

'Harmless' Citizens Who Commit Brutal Crimes

FRANKFURT (Associated Press).—The quiet, bespectacled bank clerk . . . the friendly policeman on the beat . . . the respected businessman who takes a keen interest in charity work.

Hardly in tune with the popular conception of the cruel, arrogant Nazis of the Hitler heyday.

Yet at regular intervals in West Germany just such "harmless" citizens as these are arrested and charged with Nazi atrocities.

What turned ordinary, decent Germans into mass murderers and then enabled them to slip quietly and without conscience back into civilian life at the end of World War II?

A leading West German psychologist suggests that in many cases the German sense of order and obligation to obey orders is the cause.

In an article in the weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" Professor Horst Eberhard Richter, director of the Psychosomatic Clinic at Giessen University, argues that many war criminals were not fanatical followers of Nazi ideology, nor were they naturally aggressive types who found an outlet in the brutality of the Hitler regime.

As Richter points out, in post-war West German Nazi trials one argument of the defendant has recurred with monotonous regularity: "I was only obeying orders."

Richter says that while some of the accused may have been just trying to win the sympathy of the court,

the sympathy of the court, many of them undoubtedly regarded this argument as a valid defence.

Substitute

"For these people authority is a substitute for their ego.

"They can only incur guilt by disobeying or coming into conflict with this ego — in other words, "authority," says Richter.

He argues that such people could easily be converted to other forms of totalitarianism, apart from Nazism, as long as they fulfilled their desire to depend on higher authority.

The ideology itself is of secondary importance.

Richter quotes the Eichmann trial as evidence to support his claims.

He says the only time Eichmann really lost his composure was when the judge asked him to speak up at one point while he was giving evidence.

Eichmann's blushes and confused apologies were, according to Richter, a sign of his shame at losing face in front of authority — in this case the judge, even though the Israeli judge was a member of a race which Nazi ideology required Eichmann to look upon as inferior beings.

Not Question

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Many other defendants, charged with concentration camp shootings and gassings, have repeatedly said in court that it never occurred to them to question the authority which ordered the killings.
