

**IF ONLY MORE PEOPLE HAD THE SAME MORAL COURAGE AS
THIS GERMAN CAPTAIN**

**CAPTAIN JOSEF SIBILLE OF THE WEHRMACHT TOLD HIS BATTALION COMMANDER THAT NEITHER HE
NOR ANYONE IN HIS COMPANY WOULD KILL ANY JEWS**

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“I was merely obeying orders.” It’s a well-worn trope of Nazis accused of war crimes, and an excuse that suggests they had no choice in the matter. Certainly, it’s widely assumed that if a soldier refused to execute a prisoner, he would be shot for disobeying the order and the prisoner would still be executed. In other words, there was no point in taking a moral stand because two people would end up dead rather than one.

The other day, I got into a conversation about this issue of choice with Waitman Wade Beorn, formerly with the U.S. 10th Cavalry and now teaching history here in the U.K. He’s done some fascinating—albeit very grim—work on the Holocaust on the Eastern Front, looking at crimes carried out by the regular army, the Wehrmacht, rather than by the SS-led *Einsatzgruppen*.

Waitman told me about the operations of the German 691st Infantry Regiment’s 1st Battalion in Belarus in October 1941. The battalion commander, Major Alfred Commichau, was ordered to round up the Jews in the area and execute them all, whether man, woman, or child. At the time, his three companies were based in different towns, and so he, in turn, issued orders to each of his company commanders. First Lieutenant Hermann Kuhls, commander of 2nd Company, was a Nazi Party member and also in the SS, despite serving in the Wehrmacht. A rabid anti-Semite, he immediately complied, executing all the Jews in his jurisdiction with enthusiastic and brutal efficiency.

The 3rd Company commander was Captain Friedrich Nöll. He was ordered to round up the 150 Jews of the small town of Krucha, where he and his company were stationed, and eliminate the lot.

This caused Nöll “great confusion and agitation,” as he put it. He believed it was wrong, and he didn’t want any part in such a deed. However, his first sergeant, Emil Zimmer, argued that Jews supported the partisans—irregular Soviet troops operating behind German lines—so, in effect, they were partisans and, as a result, a legitimate target. This link between Jews and partisans was, of course, utter nonsense, but it folded neatly into the warped Nazi ideology about the menace of the Bolshevik-Jew—something that had been recently “confirmed” at a Wehrmacht training conference in the Belarusian city of Mogilev. It was even more absurd because, at that time, there was no real partisan threat. Nonetheless, if it were to be involved in such operations, the Wehrmacht needed to convince its ranks that Jews were a legitimate danger. At any rate, Sergeant Zimmer had no qualms and carried out the order on Nöll’s behalf, while his company commander stayed well away and played no direct part in the slaughter.

The 1st Company commander received the same order. Captain Josef Sibille, a 47-year-old teacher, spent what he called “anxious hours and a sleepless night” worrying about what to do, before telling his battalion commander that neither he nor anyone in his company would kill any Jews. Major Commichau told him he needed to be tougher and gave him three days to carry out the order. But Sibille still refused, telling Commichau he was not prepared to dishonor himself or his company.

Was Sibille shot for disobeying a direct order? No. Nor was he court-martialed or punished in any way at all. When Sibille reported to Commichau five days later, the battalion commander did not even mention this moment of insubordination. Afterward, Sibille reported hearing that he’d been considered “a bit soft.” That was the only consequence of his refusal to murder innocent people.

As Waitman pointed out, it was remarkable that three companies of the same battalion were given the same order to murder Jews, yet each company commander responded differently. Clearly, orders did not always have to be obeyed when it came to taking an active part in the Holocaust.

In other words, Germans did have a choice.

I couldn’t stop thinking about my conversation with Waitman for days afterward.

If only more people had had the same moral courage as Captain Sibille.

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