Scientific Research Publishing

Open Journal of Social Sciences, 2025, 13(10), 390-403
https://www.scirp.org/journal/jss
ISSN Online: 2327-5960
ISSN Print: 2327-5952

War Crimes: What Drives Soldiers off the Edge? An Examination of Atrocities Committed by the Wehrmacht and Vietnam Soldiers

Claire Masiée

Department of History, Sociology, and Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany
Email: werneket@hu-berlin.de

How to cite this paper: Masiée, C. (2025). War Crimes: What Drives Soldiers off the Edge? An Examination of Atrocities Committed by the Wehrmacht and Vietnam Soldiers. *Open Journal of Social Sciences, 13,* 390-403.
https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.1310022

Received: September 11, 2025
Accepted: October 17, 2025
Published: October 20, 2025

Abstract

This paper argues that on both the Eastern Front and in Vietnam, the forces of authority, exclusionary order, and comradeship fostered conditions where atrocities became likely, compounded by the psychological "Diffusion of Disorder". It examines these dynamics through the Wehrmacht's war crimes and the Vietnam War's My Lai massacre. While Nazi atrocities were often organized by SS units, ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers also engaged in violence against civilians, aided by legal and ideological sanction. Memoirs like that of Luis Raffeiner illustrate how duty and obedience justified acts of cruelty, though such testimonies must be read critically. Milgram's obedience experiments, and later refinements showing that compliance stemmed from identification with authority's goals, help explain these behaviors. Similarly, in Vietnam, young American soldiers fighting a guerilla war with little cultural understanding turned against civilians despite official U.S. aims to protect them. The massacre at My Lai revealed how authority, group identity, and structural pressures converged to produce extreme violence.

Keywords

Eastern Front, Vietnam War, Wehrmacht, My Lai Massacre, War Crimes, Authority, Comradeship, Obedience, Diffusion of Disorder, Milgram Experiments, Collective Violence, Exclusionary Order, Soldier Psychology, Group Dynamics, Atrocity Studies, Comparative Warfare

1. Some Common Mistakes

- **Overreliance on memoirs and testimonies**—taking soldiers' post-war accounts at face value without recognizing selective memory, self-justification, or attempts at rehabilitation.

- **Attributing atrocities to a single cause**—oversimplifying by blaming only authority, ideology, or comradeship, rather than examining how these factors interact.
- **Neglecting structural and systemic influences**—focusing too narrowly on individual psychology without considering military hierarchy, state policy, or cultural context.
- **Romanticizing acts of "kindness"**—misinterpreting small gestures of humanity in memoirs as evidence of moral resistance, when they often coexisted with participation in atrocities.
- **Using problematic comparisons**—equating the Eastern Front and Vietnam too directly without acknowledging major differences in ideology, context, and scale.
- **Ignoring methodological limits**—failing to balance oral histories with archival records, court testimonies, and scholarly analyses.
- **Assuming obedience is automatic**—misapplying Milgram's findings without recognizing later refinements about identification with authority and group goals.

2. Paper Organization

The structure of this paper is organized through a hierarchy of headings that guides the reader from the broadest themes to the most specific analyses. The paper title functions as the primary head (Heading 1), since all content flows from this central research question. The main divisions—*Introduction*, *Methodology*, and *Conclusion*—are presented as Heading 2, marking the core components of the argument.

Within *Methodology*, topical sub-sections are further divided into Heading 3: *Authority*, *Order*, *Comradeship*, and *Diffusion of Responsibility*. These subsections reflect the three central social forces under analysis, plus the psychological concept that connects them. Each of these is developed with detailed historical and psychological evidence, including examples from both the Eastern Front and the Vietnam War.

Where necessary, individual sections also contain Heading 4 sub-sections. For example, under *Authority*, discussion is broken down into Milgram's experiments, Raffeiner's memoir, and the U.S. military command structure in Vietnam, allowing readers to follow the progression from psychological theory to historical case study. However, the use of Heading 4 is limited to cases where multiple subtopics demand parallel treatment, ensuring clarity without fragmenting the analysis unnecessarily.

In the *Conclusion*, the text uses component heads—*Summary of Findings* and *Further Research*—to distinguish sections that are not subordinate to one another but instead represent distinct closing components of the paper. Similarly, the *Abstract* and *References* are treated as independent component heads.

This layered heading structure ensures that the argument is transparent and

logically organized: the reader is introduced to the overarching research problem, guided through the analysis of each causal factor, and finally directed toward the implications and avenues for future research. By balancing component heads with a clear hierarchy of text heads, the paper maintains both accessibility and scholarly rigor.

3. Introduction

Humans are deeply social animals who seek the approval of others and strive to be recognized as ethical contributors to their communities, often believing that under pressure they will choose what is right. Our instinct to cooperate, to build hierarchies that streamline decision-making, and to create order out of chaos has enabled extraordinary achievements—from distributing food and medicine worldwide to developing vaccines and landing on the moon. Yet these same instincts can also lead to unimaginable cruelty. War routinely reveals this paradox: soldiers capable of self-sacrifice and loyalty also commit atrocities against civilians. Ironically, the very drives that make human cooperation possible—respect for authority, the comfort of shared order, and the powerful need for comradeship—can push people toward acts of brutality. When soldiers later explain their actions, they often add another revealing justification: everyone else was doing it. This observation points to a fourth, closely related psychological force known as diffusion of responsibility, in which individuals feel less personally accountable when responsibility is spread across a group.

This paper examines whether soldiers commit atrocities primarily out of deference to authority and order, from a desire for conformity and comradeship, through the mechanism of diffusion of responsibility, or through the interaction of all three. It analyzes two emblematic cases: the crimes of ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers on the Eastern Front and the 1968 My Lai Massacre carried out by American soldiers in Vietnam. The research relies on three types of evidence. First, primary testimonies and interviews with soldiers, including memoirs and after-action reports, offer insight into perpetrators' reasoning but are treated with caution because memory, self-justification, and post-war reputation often shape such narratives. Second, historical scholarship reconstructs the structural and ideological pressures of each conflict. Particular attention is given to Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments, Jörg Baberowski's analysis of "order" and its violent corollaries, and Thomas Kühne's work on comradeship and shame culture. Third, the psychological theory of diffusion of responsibility, first formalized by Darley and Latané and anticipated in Milgram's own reflections, provides a critical bridge between individual testimony and group dynamics, highlighting how moral accountability can be diluted when "everyone else is doing it".

By integrating these sources, this paper seeks not only to recount events but also to identify the social and psychological mechanisms that make atrocities more likely. The analysis proceeds in four sections. Authority explores how hierarchical command structures and obedience to orders, documented by Milgram, facili-

tated violence. Order examines how regimes in both Nazi Germany and the U.S. military defined insiders and outsiders, creating "spaces of violence" in Baberowski's sense. Comradeship analyzes how tight-knit units, described by Kühne, created intense peer pressure that rewarded conformity and punished dissent. Diffusion of responsibility explicitly connects these forces, showing how shared participation allowed soldiers to perceive their individual role as minor or excusable. Testimonies from Wehrmacht troops and members of Charlie Company who claimed that "everyone else was shooting" illustrate how collective action eroded personal accountability and encouraged escalation. By situating diffusion of responsibility alongside authority, order, and comradeship, the paper underscores how these interlocking social forces transform ordinary individuals into participants in extraordinary violence.

The thesis of this paper is that in both the Eastern Front and Vietnam, the forces of authority, an order that excluded groups of people, and the desire for comradeship combined to create a warfare environment in which illegal actions and atrocities would occur. This paper will be organized into three sections analyzing the extent to which atrocities are caused by these three factors: authority, order, comradeship, and the psychological phenomenon of the "Diffusion of Disorder".

While most Holocaust-related atrocities were organized by officers in the SS-Totenkopfverbände, Einsatzgruppen, and Waffen-SS, ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers also committed acts of terror on other populations, mainly in the East. In Nazi Germany, ethnic cleansing of Jewish and Slavic populations was not only legal; it was a priority for the regime, and there is evidence that many German soldiers engaged in acts that they initially thought unacceptable. Throughout the course of Nazi Germany's involvement on the Eastern Front, from 1941 to 1945, approximately 10 million German men in the Wehrmacht were deployed to the East. Hannes Heer, a German historian who created the Wehrmacht Exhibition in the 1990s argues that "60 to 80 percent of German soldiers who fought on the Eastern front participated in war crimes".[1] The atrocities committed by Wehrmacht soldiers included starving the civilian population, rape, sexual slavery, collecting slave laborers, and harming civilians during scorched-earth retreats.

In analyzing these crimes it is tempting to rely on vivid personal testimonies, yet soldier memoirs pose serious methodological challenges. They are often written decades later, filtered through self-justification, selective memory, or even a desire for rehabilitation in post-war society. The recollections of Luis Raffeiner, a private and tank mechanic whose memoir details both convivial encounters with Russian villagers and participation in home burnings, illustrate this tension. Raffeiner recounts torching peasant huts on Christmas Eve, reflecting that "war knows no mercy", and justifies taking food knowing peasants might starve. He claims kindness toward forced-labor Jews while simultaneously presenting him-

[1]Kay, A. J. & Stahel, D. (2018). *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*. Indiana University Press. 174.

self as powerless: "an order is an order". Such passages are revealing, but they also invite caution. As historians such as Omer Bartov argue, post-war narratives often downplay antisemitism or shift blame upward, making it essential to read Raffeiner as evidence of attitudes and rationalizations rather than as an objective chronicle of events.

Milgram's famous obedience experiments help frame these accounts. His findings—that ordinary individuals inflict harm when authority legitimizes it—remain a critical lens through which to interpret both the Wehrmacht and later atrocities like My Lai. Later analyses, however, complicate this picture. Scholars such as Alex Haslam and Stephen Reicher have shown that obedience in Milgram's studies was not purely automatic; participants were most compliant when they identified with the scientific mission and the perceived social value of the experiment rather than when they felt coerced. This refinement suggests that authority operates not only through fear of punishment but also by winning the allegiance of those who come to see its goals as worthwhile. Raffeiner's insistence on duty echoes Milgram's subjects, but it must be weighed alongside archival records, court testimonies, and the broader historiography that documents structural incentives for violence beyond any single soldier's memory.

In the Vietnam War, the American official position was that the war was to protect Vietnamese civilians, yet in a guerilla war fought largely by very young American soldiers with a poor understanding of Vietnamese culture and politics, aggression against the local population began to grow. When it became known that an otherwise ordinary and inexperienced Vietnam War platoon called Charlie Company had raped, tortured and massacred the civilians of Vietnamese villages referred to as My Lai, including women and children, even babies, using violence of a scale so shocking that it goes beyond the scope of this paper to describe, there was much speculation as to what might have caused these men to do such a thing.[2]

Stanley, Milgram, Jörg Baberowski and Thomas Kühne have described different forces that seem to have been at work in the dynamics of the platoons and the minds of the soldiers who committed these acts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Authority

In his groundbreaking experiment involving subjects being told to provide painful electric shocks to another person in the interest of science, Stanley Milgram demonstrated that human beings, much more than we would like to admit, are willing to cause others pain when they are told by an authority figure that there is a justification for the pain. Milgram's experiment has long been taken as evidence for the notion that in environments with very strong authority, such as the military or a totalitarian regime, the individuals subject to that authority will largely

[2]Opton, E. M. (1971). It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It. *Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness.* (pp. 49-70). Jossey-Bass. 50.

commit acts that cause pain, death, and atrocity against all moral upbringing the individual subject may have received. Later analyses, however, complicate this picture. Scholars such as Alex Haslam and Stephen Reicher have shown that obedience in Milgram's studies was not purely automatic; participants were most compliant when they identified with the scientific mission and the perceived social value of the experiment rather than when they felt coerced. This refinement suggests that authority operates not only through fear of punishment but also by winning the allegiance of those who come to see its goals as worthwhile. The horrors of Nazi Germany are often partially explained by reference to Milgram's work, and the horrors of My Lai are also related to authority.

One former German soldier who included in his memoirs accounts of atrocities and the pressure of authority is Luis Raffeiner, who served as a private and a tank mechanic on the Eastern Front. Raffeiner's accounts vary from normal and positive interactions with Russian villagers, to witnessing (without either participating in or objecting to) the murder of "partisans", Jews, and Russian POWs. Raffeiner even discusses his accounts of taking action directly to burn peasant homes and take food from peasants. Raffeiner acknowledges that the peasants may have died from cold or starvation as a result of his actions, but "war knows no mercy".[3] Raffeiner describes complying with a Christmas Eve order to torch homes as they retreat, stating that "At home, the sacristan will be lighting up the candles… and meanwhile we are lighting up the huts of innocent people… but an order is an order." When coming across a group of Jews being abused during forced labor, Raffeiner states that there was nothing to do other than to be kind on an individual basis (Raffeiner 2010). Raffeiner's memoirs often come across as relatable to a degree that makes one wonder whether he is entirely honest in his portrayal of the pain of war, and he spends about half of his book describing his own challenges returning home after the war. His narrative shows how a sense of duty to military hierarchy can eclipse individual moral judgment. At the same time, Raffeiner's insistence that he was merely following orders hints at what psychologists call diffusion of responsibility—the belief that culpability is shared across the entire unit and its commanders, so that no single soldier feels fully accountable. It may be that Raffeiner's account is not entirely reliable in that he would be motivated to write about himself in the best possible light, yet he comes across as very much the sort of authority-driven participant who does not recognize any possibility of standing against the power structures.

Like Milgram's subjects, Raffeiner stands behind the authority of those who gave orders in order to avoid taking responsibility himself even though he is aware that he has caused pain and very possibly death. He is a cog in a great machine, with some independence to think for himself but never enough to stand up to the machine. He seems to have a sense of humor and attempts to befriend Russian peasants, but, at a much lower level of responsibility, he makes the tanks run just

[3]Raffeiner, L. (2010). *Eyewitness to Wehrmacht Atrocities on the Eastern Front; A German Soldier's Memoir of War and Captivity.* Pen & Sword Books Ltd. 94.

as Eichman made the trains run, not to mention making the homes burn after their cellars are raided.

At My Lai, authority took two forms: direct instructions from platoon leaders as well as indirect encouragement from the military establishment as a whole, which seemed to be enabling civilian deaths if not explicitly encouraging them. The night before the massacre, the platoon's captain, Ernest Medina, instructed the soldiers to kill anything that moves, and was reported to have confirmed that included women and children. On the ground in My Lai, Lieutenant William Calley shouted to the troops to get them to kill.[4]

Inconsistent with the values that many Americans believed the war in Vietnam stood for, the US Military command in Vietnam enforced a structure encouraging violence, even violence against an innocent person. Military strategists in Washington D.C., some of whom came from corporations, believed that a factor in winning the war would be the US soldiers killing enemy soldiers faster than they could be replaced.[5] "Body count" became the indicator of success and the "fastest way to promotion", and the body count could include civilians.[6] American journalist, Nick Turse describes many atrocities and writes that the Americans had created a "veritable system of suffering" where My Lai was "an operation, not an aberration" (Turse, 2013). Edward Opton points out that the massacre at My Lai was only one minor step beyond the standard, official, routine United States policy in Vietnam (Opton, 1971). In such an environment, the soldiers committing the atrocities at My Lai could be expected to assume that their actions would fit the expectations of the U.S. military hierarchy—or, as diffusion of responsibility predicts, that their own part was only a small fragment of a collective act and therefore less morally significant. Believing that they had that authority behind them, the men in Charlie Company continued to kill civilians much like the subjects in Milgram's study continued to deliver electric shocks.

Yet My Lai also contained a critical example of resistance. Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson Jr., piloting a helicopter that morning, witnessed the killings and landed between U.S. troops and fleeing villagers. He ordered his crew to open fire on American soldiers if they continued shooting civilians and evacuated survivors by helicopter. Thompson's defiance—later recognized with the Soldier's Medal—demonstrates that even within a culture of obedience, individuals could and did refuse unlawful orders. His actions highlight that authority, while powerful, is not absolute; moral courage and personal conscience can override the pressure to conform.

4.2. Order

In *The Quest for Order and the Pursuit of Terror*, Jörg Baberowski and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel write about how the Nazi ideology involved a quest to create

[4]Hersch, S. (1970). *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and its Aftermath*. Random House Inc. 50.
[5]Turse, N. (2013). *Kill Anything that Moves; The Real American War in Vietnam*. Picador. 42.
[6]Jones, H. (2017). *My Lai, Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*. Oxford University Press. (Oxford, England). 70.

Order based on ethnicity, where ethnicities from the outside would be excluded.[7] Baberowski defines order as: "preventing spaces of violence", arguing that a functional social order is maintained through a state's monopoly on force. Though, he also admits that these very spaces have the capacity to turn violent.[8] To the Nazis, the utopian world was one that combined modern technology with anti-modern rhetoric and thinking, a world in which new orders were established that included some people and excluded others and the rest of the world. The desire to organize people around ethnicity arose out of experiences during the First World War, when many Germans first encountered the multiethnic cultures in Eastern Europe which, because they could not understand these cultures, they found to be inferior (Baberowski, 186). In response to the humiliating defeat in World War One and the loss of German speaking lands to the East, these ideas of inferior cultures and peoples grew to fit well with the National Socialist ideology to justify expansion to the East (Baberowski, 187). The Nazis held a widespread belief that the outside world was an assortment of dangerous counter orders that threatened the existence of their exclusionary order (Baberowski, 181). The enemies to the Nazi regime needed to be classified and dealt with based on racial, social, and national classifications. Baberowski and Doering-Manteuffel argue that Nazi genocide occurred because Nazis actually believed it to be possible to eradicate all of a population of excluded peoples. Soon after the invasion of Poland, the Wehrmacht had largely accepted the idea that the war would involve mass killings of civilian populations (Baberowski, 189).

Though Nazi Germany was publicly committing a variety of war crimes including the largest genocide in history sanctioned by the government, the Jurisdiction Decree Barbarossa of May of 1941 contained language that was intended to avoid other atrocities by the Wehrmact. For example, the decree clearly outlined that "grave actions that are caused by a lack of sexual restraint" (Kay & Stahel, 2018), indicating that rape was illegal and reprimandable.[9] Additionally, "… rape in the Wehrmacht was officially a crime under the classification of crimes and offenses against morality" (Kay & Stahel, 2018). In light of these rules intended to avoid atrocities, the Wehrmacht soldiers who committed atrocities were doing so in defiance of the orders of those higher up. However, it is clear that the soldiers viewed those outside their group as lesser and, especially during wartime, dangerous. Wehrmacht troops often lodged with Russian or Ukrainian peasants, and memoirs such as Raffeiner's describe attempts to socialize—he famously played a gramophone for villagers—while also requisitioning food and destroying property. Scholars caution, however, that such anecdotes risk romanticizing moments of "humanity" and can obscure

[7]Baberowski, J. Doering-Manteuffel, A. (2012). *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared.* (Geyer, M. Fitzpatrick, S. Editors. Haneberg, B. Translator.) Cambridge University Press. (Cambridge, England). 181.

[8]Baberowski, J. (2015). *Spaces of Violence.* (Brenner, D. A. Translator.) S. Fischer Verlag (Frankfurt, DE). 5-6.

[9]Mühlhäuser, R. (2017). Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Stategy of War: The Case of the German Wehrmacht during the War and Genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941-1944.

the systemic nature of Nazi occupation policy, which deliberately blurred the line between civilian and partisan to justify collective punishment.

Although racial cleansing was not the goal of the Vietnam War, American soldiers similarly failed to understand Vietnamese culture and saw it as inferior (Turse, 2013). American soldiers grew to believe that Vietnamese citizens were hiding affiliation with the enemy, and justified their actions by labeling "Everything that walked and didn't wear any uniform was a VC… and [we] had no respect for them… The lack of respect was apparently infectious" (Hersh, 1970). The Americans created "free fire" zones where soldiers were given the right to fire at whomever they found (Turse, 2013). In this way, the Americans created people or geographies that were included in their protection, and people and geographies that were excluded. Even if American soldiers had not, as they mostly had, grown up exposed to racism and societal dehumanization of people, the fact that they were allowed to shoot anyone in a free fire zone conveyed a strong message to them about the perceived value of those people. Although Vietnamese civilians were allowed and perhaps even encouraged to leave their homes in free fire zones, many of them stayed and, in fact, there was not sufficient housing for all of them outside the zone (Turse, 2013).

In *My Lai*, *Vietnam*, *1968*, *and the Descent into Darkness*, Howard Jones describes William Calley, one of the main My Lai participants, as feeling frustrated to have been in Vietnam for four months and never seen the enemy even though he had been shot at (Jones, 2017). Calley learns that women in market stalls may be turning baskets a certain way to send a message about the presence of an American soldier, for example (Jones, 2017). When members of the Platoon were killed, the soldiers wondered whether the townspeople had purposefully failed to warn the soldiers about the mines, or perhaps had even worked to place them there. Furthermore, the account from Charlie Company soldier, Eusebio B. Santellana accounts for the distrust between soldiers and the entire Vietnamese population, that "Villagers won't tell you nothing. How come they won't tell you? They ought to know. Why don't they like GI's?" (Hersh, 1970) Even before the American soldiers arrived in Vietnam, from the beginning of training, they were taught to use vulgar terms for the Vietnamese, making it clear that the Vietnamese were outsiders, and there was a term used to express a lackadaisical response when something bad happened to Vietnamese people: the "Mere G—Rule" (Turse 2013). Whether or not these conclusions about Vietnamese civilian involvement with the enemy were true, and particularly with the common use of derogatory words, in the minds of many American soldiers, the local Vietnamese people became excluded from the American order.

In both the Eastern Front and in Vietnam, the imposed social Order that categorized civilians as outsiders was one factor pushing the soldiers' psyches towards war crimes and atrocity.

4.3. Comradeship

In *Male Bonding and Shame Culture: Hitler's Soldiers and the Moral Basis of Gen-*

ocidal Warfare, Thomas Kühne describes the need that Wehrmacht soldiers had for acceptance from their "Zug", and how the resulting cohesion of the platoon, combined with anti-semitism, enabled members of the Zug to engage in or at least condone atrocities perpetrated on civilians. A new set of ethics was adopted by the 1930s based on membership in, conformity to and loyalty to a group of comrades.[10] Kühne suggests that "shame culture", a culture of needing to be accepted by a group that had a tendency to exclude and shame members who do not conform, became prevalent in Germany after the failure of the First World War (Kühne, 2008). In the context of military platoons, shame culture would work to encourage participation in illegal activities and atrocities even among reluctant soldiers. Those who did not participate would feel enough fear of exclusion that they would not criticize the actions (Kühne, 2008). Kühne argues that this culture, along with the existing dehumanization of Jews and other victims of Germany atrocities, led to the otherwise ordinary and sometimes unimpressive Wehrmacht soldiers participating in atrocities and illegal activities.

Given that platoons often had to survive on their own, with nobody to rely but one another, comradeship can take an even darker turn. When comrades were hurt, comradeship would demand retribution, and soldiers would let go of their pre-war standards of behavior more easily. Kühne gives an example of a German Wehrmacht officer who at first is appalled by the treatment of Russian civilians, but after some of his men are killed by a mine presumably placed by "partisans", he drops his scruples and requisitions food from a civilian town, making jokes with his men about how the cow was paid for (Kühne 2008).

In Vietnam, oral histories and after-action interviews with Charlie Company soldiers—including Paul Meadlo's admission that he fired because he "lost buddies"—offer a window into the perpetrators' mindset, but they must be weighed against contemporaneous investigations, court-martial records, and journalists' findings[11]. Seymour Hersh's reporting and Nick Turse's archival research reveal that My Lai was part of a broader "system of suffering", challenging any notion that it was merely the work of a few rogue men.

This climate of escalating violence and dehumanization produced dynamics strikingly similar to those seen on the Eastern Front. Paul Meadlo, who shot into a ditch full of civilians at My Lai on orders from Lieutenant Calley, explained that he did it because "I felt like I was ordered to do it, and it seemed like… I was doing the right thing, because, like I said, I lost buddies". Several days earlier, a well-liked member of the company had been killed by a booby trap (Jones, 2017). Jones notes that "They were young men anxious to prove their manhood to comrades and, perhaps more importantly, to themselves. They were determined to avenge their buddies' deaths. Most of all they were afraid to die. Basic training had taught them that the Vietnamese were merciless, a belief that justified equal mercilessness" (Jones, 2017). Comradeship and ego became more important than personal

[10]Kühne, T. (2008). Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives. (Jensen, O. Szejnmann, C. C. W. Editors). Springer. (Berlin, Germany). 61.
[11]Meadlo, P. (1969). War Veteran Says He Killed "10 or 15" in Vietnam Village. The New York Times.

morality, and—especially when combined with dehumanization—could lead to atrocities such as My Lai.

Yet Thompson's intervention underscores that comradeship need not always lead to atrocity. His helicopter crew followed his order to protect civilians even against fellow Americans, showing that group solidarity can also be harnessed for restraint.

This contrast between the men of Charlie Company and Hugh Thompson's crew underscores a central tension in any analysis of wartime behavior: the same social forces that can erode individual conscience can also enable moral courage. Comradeship, obedience, and the search for order are not inherently destructive; their impact depends on the ethical choices of those who embody them. Thompson and his team demonstrated that loyalty to one another need not require loyalty to injustice, and that solidarity can be directed toward protecting the vulnerable rather than harming them. Their actions remind us that even in environments designed to normalize violence, individuals retain the capacity to defy immoral commands and to redefine what duty and honor mean in the midst of war.

4.4. Diffusion of Responsibility

Psychologists identify *diffusion of responsibility* as a key mechanism by which individuals commit harmful acts when they perceive responsibility to be shared among many. As first described by John Darley and Bibb Latané (and anticipated in Stanley Milgram's early analyses of obedience; see Milgram, 1974), the presence of others performing or condoning an action allows each participant to feel less personally accountable, weakening the normal restraints of conscience.[12]

Evidence from both the Eastern Front and Vietnam illustrates this process. In the Wehrmacht, soldiers frequently justified brutal actions by noting that "everyone was doing it", or by pointing to the sheer scale of the operations that made individual restraint seem meaningless. Raffeiner's own memoir, despite its self-exculpating tone, reveals this dynamic when he recounts torching peasant huts on Christmas Eve because "*an order is an order*" and because his comrades carried out the same command. Responsibility dissolved into the collective will of the unit and the state.

At My Lai, diffusion of responsibility was equally visible. Paul Meadlo's statement that he shot civilians because he "lost buddies" and felt ordered to do so reflects not only obedience to authority but also a sense that moral weight was spread across the entire company. Soldiers reported that nearly everyone around them was firing, creating an atmosphere in which refraining might appear both futile and socially isolating. Milgram's own interpretation of his obedience experiments anticipated this pattern: when an action is carried out as part of a group and sanctioned by a recognized authority, "each individual feels only part of a fragmented responsibility" (Milgram, 1974: p. 848).

[12]Wallach, M. A., Kogan, N., & Bem, D. J. (1964). *Diffusion of responsibility and level of risk taking in groups. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 68*(3), 263-274.

By explicitly applying the concept of diffusion of responsibility, the atrocities on the Eastern Front and at My Lai can be understood not merely as failures of individual character but as predictable outcomes of group psychology. Authority provided legal and hierarchical cover, order defined who was excluded from moral concern, and comradeship intensified the sense of shared action—all combining to erode personal accountability.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

As horrifying and unthinkable as war crimes and atrocities are, it is important to recognize that they occur as a result of a number of influences, some of which can serve a positive purpose in daily life. Authority and Order are important in society, and comradeship can be a source of joy and strength. Yet in the wrong circumstances, and war may always be a wrong circumstance, these factors can work together to make men lose their humanity and act ruthlessly for no apparent reason. Their actions may be quiet, as people who simply do their job without questioning, or more explicit such as the men at My Lai, but all of these people nonetheless committed acts against humanity.

War crimes emerge not from a single cause but from the convergence of structural authority, imposed social orders, and the powerful pull of comradeship. Memoirs such as Raffeiner's or interviews with Charlie Company soldiers are valuable windows into the psychology of perpetrators, yet they are also mediated, self-protective texts. Reading them critically—alongside court documents, operational orders, and the wider historical scholarship—reveals how individuals rationalized participation while still retaining the possibility of moral choice, exemplified by Hugh Thompson Jr.'s intervention at My Lai. Authority, order, and group loyalty are indispensable elements of social life, but in war they can be weaponized to erode moral judgment. Recognizing both the evidentiary limits of personal testimony and the systemic forces that enable atrocity is essential if we hope to design military and policing institutions that resist such dynamics in the future.

This paper demonstrates the connections between the work of Milgram, Baberowski, and Kühne and the experiences of men on the Eastern Front and at My Lai to show that each of the forces they identify—authority, order, and comradeship—can play a decisive role in driving war crimes and atrocity. Milgram's experiments reveal how ordinary individuals can be induced to harm others when obedience is framed as a moral duty; Baberowski highlights how a state's quest for a rigid social order can create "spaces of violence" in which civilians are deliberately excluded from protection; and Kühne's analysis of shame culture and male bonding shows how the human need for acceptance within a close-knit group can erode personal moral boundaries. Together these frameworks illuminate why soldiers who may have begun their service with conventional moral compasses could come to participate in acts of extraordinary cruelty.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that these forces rarely act in isolation. Authority provides the moral and legal justification that allows individuals to believe their violence is sanctioned; exclusionary order supplies the target by defining who falls outside the circle of protection; and comradeship exerts the social pressure that makes refusing participation feel like betrayal. Together they create a powerful feedback loop in which each factor reinforces the others, eroding personal responsibility and making atrocity not only possible but, to those involved, almost inevitable. Recognizing this interaction is crucial if societies hope to interrupt the cycle and build institutions capable of resisting the descent into collective violence.

5.2. Further Research

Further research could extend these insights beyond the Eastern Front and Vietnam. Comparative studies of conflicts such as the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Rwandan genocide could test whether similar combinations of authority, imposed order, and group cohesion operated there and how local cultural or political contexts might alter the balance. Oral histories and memoirs from combatants in those settings, when critically analyzed alongside archival records and tribunal proceedings, could reveal both parallels and key divergences.

These dynamics are not limited to formal war zones. Modern instances of police brutality—including the murder of George Floyd in 2020—raise pressing questions about how militarized training, hierarchical command structures, and tight-knit police culture can mirror the psychological mechanisms seen in military atrocities. Scholars and policymakers have debated the extent to which the increasing militarization of U.S. police forces fosters an "us versus them" mentality that normalizes excessive force against civilians, particularly marginalized communities. Examining these parallels with the same critical tools applied to historical war crimes could help identify the structural and psychological factors that turn ordinary law enforcement officers into perpetrators of violence.

By integrating historical case studies with contemporary criminology, psychology, and sociology, future research may better illuminate the pathways from obedience and group loyalty to violence. Such understanding is not merely academic. It can inform concrete reforms in military training, rules of engagement, and police oversight—helping to design institutions that foster accountability and moral courage rather than blind conformity. Only by recognizing how these forces operate across time and setting can societies hope to reduce the conditions that allow atrocities, whether on foreign battlefields or city streets, to occur.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Baberowski, J. (2015). *Spaces of Violence* (D.A. Brenner, Trans., pp. 5-6). S. Fischer Verlag.

Baberowski, J., & Doering-Manteuffel, A. (2012). *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*. (M. Geyer, & S. Fitzpatrick, Eds; B. Hanenburg, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Hersh, S. (1970). *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath*. Random House.

Jones, H. (2017). *My Lai, Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*. Oxford University Press.

Kay, A. J., & Stahel, D. (2018). *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*. Indiana University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3znw3v

Kühne, T. (2008). Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives (O. Jensen, & C. C. W. Szejnmann, Eds.). Springer.

Meadlo, P. (1969). War Veteran Says He Killed "10 or 15" in Vietnam Village. *The New York Times.*

Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. Harper & Row.

Mühlhäuser, R. (2017). Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War: The Case of the German Wehrmacht during the War and Genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941-1944. *Journal of the History of Sexuality, 26,* 366-401. https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs26302

Opton, E. M. (1971). It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It. In E. M. Opton (Ed.), *Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness* (pp. 49-70). Jossey-Bass.

Raffeiner, L. (2010). *Eyewitness to Wehrmacht Atrocities on the Eastern Front: A German Soldier's Memoir of War and Captivity.* Pen & Sword Books.

Turse, N. (2013). *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. Picador.

Wallach, M. A., Kogan, N., & Bem, D. J. (1964). Diffusion of Responsibility and Level of Risk Taking in Groups. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 68,* 263-274. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0042190

Abbreviations and Acronyms

Several abbreviations and acronyms are used throughout this paper and are defined here for clarity. The SS (Schutzstaffel) was a Nazi paramilitary organization central to enforcing racial policies and perpetrating atrocities during the Second World War. Within it, the SS-Totenkopfverbände, or "Death's Head Units," were responsible for administering concentration camps, while the Waffen-SS served as the armed, combat-ready divisions of the SS. The term POW refers to "Prisoner of War," a designation for captured enemy combatants, and is used in relation to Wehrmacht treatment of Soviet soldiers. In the Vietnam War context, VC stands for "Viet Cong," the Communist guerrilla fighters who opposed American and South Vietnamese forces. References to the U.S. designate the United States, whose military played a central role in both the Vietnam conflict and in shaping post-war international order. Finally, the colloquial term GI, short for "Government Issue," was commonly used to describe U.S. soldiers during the Vietnam era.