsibility to report it to the authorities.

They also argued that the only authorities in Continental Europe at the time were German, and thus, they would only have killed themselves by attempting to inform the outside world, and would have accomplished nothing. This is not true. Most of the German population knew nothing of it, but had they, they could easily have banded together and demanded that the Holocaust be stopped. The Nazis would have been reluctant to exterminate their own “master race,” and by that point, the Allies would have heard news of it. So the Nazis wisely concealed the concentration and death camps from all but the small villages nearest to them.

The Holocaust is so infamous because the populations of the villages near these camps, Dachau, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and Ravensbruck, to name a few, knew perfectly well of the atrocities and horror inside the camps. The camps were established near fairly large towns and cities, the inhabitants of which could not have ignored the stench coming from them. Allied soldiers all reported smelling camps before finding them, from as far as 20 miles if the wind blew right. The Allies accused the German citizens of these towns of knowing full well what was happening to Jews and other “undesirables” and yet making no effort to save one life. These German populations were thus forced to clean up the emaciated corpses and bury them in mass graves, as punishment for their passivity.

Source: <http://listverse.com/2009/11/02/10-notorious-cases-of-the-bystander-effect/>