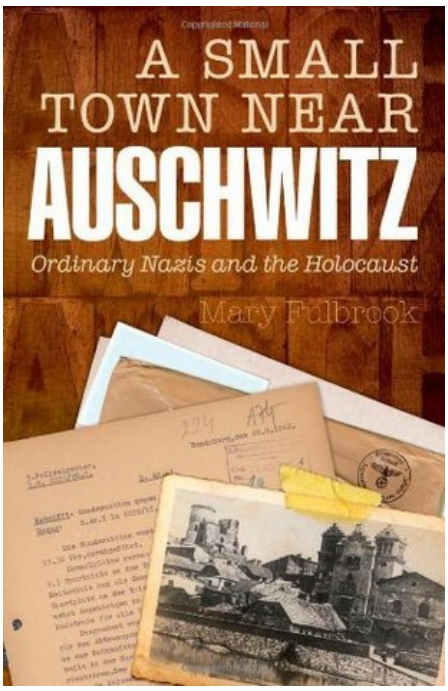

A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust

Mary Fulbrook

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The Silesian town of Bedzin lies a mere twenty-five miles from Auschwitz; through the linked ghettos of Bedzin and its neighbouring town, some 85,000 Jews passed on their way to slave labour or the gas chambers.

The principal civilian administrator of Bedzin, Udo Klausa, was a happily married family man. He was also responsible for implementing Nazi policies towards the Jews in his area - inhumane processes that were the precursors of genocide. Yet he later claimed, like so many other Germans after the war, that he had 'known nothing about it'; and that he had personally tried to save a Jew before he himself managed to leave for military service. A Small Town Near Auschwitz re-creates Udo Klausa's story. Using a wealth of personal letters, memoirs, testimonies, interviews and other sources, Mary Fulbrook pieces together his role in the unfolding stigmatization and degradation of the Jews under his authoritiy, as well as the heroic attempts at resistance on the part of some of his victims. She also gives us a fascinating insight into the inner conflicts of a Nazi functionary who, throughout, considered himself a 'decent' man. And she explores the conflicting memories and evasions of his life after the war.

But the book is much more than a portrayal of an individual man. Udo Klausa's case is so important because it is in many ways so typical. Behind Klausa's story is the larger story of how countless local functionaries across the Third Reich facilitated the murderous plans of a relatively small number among the Nazi elite - and of how those plans could never have been realized, on the same scale, without the diligent cooperation of these generally very ordinary administrators. As Fulbrook shows, men like Klausa 'knew' and yet mostly suppressed this knowledge, performing their day jobs without apparent recognition of their own role in the system, or any sense of personal wrongdoing or remorse - either before or after 1945.

This account is no ordinary historical reconstruction. For Fulbrook did not discover Udo Klausa amongst the archives. She has known the Klausa family all her life. She had no inkling of her subject's true role in the Third Reich until a few years ago, a discovery that led directly to this inescapably personal professional history.

A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust Details

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From Reader Review A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust for online ebook

Roman Clodia says

"They acted in ways that were predicated on `not seeing'... on `not knowing' what the outcomes of their actions really were"

This is a subtle, devastatingly honest and very humane book that takes an oblique look at the Holocaust - not so much the perpetrators of genocide, but the thousands of `facilitators', civilian administrators, who were complicit with Nazi ideology while giving themselves the psychological get-out clause that they were 'decent' people, that they didn't know the full story of what was happening and so were never guilty of mass murder.

Fulbrook focuses on Udo Klausa, the chief administrator of Bedzin, a small town twenty-five miles from Auschwitz, and explores the way in which he strives in his memoirs to distance himself from the Final Solution, even while being responsible for the rounding up, ghettoization, and transportation of all the Jews from his town.

The book is given an added weight since the author knew Klausa who was married to her godmother. Fulbrook isn't so concerned with pointing the finger (though she can't help but make moral judgements) but with understanding the psychological processes, the preconditions which allowed the Holocaust to happen, and it's this which makes the book so important, such a living exploration of things which matter today.

This is, inevitably, a disturbing, distressing book and one which it's impossible to read without getting choked up and emotional. But despite the author's own emotions (which do, rightly, break through into the text), this is essentially a cool and rational exploration of the kind of myths which allowed `ordinary, decent' Germans to separate themselves from the `real Nazis'.

As a professional academic historian, Fulbrook is almost apologetic for allowing her own moral and ethical judgements to have space in this book but that's precisely what makes this so powerful.

So, in summary, this is an important book which reveals the way in which academic Holocaust studies are not just about understanding the past, as important as that is, but also about projecting that knowledge into our present and future.

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

This was a incredibly interesting book about a small Polish town named Bedzin that was located only 25 miles away from Auschwitz. Now, 25 miles sounds like a far enough distance that the people who lived in there might be able to say that they had no idea what was going on in Auschwitz and that is exactly what they claimed after the war ended.

In particular, the focus of this book is on the Landrat or county administrator Udo Klausa, who claimed he was innocent of any wrongdoing as far as the Holocaust was concerned, but who was only doing his job. Klausa wasn’t a fanatical Nazi, but was loyal to the party, and in doing his job, helped to facilitate the deaths

of so many thousands of Jews who passed through Bedzin on their way to Auschwitz.

This is a difficult book to read. It shows how low level officials who claim they were only doing their job, actually were receiving ill-gotten benefits for the work they performed. This is an exceptionally well done book, the while text is accessible to anyone interested in reading about the Holocaust, the research is impeccable and resources reliable.

This book was an EARC received from NetGalley

Diane S ? says

The research for this book is outstanding as is the concept. What did non Jews know and how did they let this happen. Using a family connection in a small village, the author sets out to discover how half a town could go missing and people still say they didn't know what was happening. I did find this book a bit hard to read, I like when non fiction is written in a reader friendly, story type of style, which this book for the most part was not.

Annette says

A Small Town Near Auschwitz is the town and county of Bedzin, Poland. Bedzin is located in southern Poland, or Upper Silesia province. This area had once been a German province. When Nazi Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939 they wanted to regain what they'd lost after World War I. From the south and the west they marched into Poland, and on immediate arrival began their murderous rampage against the Jews. While Germany invaded from the south and west. The Soviet troops moved into Poland from the east. At the time of the invasion the town of Bedzin's Jewish population was more than half of the total population. It was a town with a new rail station, new schools, and new factories. Antisemitism had always been there, but the people lived and worked together despite prejudice. Bedzin's Jewish population was from the wealthy to the poor. After Nazi Germany invaded they began a program of resettling the Jew's into a Ghetto in order to keep them contained in one area. They placed a person in charge of carrying out their orders, his title was Landrat. The Landrat of Bedzin was Udo Klausa. Udo and his wife Alexandra were close friends of the author Mary Fulbrook's family. For Fulbrook, the writing of this book was prickly, it was difficult to not become emotional and make judgments. Yet, the author wanted to write an honest book detailing her research of what happened in Bedzin, specifically to the Jews during the Nazi German occupation. The first actions of the Nazi's was in rounding up those Jew's who were wealthy. Eight days after the invasion the synagogue and streets around it were burned by incinerated bombs. Many vicious public acts were carried out in the streets: cutting Jewish mens beards, beatings, shootings, hangings, burning of buildings and houses, restrictions on where a Jew could go. The first large transport of Jew's to Auschwitz was in the spring of 1942.
The author wanted to understand how Udo Klausa, his wife, and even the Polish people could take part in this annihilation of humans. She found in her research they believed that because they did not themselves touch another Jew by wounding them or causing harm, they were innocent.

"Yet, the Holocaust was possible only because so many people acted in ways that, over a longer period of time, created the preconditions for the ultimate acts of violence."

I have deep respect for the author in tackling a book where she knew the perpetrator Landrat Udo Klausa. Throughout the book she expressed trying to keep her feelings in check.
She contemplated and studied Klausa's words and actions, looking for a point where he might have become uncomfortable in his involvement.
Mary Fulbrook is a scholar on the history of Germany. Her study and research of the subject is apparent in this book.
This book should be considered an academic study. I also consider it to be a psychoanalysis of Udo Klausa and all those that were involved in the Nazi campaign of eliminating the Jew's.

I've read a lengthy list of books on the Holocaust (see the left side bar of my blog.)
In what way did this book compare to other books on this subject?
1. The author is not Jewish.
2. The author is not a survivor of the Holocaust.
3. The author knew personally the Landrat of Belzin as well as his wife and children.
4. The author was privileged to read his journal, and also letters that were written to her mother during the war.
5. The book is a study of a people group who were civilians; but were swept up in the furor and political aspiration of the Nazi program.
6. The focus is on the town and county of Belzin, Poland. The magnifying glass (so to speak) rests over this geographical area.

I would give this book 5 stars for excellent.

Thank you to Net Galley and Oxford University Press for my free E-Book in exchange for an honest review.

Lewis Weinstein says

... a remarkably detailed, horrible to read documentary account of the murder of the Jews of Bedzin ... clearly posing the choices faced by the Jews and the heartless murder committed by the Germans, Nazis and civilians alike ... no German could have failed to know what was going on

... the August 1942 deportation relied on trickery and deception to get Jews to collect themselves in a place that could easily be overseen and guarded ... the roundup was initially disguised as an identity card procedure ... the Jewish Council issued an order that all Jews mst show up to have their identity cards authorized ... failing to comply would risk arrest and deportation ... 23,000 Jews gathered (alphabetically) on the Hakoach and Sarmacja sports grounds from Aug 12 to Aug 17 ... families were not broken up ... selections between 'fit to work' and death were done in full view of the townspeople ... carried out by SS with local employers and the SS Schmelt organization ... 4700 were selected for deportation and retained in the orphanage building on the other side of the railway line and 2 other locations ... the first transport to Auschwitz left on Aug 14 ... trains continued to run until the last deportation on Aug 18 ... many died or were killed while loading the trains ... elderly, sick, babies were shot or brains bashed out

... Selections were made … Jews were called up to the tables in turn … evaluated according to age, Health, current employment, potential usefulness for work … the old, Young, ill, people without work identity cards were sent straight to Auschwitz … families were separated ... They treated us like cattle, no longer human beings ... We did not know what was best to do ... Those not selected the first day stood in the rain overnight until the next day ... those who survived carried on until the next time

... An elderly member of one family, on a list for deportation, fear that any attempt to evade around would put all members of his family at risk … in other families, when one member was listed for deportation, others went with them, unable to bear the thought of loved ones going alone to their deaths ... Still others committed suicide, choosing their own moment and means of death

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Molly says

This was more dense and scholarly than I was looking for at the time.

Michelle says

Back when I was a naïve bright-eyed college student thinking of becoming a school teacher and minoring in German, I briefly flirted with the idea of incorporating my love of history and my German degree by trying to solve the unsolvable while obtaining my Ph.D. What was that unsolvable question? Why did an entire population ignore/remain in the dark/allow the horrors that befell anyone who was not of Aryan decent in Germany and its controlled countries during the 1930s and 1940s? Mary Fulbrook explores a similar unsolvable question in A Small Town Near Auschwitz, as she explores one man's experiences as a lower-level bureaucrat in a Nazi-dominated area roughly twenty miles from the infamous Auschwitz death camp.

A Small Town Near Auschwitz is a fascinating story that unfortunately reads like a poorly-written dissertation. Seriously, if one had a dissertation checklist as to formatting and necessary requirements, one could go down said checklist and mark off each item as one reads the book. In addition, it is filled with details, big and small, that contribute to a vivid portrayal of Bedjzin before and during the war but that also bog down the narrative. The details are in and of themselves very interesting, but they force a reader to dwell on terrifying and extremely emotional experiences that make it difficult to read. One has to take a break from the emotional trauma that Ms. Fulbrook's words create. In other words, it is very slow and cumbersome reading.

Another issue found with A Small Town Near Auschwitz is Ms. Fulbrook's close association with her subject matter. While she makes no attempts to hide her connections to Udo Klausa and his wife, there are times in the narrative where it is obvious that Ms. Fulbrook is not quite as objective as she is trying to be or as she perhaps should be as a historian. Her conclusions are tainted, at times, with a sense of guilt that she was either drawing such negative conclusions about a long-time family friend or that she was trying to find a more positive explanation for behaviors or attitudes that probably should not be positively explained. This sense of shame weakens her conclusions as she allows her personal history to impact them.

That being said, without the close relationship between Mrs. Klausa and Ms. Fulbrook's mother and personal correspondence this relationship created, her insights into the bureaucratic layers of the Nazi regime would not be as intimate and revealing. This correspondence provided a glimpse into the Klausa family's true thoughts about Hitler, the Nazi regime, and what was occurring in Bedjzin, something the revisionist history of the post-Hitler era would never have allowed to occur. Her familial relationship with the Klausa family is a very sharp double-edged sword that allows for brilliant moments of clarity in an era where everyone was obfuscating the truth while shading the entire work in elements of gray as Ms. Fulbrook allows her personal feelings to interfere with her conclusions.

Ms. Fulbrook’s research in A Small Town Near Auschwitz is extremely thorough and, as such, extremely upsetting. The stories of atrocity towards the Jewish and the Polish population are straightforwardly presented, but it does not make it any less emotional a reading experience. What makes the scenes truly horrific is that Ms. Fulbrook goes beyond descriptions of what occurred and delves into the political machinations behind such actions, as well as depicting the thought processes of those in charge of carrying out such heinous acts. The unemotional attitudes of the oppressors over the oppressed is truly terrifying and caused more than one disturbing dream in the course of reading the book.

Ms. Fulbrook presents her answers to the unsolvable question about the general population involvement in the Final Solution as fully as she can, drawing on the private correspondence between her own mother and Udo Klausa’s wife as well as the unique perspective of having met and known her chosen subject. The conclusions she draws are chilling in that they show how easily anyone can justify his or her own behavior and ignore the impact of one’s actions on others. Not only that but she showcases how simple it is to retell one’s own personal history to avoid appearing guilty in the eyes of others. A Small Town Near Auschwitz, if one can get through the tedium of reading such dense and emotionally-charged material, is an unnerving reminder of what happened to an entire population and a subtle warning of how easily it could again occur.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to NetGalley and to Oxford University Press for my review copy.

Holly says

While definitely a very informative read, the dry, dull tone of the narration, paired with the jagged insertion of the personal accounts leaves something to be desired for a more fluid narrative. It's still very informative, but it cannot seem to strike a balance between the human and historical elements it wishes to tell.

Jan Peczkis says

Nazis Saw Jews and Poles Similarly, and Showed It In Their Actions. Jewish Nazi Collaboration Once Treated Just Like Any Others' Collaboration

This work centers on the Jews of Bedzin (Bendzin). It touches on pre-WWII Polish-Jewish relations, the early years of Nazi German rule (this area had been annexed directly into the Third Reich), the Holocaust proper, and some postwar Jewish experiences.

Author Fulbrook examines wartime events through the eyes of Udo Klausa, an "ordinary German". Klausa's superior was put off by Klausa's devout Catholicism. (p. 14). However, Klausa obviously dichotomized his private faith and his public conduct, and suffered no obvious repercussions because of his religious convictions. (p. 195).

POLAND WAS HARDLY A BAD PLACE FOR THE JEWS

Before WWII, the Bedzin Jews were generally better off than the Poles. (pp. 28-2). Anti-Semitic incidents tended to be sporadic, mostly verbal in nature, and largely limited to the 1930's. (pp. 39-45).

NO VALID DUALISM BETWEEN THE SUFFERINGS OF JEWS AND POLES

The author consistently goes beyond the purely Judeocentric approach that typifies Holocaust studies in general. She provides details on how Poles suffered under the Nazi German occupation as well as Jews. Both Poles and Jews experienced humiliation, forced labor, expropriation of property, mass forced relocation, destruction of cultural treasures, and mass murder at the hands of the German occupants. Udo Klausa realizes that these things happened, "`since Poles and Jews had no rights.'" (p. 93).

NO SELF-CONSISTENT NAZI POLICY ON THE PERSECUTION OF EITHER JEWS OR POLES

The common meme, propounded as part of Holocaust supremacism, that Jews and non-Jews can be polarized in terms of how the Nazis treated them, falls apart in the face of basic evidence.

Although Poles were "unequal victims" with Jews, the differences were relative, not absolute. Fulbrook notes that, "Ration cards were distributed according to `racial' categories. Poles received more than Jews; but even so the allotted rations for Poles were well below standards required for health and maintenance of weight and labor productivity--the latter being of most concern to the Germans." (p. 167).

The Nazis did not treat all Jews the same. Whereas the Jews in the ghettoes of Lodz and Warsaw experienced massive starvation, those in the labor camps of the Bedzin area were fed well enough for at least quasi-productive labor. (p. 168).

Some of the differences, in the ways that the Nazis treated Poles and Jews, owed to tactical motives. For instance, throughout the Reich and Reich-occupied territories, Jews were forced to wear the Star in some locations but not others, and Poles were forced to wear the "P" (POLEN) in some locations but not others. Udo Klausa suggested that Poles in the Bedzin area should probably not have to wear the "P", because this may increase solidarity between Poles, and may indirectly enhance Polish sympathy for, and solidarity with, Jews. (pp. 272-273).

THE SHOAH ITSELF

Soon after the 1939 German-Soviet conquest of Poland, the Germans burned Bedzin's synagogue, along with surrounding Jewish homes. One or more Polish priests gave refuge to fleeing Jews within a nearby church. (pp. 52-53). But that was not yet the Holocaust.

Fulbrook describes the exterminatory function of Auschwitz, beginning in 1942. The smell of burning flesh, from the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, could sometimes be smelled as far as Katowice (Kattowitz), some 20 miles away. (p. 230). Some of the Bedzin-area Jews survived by being in labor camps, while others survived by hiding among Poles.

THE GERMAN-IMPOSED DEATH PENALTY WAS DECISIVE

Neo-Stalinists such as Jan T. Gross have advanced the argument that Poles were so accustomed to the German-imposed death penalty (as in black market dealings) that they had no real fear of it. Therefore--according to their argument--the fear of death could not have been what motivated Poles to avoid aiding Jews more substantively. It had to be--what else--anti-Semitism. Their argument is ridiculous. Poles caught in such capital offenses as black market dealing, or unauthorized slaughter of animals, were so afraid that some of them committed suicide. (p. 174). In addition, the Germans did not consistently impose the death penalty for black market dealings or unauthorized slaughter of livestock. (p. 112). [In addition, of course, it

is much less risky to conceal contraband goods than it is to hide a contraband person.]

AT ONE TIME JEWISH NAZI COLLABORATION AND POLISH NAZI COLLABORATION WERE TREATED THE SAME

The author is relatively even-handed in describing Jews as well as Poles who collaborated with the Germans. Consider, for instance, Hirsch Barenblat, commander of the Jewish militia at Bedzin (Bendzin), and his role in the round up of Jews for their deaths. He was tried in Poland after WWII, and again in Israel in the early 1960's, after a survivor recognized him. A Tel Aviv District Court convicted him of collaboration, but the Israeli Supreme Court subsequently overturned this decision. (p. 224).

Ed says

This very powerful book accomplishes a shift in the historiography of ht Holocaust. While most writing about the fate of the Jews has focused on the death camps, Fulbrook looks at events in one town in the two years before the 85,000 Jews were taken to Auschwitz to be murdered. A historian of Germany, Fulbrook's godmother was the wife of an administrator of a region of Poland during those years. Using her godmother's letters, the administrator's memoirs interviews with survivors and archival material she constructs a dual story-- from the point of view of the survivors and from the point of view of the administrator. Aside from the administrator's absurd denials of responsibility for the fate of the Jews, which the author demonstrates many times, what is most compelling is the extent of the degradation and humiliation that the Jews suffered in the years before the extermination. Fulbrook argues that this dimension of the story has been neglected. Certainly I had only a superficial appreciation of this. In terms of deepening my understanding of events in Eastern Europe during World War II this book is a worthy sequel to Bloodlands.

Heather Boustead says

A Small Town Near Auschwitz
By Mary Fulbrook

Historian Mary Fulbrook tells the story of Udo Klausa, a civilian administrator in the small town of Bedzin.

This is a non-fiction account of events that took place during World War Two taken from memoirs, interviews, testimonies, personal letters, and other sources. For the most part this is a vivid and startling look into the actions of the Nazi group. The biggest problem I have with this novel is that the man Mary Fulbrook is writing about is the husband of her God Mother, so though she tries not to the novel itself has a tone of “It wasn’t him it was the times.” In one instance she is recounting one of her God Mother’s letters where the woman is talk about the filthy Jews and the author states that this is a normal reaction of Germans in the time. This I can understand no matter how hard you try to be objective when there is a personal connection to something you are biased by default. What drove me crazy however is that she stated that people were all too willing to discuss what had happened.... I just got back from living in Germany and I can say for an absolute fact this is not true, which leads me to wonder how exactly she got these people to talk to her and how many euros she was flashing around. Other than this it is an interesting read though there are times when it seems like the author is making excuses for a man who had a role in the atrocity that occurred. It seems like this will be one of those that you will either love or hate with no middle ground, I can see how some people will

enjoy this since the author does a remarkable job in recounting historical events but I can also see how some will hate it.

For More Reviews be sure to visit my blogs at:
http://reflectionsofabookworm.wordpre...
http://bookwormrflects8.blogspot.com/

Jgknobler says

A scholarly examination of the role of the chief German administrator of a town just outside of Auschwitz, Poland during WWII. Fulbrook presents the relentless progression of Nazi atrocities toward the Jews--expulsion from homes, removal of businesses, exploitation in labor camps, starvation, shootings, and finally death in Auschwitz, as well as documenting the assistance of the local, German civilian administration in perpetrating these atrocities. She also presents the not very believable attempts of the administrator ("Landrat") to excuse himself and portray himself as someone who did not know any of this was happening. Thus it is an examination of one of many, many German bureaucrats who worked in the Nazi regime and needed to find ways to justify their facilitation of brutality and murder.

The one thing that I find possibly exculpatory is explored in Ursula Hegi's fictional Stones from the River. That is, in Nazi German it was highly dangerous to express opposition: it could lead to death for oneself and one's family members. I would have liked a discussion of this issue.

Jean-Paul Adriaansen says

Mary Fulbrook brings us the story of Udo Klausa, a German civilian administrator in Bedzin, Poland, during WW II. He was known as a decent well-respected man during and after the war. However, Klausa was a German who could not say: *"Wir haben es nicht gewusst"* (we did not know that). Although he was not directly involved in the atrocities, as Landrat (District Administrator) he must have implemented and even facilitated the inhuman Nazi handling of the Jews.
Udo Klausa, probably brainwashed by the Nazi propaganda, believed in the correctness of his duties and considered himself as a decent man and good German. He was ready to serve his Fatherland, even willing to go to the front. Did he ever realize the wrongdoing by the Nazis? Did he try to distance himself of their actions? Did he try to stop them?
Fulbrook digged deep into the Klausa family archives, and at the same time she investigated very thoroughly the memories and records of Polish and Jewish survivors of the Bedzin Region.
This work is rather heavy, full of long descriptions, citations, and testimonies. It is not an easy read; it took me a while and a lot of pauses to finish it. But it is probably one of the best investigations into the backgrounds of the Holocaust.

In the same period as I was reading this book, I also plunged in the *500 Days: Lies and Secrets in the Terror Wars* by Kurt Eichenwald. I strongly condemn those who actually committed horrific atrocities against innocent (and even not so innocent) people, but I just wonder how we morally can judge people who were blinded, brainwashed, and misled, by an extremely well organized propaganda system (then and now) and

who strongly believed in the righteousness of their actions.

Chris says

Disclaimer: Received an ARC via Netgalley.

The question of how people could just stand by and let something happen is always taken up in history. How much did the average German know about what occurred during the Holocaust? How much did the mayors and the other civilians administers know? How much of what they said after the war was truth and how much an editing of the past either so they can live their life or avoid imprisonment? Mary Fulbrook's godmother was the wife of Udo Klausa who was an administer for the part of the Poland that included Auschwitz. Udo Klausa and his wife, Alexandra, lived in a town near the camp, a town that had a Jewish population, including a Jewish gardener who worked for the Klausas.

Fulbrook's mother, who had left Germany with the rise of the Nazis, was able to reconnect with Alexandra Klausa after the war. The book opens and closes with Fulbrook looking at the relationship with the two women. This frame is important to the topic of the book, for not only does the friendship provide the impetus for Fulbrook to write the book, but it also represents in a small way the theme and idea of the book.

Fulbrook wants to discover what the Klausa would've known about what happened. At the same time, she also examines what the Polish and Jewish residents were being subjected to. At time the juxtaposition makes for strange reading. Alexandra Klausa comments on the bad state of her garden because the gardener is gone. He is gone because he was deported, his family killed. Alexandra Klausa comments on how quickly and cheaply she is able to furnish her house with furniture seized from Jewish families.

Fulbrook reads the Klausa family letters closely. While she is attempting to understand or discover, she doesn't let it blind her. When Klausa seems to be less than truthful, Fulbrook points it out, using official documents to show where exactly Klausa was when something like the killing of 32 innocent people occurred. She weighs and examines Klausa's story of trying to save his Jewish gardener. But, she also takes care to point out when the family might be keeping something hidden. Why, for instance, was Klausa so sick?

A book like this is important because of what it shows. Fulbrook is able to showcase exactly what an administrator would've known during the Second World War. More importantly, she shows side by side the experiences of both conqueror and victim. This is important because to disregard one half of the equation, the Nazis, gives and incomplete picture. What Fulbrook has done, and done brilliantly, is present a complete general picture of not only how something happened but what the effects of the event were on everyone involved. The book isn't easy reading for Fulbrook doesn't pull any punches, but it is a must read because of the picture that is given. It promotes discussion and adds levels of understanding. Any student of World War II or history should read this book.

Günther Simmermacher says

After World War II, most German families had to come to terms with the role of their members in the Third

Reich. For the sons and daughters of the Nazi bigwigs this obviously was a painful process. Some have written movingly about it. Less known are the stories of the unexceptional, middle-ranking bureaucrats who did not plan the Holocaust but helped to facilitate it, perhaps unaware of the full magnitude of the crimes they were party to.

One such middle-manager was Udo Klausa (1910-98), a Catholic bureaucrat who served as Landrat (town administrator) in Bedzin, a Polish town near Auschwitz which was annexed by Germany after the invasion of 1939.

Mary Fulbrook's A Small Town Near Auschwitz tells the story of this man, one who perceived himself as a decent person. The twist is that the author is friendly with the Klausa family; Udo's wife Alexandra was Fulbrook's godmother.

This proximity has given Fulbrook, a historian, access to letters and other private documents which usually are not available to the ordinary historian. This indisputable advantage also creates an ethical dilemma: the author might be tempted to diminish the responsibility of a man she knew and liked. Fulbrook discloses and discusses these ethical conflicts.

In the event, Fulbrook pulls no punches. She interrogates Klausa's war-time record fairly but robustly, and demolishes many of his post-war justifications, which were recorded in a self-serving memoir. The picture of Klausa that emerges can be applied to many other Germans, and it helps us acquire a sense of how the nation of Goethe, Bach and Gutenberg could have fallen for the thuggery of the Nazi Party.

Fulbrook explains this by reference to seduction and threat. In the early years of their reign, the Nazis increased employment, returned order to the chaos of the Weimar Republic, brought a sense of economic justice and restored an affirming national consciousness. The price for this collective buoyancy was the demise of democracy and the persecution of Jews and political opponents. The long-suffering German people put up with that as an expedient.

Broad acquiescence in the regime was further assured through the uncompromising intimidation by a mighty state that was prepared to exercise fear and reward loyalty.

A Small Town Near Auschwitz makes the obvious but often forgotten point that not all Nazis were the same, or even motivated by a common vision. There were the fanatical "true believers", fellow travellers swept along by a movement, and those who tried to make "the best out of a bad situation".

As a practising Catholic, Udo Klausa had many points of philosophical divergence with Nazism, but he found ways to separate his faith from his ambitions of rising up the bureaucratic ranks.

He saw himself not as a convinced Nazi — even though he was a member of the Nazi's paramilitary SA even before 1933 — but as having "innocently become guilty" (this is the author's translation; I would use the word "culpable") through his role in Bedzin.

Fulbrook doesn't buy Klausa's pleas of ignorance: he must have known much of what was happening; his repeated and ultimately successful attempts to extricate himself from his position in Bedzin — by serving as a soldier on the Russian front — hint at an unease at what he was being part of.

Klausa's tenure as Landrat helps to explain how it was possible to carry out the pogroms and random massacres, the systematic dispossession of Jews, the herding into ghettos, the forced labour, the summary

executions, the deliberate starvation, and ultimately the industrial extermination — though nothing can possibly explain the arbitrary, gleeful inhumanity shown by many Germans in its execution.

Fulbrook sums it up well: “Not everybody was a perpetrator in the obvious sense of committing direct acts of physical violence or directly giving orders that unleashed such violence. Yet the Holocaust was possible only because so many people acted in ways that, over a long period of time, created the preconditions for the ultimate acts of violence.”

Klausa, Fulbrook writes, lacked the capacity to “register the human consequences of policies carried out in service of a deeply racist state”. This is hardly a defence of the man, but an indictment. The philosopher Hannah Arendt’s famous quote about the “banality of evil” seems to apply to the likes of Klausa even more than it does to its original target, the war criminal Adolf Eichmann.

Fulbrook complements her research into Klausa by interviews with Jewish survivors of Bedzin and towns like it, including Arno Lustiger, a cousin of the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, who spoke to nobody about his experiences for 40 years. She also refers to war-time letters and documents from Bedzin’s Jews, thereby giving a voice to the victims of Udo Klausa’s actions.

Some historians argue that attempting to understand the Shoah is not only impossible but also dangerous, saying it should remain incomprehensible. Fulbrook’s book shows that it is possible to glean some understanding of the Shoah without stripping it of its inexplicability.

• Review in The Southern Cross
http://www.scross.co.za/2012/12/small...
