

# Ordinary Wizards: The Psychology of Evil in the Harry Potter Universe

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That the *Harry Potter* stories are primarily about good and evil is undeniable, and no fictional character since Darth Vader has embodied the latter quality as thoroughly as Lord Voldemort. The rapidly growing psychological literature on psychopathy can provide some insight into Voldemort's evil nature. But what of his followers? Are the legions of Death Eaters similarly psychologically disturbed? And what of the Wizards who denied Voldemort's presence and refused to stand up to him as he and his followers tried to create a "pure" social order? This paper uses scholarship from Holocaust Studies and Psychology to argue that, unlike Voldemort and a handful of other Death Eaters, most of Voldemort's followers, as well as those whose lack of resistance facilitated Voldemort's agenda, are neither mentally ill nor morally corrupt but are ordinary and possibly even decent wizards caught up in unusual circumstances out of their control.

## The Holocaust and Harry Potter

Given that J. K. Rowling is on record as acknowledging some intentional parallels between Voldemort and Adolf Hitler<sup>1</sup> and the many other similarities between Nazis and Death Eaters (e.g., their love of racial purity and their efforts to create a racially pure society), it is reasonable to begin the analysis of evil in the Harry Potter universe with an examination of the voluminous Holocaust studies literature. Two particular scholarship inquiries are particularly relevant to this essay: 1) Why did so many "ordinary" people in Germany support (or at least did not actively oppose) Nazi activity and 2) Given that the support was so widespread, what specific characteristics did the individuals who helped Jews have in common? Or, applied to the Harry Potter universe: Why did so many "ordinary" wizards support the Death Eaters and what was it about the handful of people that refused to do so (like those who joined The Order of the Phoenix) that allowed them to not conform to the majority? The answer is somewhat surprising and begins with a critical analysis of what is, in fact, "ordinary".

The dictionary definition of "ordinary" is (as perhaps it ought to be) unremarkable: "of no special quality or interest; commonplace; unexceptional; plain or undistinguished" (dictionary.com). In the context of people, then, the dictionary suggests that the ordinary person is one who is typical and has "no special quality or interest." In the context of the Holocaust, the suggestion that those who supported the Nazis were "ordinary" implies that any of us might have done the same *under the circumstances*. They key, of course, are the specific circumstances. These were decidedly out of the ordinary, both in Nazi

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<sup>1</sup> In a July, 2000 interview with the CBC, Rowling said, "In the second book, Chamber of Secrets, in fact he [Voldemort] is exactly what I've said before. He takes what he perceives to be a defect in himself, in other words the non-purity of his blood, and he projects it onto others. It's like Hitler and the Aryan ideal, to which he [Hitler] did not conform at all, himself. And so Voldemort is doing this also. He takes his own inferiority, and turns it back on other people and attempts to exterminate in them what he hates in himself."

Germany and in the Harry Potter universe. It's a provocative idea and one that is not shared by all social scientists and historians, but it has substantial historical and empirical support. I will get to the research and discuss the specific evidence in favor of the ordinary people, unordinary circumstances hypotheses. But first, let's examine the evidence for the competing hypotheses – that the supporters of the Nazis and the Death Eaters were, in fact, somehow unusual.

There are, of course, many different ways to not be ordinary. One way is to be “crazy” or what clinical psychologists would label “mentally ill”. Indeed, this is a common argument made by lay persons (i.e., non-psychologists) to explain behavior they would characterize as “evil”. There is a certain “common sense” appeal to this argument. After all, anyone who would kill or support the killing of innocent people – especially on a large scale – can't possibly be sane. But this is circular reasoning, since it requires assuming something (that the person is “crazy”) in order to prove the very thing that was assumed (that the person is not “ordinary”). That said, the mental illness hypothesis is worth examining on its own merits.

Is it possible that the Nazi perpetrators and their supporters (and by extension, the Death Eaters) were mentally ill? Some Holocaust historians have made this argument, probably none more emphatically than Lucy Dawidowicz. Here is an example from her 1975 best seller *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945*:

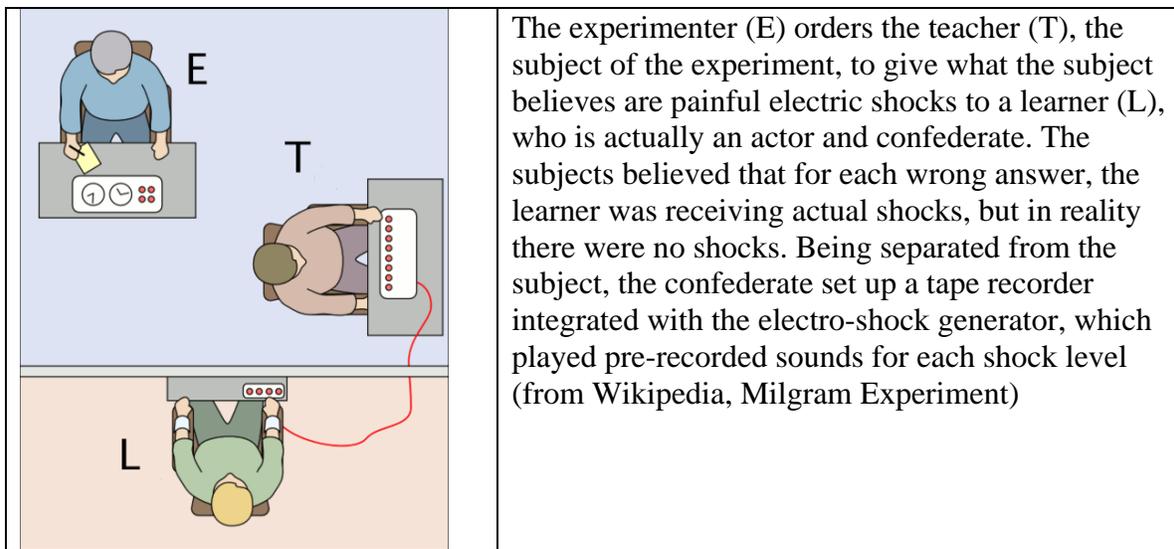
"The insecurities of post-World-War I Germany and the anxieties they produced provided an emotional milieu in which irrationality and hysteria became routine and illusions became transformed into delusions. The delusional disorder assumed mass proportions.... In modern Germany the mass psychosis of anti-Semitism deranged a whole people" (Dawidowicz, 164).

Dawidowicz was a respected historian, and *The War Against the Jews* was meticulously researched and is still regarded by many as the book against which other Holocaust books are measured. But in this particular claim, she has had little support from her peers. Even Daniel Goldhagen, the author of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and long-standing critic of the “ordinary men” hypothesis has explicitly distanced himself from this argument. “I by no means agree with much of Lucy Dawidowicz's formulation,” Goldhagen wrote in *Ordinary Men or Ordinary Germans*, “I have never said and do not hold the view, that the German people were deranged by a delusional mass psychosis.” There is good reason for the lack of support. To agree with Dawidowicz is to endorse the notion that countless thousands of Germans (not to mention their Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Polish collaborators) were not only simultaneously delusional but shared the same delusional worldview. This is just not possible.

But what about other unordinary characteristics? Could it be that, while not mentally ill, those who joined or tacitly supported Nazi activity had a peculiar personality characteristic that led them, or at least *allowed* them, to turn a blind eye to Nazi atrocities? Dawidowicz makes this argument too, positing that the “overwhelming majority of Germans ascribed to the *völkische* anti-Semitism from the 1870s onward, and

it was this morbid anti-Semitism that attracted support for Hitler and the Nazis.” (Wikipedia). In other words, what distinguished Nazis and their sympathizers was a deep-rooted and intense hatred of Jews. Fair enough, but anti-Semitism was commonplace throughout Europe, and, by Dawidowicz’s own account, was prevalent in Germany and elsewhere long before the Nazis came to power, including during periods in time that were characterized by peaceful and tolerant relations with the Jews. Even if hatred and/or fear of a group were part of the motivation, this explanation alone is clearly not sufficient to explain why so many supported the Nazis.

Inspired by the 1961 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichman (who is often credited with orchestrating the Holocaust but who in his trial claimed that he was just “following orders”), American psychologist Stanley Milgram thought he had the answer: the German tendency to submit to authority. In what is now regarded as one of the most important (albeit ethically problematic) psychology experiments, Milgram designed a study in which students at Yale University and people living in New Haven were instructed (by an authority figure in a white lab coat) to administer increasing levels of a painful (and eventually, they were led to believe, life-threatening) electric shock to another person as punishment for failing to master a learning task.



Milgram’s intention was to use this U.S. sample as a baseline by which to evaluate the much higher levels of obedience that he expected to find among Germans. The German study never happened, as almost 2/3 of the U.S. participants (62.5%) administered the highest levels of shock, even though they could hear the victim’s (taped) cries of pain and loud complaints of a heart condition. Many (30%) did so even when the experiment was set up in such a way that they had to manually place the victim’s hand on the shock apparatus, rather than merely flipping a switch. Whatever role obedience pressures played, it was clearly a human trait, not a German one.

Are all of us then potential “Little Eichmanns” whose only reason for abstaining from evil is the absence of a commanding authority presence? The answer is not quite so simple. As with other behaviors, different people engage in (or implicitly support)

aggressive behavior for different reasons. In the remainder of this paper I examine the specific motivations of these two groups of people: the perpetrators and the bystanders. I'll begin with the latter.

## **The bystanders**

While there is some debate regarding the centrality of “The Jewish Question” in Hitler’s motivations prior to and during the second World War, historians generally agree on the various social factors that facilitated his rise to power. These include (but are not limited to), Germany’s humiliation during World War I and the subsequent unfavorable conditions for peace, the economic hard times of the Depression, and the long-standing widespread anti-Semitism described earlier in this essay. In Hitler, the Germans found a charismatic leader under whom they could unite in a common quest for German racial and cultural superiority and eschew the economic and personal depression, ruthless competition, and political chaos associated with the polluters of the economic and national life, which were all blamed on the Jews (Staub, 1992). Put more simply, Hitler offered “the good life” during a period of hard times. It’s an offer that many ordinary people find hard to resist.

Harry Potter readers, as well as students of the Holocaust, intuitively understand the appeal of the good life, but generally blanch at the notion that they could ever be enticed to engage in the violence perpetrated by the Nazis or Death Eaters. But Nazi and Death Eater sympathizers did not directly engage in aggression or violence; they just went along with it – just as most of us today go along with our government’s admitted policy of imprisoning without trial and, in some cases, torturing political prisoners. We reason that those in charge know better and that, in any case, they (i.e., the government officials) are responsible and that it doesn’t really concern us. To the extent that we think that it will increase national security, torture might even help us, we reason, though most of us don’t reason at all, preferring instead to remain blissfully ignorant about the details, lest they make us just a little uncomfortable. So went the German people, first by supporting the ideology of racial superiority, then by supporting the eugenics movement, including the forced sterilization of various “undesirables”, and eventually by the acceptance of the Nazi ideologies of “killing as healing” and “life unworthy of life” which were actively promoted by racial “scientists” (authority figures) such as Adolf Jost (*The Right to Death*) and Alfred Hoche (*The Destruction of Lives Not Worth Living*). These and other Nazi propagandists argued that, just as it is sometimes necessary to amputate a limb to save a life, so it is sometimes necessary to kill off a group of people to save a nation (Hoche) and that in fact, the state has a natural right and sacred responsibility to kill individuals in order to keep the nation alive and healthy (Jost).

Even so, when the Nazis, a numerical minority, first instituted the T4 euthanasia programs in 1940 – their first systematic program of mass murder, which targeted individuals with physical handicaps, cognitive deficits, and mental illness, including children – there was enough protest that the program was terminated (in 1941). It was the wrong target group because its members could be found among all families. In the

Jews, of course, the Nazis had just the target group it needed and, this time, there would be no organized protest. It's not that most people perpetrated violence themselves; they just went along with it, one small step at a time.

The first incremental step was to isolate the Jews from the rest of the population through the boycotting of Jewish businesses. There was some resistance to this, not out of regard for Jews but due to the impingement on personal freedom.

*My mother said she would do her shopping wherever she pleased. She went by prices and quality, not by baptismal certificates, Party membership, or documents proving Aryan descent. -- Engelmann, 28*

But by the time the Nuremberg Laws were passed in 1935, there was little protest as Jews were forced to sell their businesses:

*I don't know whether she gave in -- probably not. But in any case there were fewer and fewer Jewish businesses. Most of them had to be sold by their owners -- Aryanized, as it was called. -- Engelmann, 28*

But there was not, during these early years, widespread approval of violence against the Jews and the reaction to the destruction of the Jewish synagogue at Kristallnacht was met with mixed feelings, as described by British historian Ian Kershaw:

*A widespread hostility to Jews, uncritical approval of antisemitic decrees of the government, but sharp condemnation of the pogrom because of its destruction and the tasteless hooligan character of it, characterized the reactions of a considerable part of the population.*

It didn't take long to persuade the masses to take the next step. Concentration camps were established in the mid-1930s, effectively removing dissenting leadership and instilling fear in everyone else. As part of this process, the Reichskirche (State Church) was thoroughly Nazified, as was the Bekennende Kirche (Confessing Church), in which nearly 2000 pastors were arrested and sent to camps and the remaining ones forced to swear a loyalty oath to Hitler. The Catholic Church, perhaps out of fear that, as a minority group, they might also be targeted, never opposed the Nuremberg Laws, and Pope Pius XI signed concordants (agreements) with both Hitler and Mussolini.

By the time the Final Solution – the plan to systematically kill all European Jews – was implemented in 1942, there was no longer any question of widespread resistance. In Kershaw's words:

*Remarkable as it may seem, the Jewish Question was of no more than minimal interest to the vast majority of Germans during the war years in which the mass slaughter of Jews was taking place . . . The evidence allows for no other conclusion.*

As in Germany, the social conditions in the wizard community prior to Voldemort's rise were just right for a charismatic leader to emerge. As in Germany, there was in the wizarding world a sense of racial superiority and infatuation (at least in some circles) with racial purity. And just as Hitler offered membership in the "volk" with all of its promised benefits of the good life, so did Voldemort offer the good life (and what could be better than eternal life?) to his own followers. Moreover, while the wizard community did not seem nearly as threatened and economically deprived as Germany at the conclusion of WWI, there did seem to be some vague perceived threat from the Giants (the Soviets?), the goblins (the Jews?), and even the far-away Muggles (the Americans?).

The incremental steps of the Death Eaters also closely paralleled those of the Nazis. Into the long-standing culture of dislike, Voldemort, through his control of the Ministry of Magic, introduced a variety of new laws intended to isolate and marginalize half-bloods and their supporters and remove half-bloods from all positions of authority, including at Hogwarts. As in Nazi Germany, those who benefited from their new positions and accumulated possessions were ordinary by any definition. They were not mentally ill or unusual in their personality make-up. They were ordinary people concerned mainly with advancing their careers, supporting their families, and fitting in with the majority.

### **The Perpetrators**

Of course, if there is killing, someone has to be personally involved. What about Eichmann and other Nazi members? What about Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy? For that matter, what about Regulus Black and Severus Snape? How do we make sense of their behavior? Is there something psychologically wrong with them? Are, at least, *they* not ordinary? Here too, there is no single answer, as perpetrators, like bystanders, engaged in or promoted violent behavior for a variety of different reasons.

To begin with, many members of the Nazi party and especially the members of the SS (before they dropped their high standards out of desperation in 1944) were "true believers". Unlike the participants in the Milgram study who were clearly uncomfortable with the idea of causing another person pain (as evidenced by their sweating, nervous laughter, and frequent requests that the experiment be stopped), many of the Nazis and the SS shared Hitler's scorn for Jews and his vision for a pure Aryan race. They obeyed not only because of the usual obedience pressures, but also because they wanted to. Yet, apart from their ideology, they were not otherwise psychologically unusual. Consider, for example, this description of Eichmann by political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt who covered his trial for *The New Yorker*:

*During his imprisonment before his trial, the Israeli government sent no less than six psychologists to examine Eichmann. Not only did these doctors find no trace of mental illness, but they also found no evidence of abnormal personality whatsoever. One doctor remarked that his overall attitude towards other people, especially his family and friends, was "highly desirable," while another remarked that the only unusual trait Eichmann displayed was being more "normal" in his*

*habits and speech than the average person. (Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, p. 25-6).*

Not all Nazis were like Eichmann, of course. As in any society, there were those with sadistic desires who were only too glad to have any opportunity to humiliate and torture others. As Nazis, they had free reign to act on their sadistic impulses, and many clearly took advantage.

And there were others still, who, while not sadistic by nature, learned to adapt to the new social reality and the corresponding social norms. In earlier times, these were law-abiding individuals who fit seamlessly into a law-abiding society. Under Nazi rule, they were no different. The only difference was what was permitted and expected under the law. Most of this group probably tried to stay away from direct violence, but circumstances led some into the most violent of places, including the death camps where previously ethical doctors and scientists conducted bizarre and useless experiments and supervised the entire killing operation, including personally “selecting” prisoners for either labor or the gas ovens (Lifton, 2000).

But there was yet another group of perpetrators, a sizable one, which, while having no great regard for Jews, found the violence demanded of them to be distasteful. This was especially common among those who joined the party for career rather than ideological reasons. This is the group that Christopher Browning describes in *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. From interviews and personal letters, Browning describes men with no criminal past and lacking in strong political ideology who join the Reserve Battalion as a means to obtain an income and a desire to avoid the Russian front. When faced with the task of killing Jews, most find the job unpalatable, many get violently sick, almost all try to numb themselves through heavy alcohol use, but with very few exceptions, they do what they’re told. This is the group that the Milgram study helps us understand.

Milgram’s experiment suggests that this particular subgroup of perpetrators were normal indeed and that the majority of us are capable of directly engaging in violent behavior – at least under some circumstances. The specifics of these circumstances are beyond the scope of this essay, but include the presence of an authority figure that is assumed to be legitimate, the presence of other people who are modeling the aggressive behavior, and the absence of any dissenting opinion.

Studies of related psychological phenomena also reinforce the important role of contextual factors. For example, studies of conformity by Solomon Asch showed that if the tendency to conform to group norms was unusually strong if the group was unanimous, while Philip Zimbardo demonstrated how many normal college students randomly assigned to be “guards” in a fake prison quickly took on the characteristics associated with that role, including engaging in clearly sadistic behaviors just days after the start of the experiment.

The point here is not to argue (as did Eichmann and other Nazis) that obedience and conformity pressures explain the totality of perpetrator behavior in Nazi Germany but to demonstrate how ordinary, psychologically healthy, law-abiding individuals can be compelled by circumstances to behave in ways that are practically indistinguishable from violent criminals, closeted sadists, and “true believers.”

Rowling does a masterful job of providing the psychological background for Voldemort himself. The motivations of many of the individual Death Eaters, however, are largely ignored. Even so, on the occasions when she does provide this background, it is evident that the reasons for becoming Death Eaters were as varied as those of the Nazis. Thus, for example, Bellatrix Lestrange is a "true believer", who loves Voldemort and shares his belief in pure-blood superiority. Lucius Malfoy, is likewise a "true believer," at least until Voldemort forces his son into a homicidal mission (to kill Dumbledore) against his will.

In contrast, for the psychologically insecure and vulnerable Severus Snape and Peter Pettigrew, the Death Eaters presented an opportunity to be part of something big and powerful. Rowling doesn't directly tell us why Regulus Black joined the Death Eaters (probably out of a sense of family obligation), but it is clear that he is not prepared for the immoral obligations that membership entails and turns against Voldemort after his attempt to kill Kreacher. Like Regulus, Draco Malfoy, also seems attracted to the Death Eaters as a result of parental indoctrination, and he too has a somewhat unrealistic fantasy of what membership entails. Fenris Greyback, on the other hand, knows all about the Death Eater blood toll. Racial ideology is of relatively little concern to him. Instead, like the sadists among the Nazis, he seems motivated entirely by blood-lust (even when not in wolf form), associating with the Death Eaters only for their many opportunities for violence.

Conspicuous by their absence are the counterparts to the Police Battalion 101, the Wizards who wind up joining or aiding the Death Eaters due to external social pressures, such as those described by Browning and illustrated by Milgram, Asch, and Zimbardo. This is no mere coincidence. Rowling believes in a world in which people have the ability to determine who they are and what they stand for through the choices they make<sup>2</sup>. In Dumbledore's words, "It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 1998). With such a view, there is no room for the complexities of social pressures. This is lamentable and unrealistic, for as Milgram concluded in 1974, “The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act.”

In so saying, Milgram is not denying the individual freedom to make choices. It's certainly true that even under the strongest social pressures, people retain individual freedom to choose, even if that choice is to die. Milgram's own study actually supports this notion, as more than a third of the participants did refuse to administer the

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<sup>2</sup> Actually this seemed to be her intention in the first 6 books. After some contemplation and several insightful comments from others, I am now convinced that personal choice ultimately plays a very minor role in the series, as not a single Slytherin was shown to change throughout the series, not even Draco, who seemed to be set up as the one agent of change.

“dangerous” shocks, even in the face of substantial pressure to obey. His point (and mine!) is that the social pressures are real and powerful and, like our character, do effect how we behave. It’s not character (as Rowling implies) OR environment (as some have mistakenly argued) that determine how we act. It’s both, together. And if we insist on ignoring or minimizing the role of either one, then, like Cornelius Fudge, we are denying important aspects of our reality.

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