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**Review of Father Patrick Desbois, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets*.  
New York: Arcade Publishing, 2018. 312 pp.**

Father Desbois' book *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets* is much more than a publication of enormous historical research on crimes committed by the local Eastern European population in aiding the German Shoah. In his work, Desbois ultimately pursues the question of what turns human beings, specifically neighbors, into willing cogs of an inhumane killing machinery. His research asks specific questions: they concern the roles these neighbors played in the Nazi genocide, the reasons that possibly made them collaborate or refuse collaboration with the Nazis, and the organization, routines, and schedules of an average execution day. Based mainly on interviews with local collaborators, his book is an outstanding work in illuminating such contexts and in providing very detailed insight into the dimension of local collaboration as well as into the technical operation of countryside executions in ditches and similar places. The overarching question, however, is that of moral judgment, or the predominant absence thereof, by locals in their individual decisions to help the Nazis, or less frequently to help Jews: why and how are village residents turned into murderers of their own Jewish neighbors, even friends, of the same village? A secondary overarching question asked by the book is that of memory and amnesia, collectively and individually, busting the "myth" of secrecy that has enveloped the massacres in the participants' recollections.

The monograph consists of 26 chapters, two introductions, a conclusion, and an afterword. The first introduction is a historical one, offering a general location of the work concerning the Shoah and its research. The second introduction is a very personal one and retraces Father Desbois' exposure, since his childhood, to the Second World War and the Shoah in Eastern Europe. The main chapters

are mostly relatively short and are titled according to the activities or functions which local residents fulfilled and which are described in the respective chapters. The chapters are grouped into five sections that lay out the typical chronology of an execution day, beginning from “The Night Before,” covering “The Morning,” “The Day,” and “The Evening,” until “The Day After.” Most chapters are dated and begin with some recollection or personal reflection by Father Desbois on the chapter’s subject matter, the circumstances or people whom he and his team met in the course of conducting interviews with locals represented in the chapters, or taking recourse to depositions from German or Soviet archives. The book represents about eight years of research conducted by Father Desbois and his team of international and local researchers, driven by the question of what exactly took place, how a typical day of mass murder at a local site could unfold, and which factors may have facilitated the local population’s participation in it.

The work is introduced by Andrej Umansky, sketching out the distinctiveness of the Shoah in occupied Soviet Eastern Europe. He describes the scope of the so-called “Shoah by bullets”: its geographical expanse, as well as time, nature, and quantity. Over 80 percent of the murdered Jewish population of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus was executed by firing squads, often at sites in the vicinity of their own village or town. Umansky introduces brief post-war testimonies by German perpetrators that revealed only their interest in the mechanical efficiency of the extermination of the Jewish population, and in the detrimental psychological effects on the shooters themselves: they proved oblivious to the fact that they had committed manifold murder and genocide. Above and beyond pointing out the Nazis’ absence of normal moral categories, in that they conceptualized the killing of the Jews and others as an ideological and racial necessity, he emphasizes another distinct feature of the Shoah in occupied Soviet territories: the killings were not conducted in secrecy, as was the case with the deportation of Jews to the concentration and death camps and their extermination there. Instead, the “Shoah by bullets” took place in “broad daylight,” to explain the book’s main title: it took place in plain sight of the local population and other German military personnel and, in fact, required the local population’s participation in the crimes at practically all stages of the executions. Umansky concludes by highlighting that even though both Soviet

and post-war German judicial investigations have collected testimonies of survivors, executioners, and neighbors concerning the destruction of almost all Jewish communities, and that these testimonies document that the execution took place for everyone to see, they are not explicit about the daily routine and organization of the executions.

In his very personal and autobiographical “Introduction,” Desbois sets the narrative tone for the whole book. He reminisces about his childhood and upbringing in rural France, where he experienced social division, and where earlier his family had been involved with the French Resistance. He encountered the silence of his beloved grandfather Claudius there, when he would ask him about his experience as a prisoner of war in the French internment camp at Rawa Ruska in Ukraine, where 25,000 Soviet prisoners were murdered. In Rawa Ruska, 15,000 Jews were also shot. It was this silence which he also experienced when first visiting Rawa Ruska himself and many other sites of mass murder since, that set him on his journey of founding the work of “Yahad – In Unum.” Subsequently, a certain dimension of this secrecy concerning the genocide against the Jews in rural and municipal occupied Soviet territories could be lifted: more than four thousand interviews were conducted and statements by witnesses were cross-referenced with archives, allowing the presentation of a certain narrative explaining crucial aspects of this “Shoah by bullets,” aspects which had hitherto not been understood in such detail. The “aggregated” or cumulative contents of many testimonials offered the “Yahad” researchers the opportunity to identify and “distill” an astounding general reality and rhythm of the killings: “it became clear that the Shoah by bullets in Eastern Europe was not the secret we have been led to believe for so long. Rather, many people – Ukrainians and Poles, especially – saw it all with their own eyes and sometimes did more” (p. 11). The local residents were the constant “helping hands” of the killers and were involved in building the ghettos, rounding up the victims, and digging and filling the graves. *In Broad Daylight* takes the reader on a journey of gradual discovery of the public nature of these executions and the local population’s involvement in them.

Each chapter contains excerpts from testimonials, descriptions of individual historical and local contexts, a narration of Father Desbois and his team’s approach in dealing with local witnesses, as well as Desbois’ reflections on the encounters

with the local witnesses and their actions and behavior. Gradually, as the book progresses, the veil of secrecy is lifted and specific dimensions of a typical day of killing are added, so that eventually, a largely complete picture emerges of how the killings were organized and to what extent locals were engaged in them, be it forcibly or voluntarily. As has been suggested above, the author often shares his own questions as to what may have motivated the neighbors' individual moral choices; sometimes such moral judgment is expressed rather explicitly by the neighbors, sometimes it is only implicit in their narration of their participation in events. Often, given his own biographical familiarity with rural life in the mid-twentieth century and its cyclical nature, the author meditates on his perception of the role which the social situation of rural communities in Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus with their specific structures, customs, habits, routines, and experiences – some of which go back to Tsarist Russia, others imposed by the Soviets – may have played in the executions and may have been purposely exploited by the Nazis. Certain groups of Ukrainians of German descent, so-called *Volksdeutsche*, were a rare and distinct example of the local civilian population participating in the actual executions by killing local Jewish populations themselves.

Rather than reviewing the book chapter by chapter, the present discussion will first outline the book's cumulative lessons concerning the organization of mass executions and the extent of local participation. Following that, some of the author's thoughts responding to such lessons will be summarized. First of all, the executions at each site of mass murder took place regularly within less than twenty-four hours and were carefully thought through and organized. The activities involved, such as the preparation and the carrying out of executions at provincial or municipal sites as well as the concluding work, were manifold. In all of these auxiliary roles, the local population participated; often they were requisitioned by the Germans, sometimes they participated voluntarily. The activities contributing to the executions included the locating of a site appropriate for mass execution and burial, the measuring out of the needed space in the earth, the digging of such ditches. Furthermore, they included the planning and organization of transportation, the sealing of Jewish neighborhoods and ghettos, the readying of local *polizei* forces for the next day, food provisions, the digging of

the ditches, the laying of planks across the ditches, the filling of the mass graves with lime, and their subsequent closing. In addition, it meant the transporting of clothes and other material possessions of the murdered Jews, as well as their preparation for further use and their “marketing” at auctions. Also involved was the documentation by the Germans for official propagandistic or private home consumption; German soldiers photographed and filmed the genocide.

Such auxiliary preparations began the night before the executions took place, in the vicinity of the locality from which the Jewish population would be extracted the following day. While a German architect or surveyor would measure out a prospective site of mass murder ahead of time, logistical requisitions for the next day would be set into motion by the regional German headquarters. At the same time or somewhat later during the night, Germans and the police would encircle the ghetto, restrict the movement of its residents, and often allow the police to rape, and subsequently shoot, women of the ghetto, as well as to steal their property: “It was as though nothing held these men back because the Jews were going to be killed the next day. [...] The extermination machine is not just for killing. It authorizes all forms of cruelty so long as they don’t interfere with the strict timing on the day of the genocide” (p. 69).

During the following morning, several things took place simultaneously. The ditches had to be dug precisely as had been calculated and measured out before to provide the right space for the planned number of human bodies. Food was ordered from a local dining hall for the day. Local vehicles, carts, and sledges had to be readied by the population (or sometimes transport companies) by the morning. The Jews were deported from the ghetto or rounded up in their houses by local police. Perhaps long before the deportation to an execution site, the ghetto was physically sealed off, often by local residents. Lime was requisitioned from the village to fill the blood-soaked mass graves, in order to sanitize them. For all of these activities, the support and services of the local population were requisitioned. The police established two cordons, one directly at the site of murder around the ditch, to prevent attempts at flight, and a second “outer” cordon to seal off traffic as well as, effectively, to separate “the space of the crimes from that of ordinary villagers” (p. 81). It was a perimeter separating life from death – even offering the local non-Jewish population a sense

of safety that the genocide was not directed against them, but against the Jews exclusively. All the way and time from the ghetto to their execution, Jews would be subject to abusive treatment. In some instances, local residents perceived the column of Jews as they were taken to their execution site as “Judgment Day,” as “Jews going up to Golgotha,” as a kind of “religious procession” and divine retribution for what Christianity had taught about the Jews for many centuries: the Christian accusation of deicide. Some spectators even made the sign of the cross in response to such scenes (pp. 88-92). The persecution of the Jews by the Nazis reverberated with a Judeophobia that was transported by traditional Christian beliefs and customs, which to some extent continued underneath the superimposed Soviet ideology.

During the daytime shootings, the executioners often took turns or breaks, during which they ate and drank and reloaded their weapons. The food had been requisitioned from the local population. Neighbors of those Jews who were being shot, as members of the *polizei* or ordinary requisitioned helpers, were present at the executions as people who dug the ditches, as those who helped round up and transport the Jews to them, as people who moved the planks on the ditches on which the Jews had to stand to be shot, as people who filled the ditches with lime, as those who provided meals to the Germans, and as those who removed the clothes and valuables while others back in the village or town roamed the Jewish homes, killed individuals that had occasionally managed to hide, and stole their abandoned property. Meanwhile, often, local residents who did not participate could still watch securely from some distance. The killing operation itself was mostly over by midday. While the locals who helped or watched returned to their communities, now emptied of Jews, the German murderers returned to their regional headquarters, celebrated with a party in the evening, and conducted execution de-briefings, evaluating their genocidal efficiency.

Desbois’ research describes this execution “process” in great detail, furnishing information from many individual testimonies concerning a great number of mass executions. In doing so, he reveals the immense extent to which these crimes were embedded in local communities. Many individuals from a community were involved in single or even in several stages of the genocide of

their Jewish neighbors, either as participants, or as spectators. Effectively, the whole community knew what was happening, before, during, and after the crime. Desbois' presentation also makes space for neighbors who either refused to participate in the local genocidal acts or who actively engaged in helping their Jewish neighbors, while seeking to understand their motivations. However, reflecting on the magnitude of the willingness of non-Jewish neighbors to support the killing of the local Jews, Desbois makes several suggestions which are certainly worthy of further contemplation and research. First of all, he enquires into the moral breakdown that made it possible to suppress human feelings and sympathy with one's neighbors. Secondly, he suggests that certain social and communal structures, as well as sets of beliefs, were already in place, that the Germans were able to consciously use. These include the specific rural and municipal government institutions of the Russian Empire and the Soviet period. Such structures had also served the Soviet requisition policies, with which the Soviet population was therefore well acquainted. Also, antisemitism, specifically Christian Judeophobia, and racism were likely prevalent among the provincial population, as outlined above. In addition, life in the villages and small towns was adapted to the daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, and yearly individual and communal routines of an often agricultural – and perhaps, to a lesser extent, also artisanal – cyclical life. Also, without justifying this morally, the abject poverty of the provincial population, worsened by the war, the German occupation generally but also by preceding Soviet policies, makes it conceivable that residents may have considered money, an item of clothing or of food, something that suddenly became accessible through the death of a neighboring Jew, more valuable than his or her life. The author considers it possible and likely that the German genocidal machine “tapped into” such local paradigms of social behavior and that the specific routines of the genocide in Soviet Eastern Europe may have been developed to fit in with them.

In the “Afterword,” the author summarizes his reflections concerning individual moral responsibility in the Shoah in particular and in genocide more generally. He suggests that above and beyond the specific totalitarian and genocidal ideology and the rhetoric and discourse of racial purity, genocide is ultimately not enacted by ideologues who follow their own rules of purity, but by “mere”

criminals, by individuals who are offered the opportunity to “extract themselves on a personal level from the usual criminal motivations. [...] Genocide masquerades as a moral act” (p. 259) in that it provides an ideological justification for murder, rape, theft, and related genocidal crimes. For Desbois, the “unmasking of the killer, wiping away the lie” (p. 261) of ideology of racial or religious superiority, may be the first step in combating the perpetration of genocide and in examining the true extent of complicity in genocidal crimes.

In conclusion, *In Broad Daylight* is a fascinating and very readable, albeit (and for obvious reasons) shocking, account of a specific aspect of the Shoah in Soviet Eastern Europe, which is a dimension of the Shoah that for many decades and for well-known historical reasons had not been properly researched. Father Desbois and his team’s work of breaking through barriers of silence and secrecy – barriers often motivated by the desire to hide one’s personal involvement in a specific act of the genocidal process – makes an important further contribution to research in this field, with which he has already been associated, owing to the precursor of his present book, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (2009). Above and beyond discovering certain and important historical facts, his personal story and relevant reflections offer conclusions and suggestions that may provide the impetus for further research concerning the Shoah in Soviet Eastern Europe, be it through the lenses of psychology, social anthropology and social studies, theology, church history, and antisemitism studies, in order to better understand actions of the local population in the context of the Shoah in Soviet territory. Ultimately, his book is also a call to the reader to consider the question that confronts all Shoah and genocide researchers alike, the question of what makes a human being disregard the humanity of his or her fellow man or woman.