The Holocaust: assessing responsibility and conscience

Collaborators: the citizens of Kovno, Lithuania

“I was confronted by the following scene: in the left corner of the yard there was a group of men aged between thirty and fifty. There must have been forty to fifty of them. They were herded together and kept under guard by some civilians. The civilians were armed with rifles and wore armbands, as can be seen in the pictures I took. A young man – he must have been a Lithuanian – with rolled-up sleeves was armed with an iron crowbar.

He dragged out one man at a time from the group and struck him with the crowbar with one or more blows on the back of his head. Within three quarters of an hour he had beaten to death the entire group of forty-five to fifty people in this way. I took a series of photographs of the victims.

After the entire group had been beaten to death, the young man put the crowbar to one side, fetched an accordion and went and stood on the mountain of corpses and played the Lithuanian national anthem. I recognised the tune and was informed by bystanders that this was the national anthem.

The behaviour of the civilians present (women and children) was unbelievable. After each man had been killed they began to clap and when the national anthem started up they joined in singing and clapping.

In the front row there were women with small children in their arms who stayed there right until the end of the whole proceedings. I found out from some people who knew German what was happening.”

From the first person account of photographer Wilhelm Gunsilius
http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/einsatz/kovnomassacres.html

1. What makes typical people commit heinous acts?

2. Have you ever seen or heard of students who act with the same motivations as the people of Kovno?