

The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews¹

Reviewed by Major Travis W. Elms*

*Everyone seemed to be ignorant of—or eager to hide—the very existence of the 10,000 Jews who had been shot in this little town back in 1942. Ten thousand people shot cannot go unnoticed. I come from a small village and I know if one person had been shot there, everyone would remember it—imagine 10,000!*²

I. Introduction

Violence showcased on television and the Internet with gripping, up-to-the-minute, raw footage is evidence that the human toll in a conflict can be vast and deplorable. With modern technology spanning most of the globe, media outlets and novice reporters routinely occupy a space in our smartphones and flat-screen televisions, providing us with vivid images and reports. Given the innovative and transformative role technology and journalism play in memorializing these events in our psyche and data servers, it seems logical to conclude that the human toll in current conflicts is being accurately and, perhaps more importantly, fully recorded for future generations.

Father Patrick Desbois, in his 2008 *Holocaust by Bullets*, brings us back, however, to the reality that deplorable human tolls can still be forgotten or hidden away, exposing the virtually unknown murder of over 1.5 million Jews in Eastern Europe during World War II. His work serves as a reminder that evidence of mass atrocities can quietly disappear into an abyss and never see the annals of history, despite the fact that a conflict is well-documented and widely remembered.

II. The Other Holocaust: Unexpected Discovery

For most people, the Holocaust is defined by the death of millions of Jews who were exterminated by Nazi Germany in the 1940s, most dying in industrialized killing centers by way of large gas chambers and human ovens.³ Astonishing is Desbois's discovery that over 1.5 million Jews were murdered during that same time at Nazi gunpoint in Eastern Europe and, in large part, written history is void of these acts.⁴ Perhaps more obscure is the reality that, while the Germans ordered the executions and physically pulled the trigger, ordinary citizens of all ages, many of whom were

friends of the Jewish victims, participated in or witnessed this secret extermination of entire Jewish communities.⁵

This profoundly disturbing reality was unearthed by the most unsuspecting of persons, a Catholic priest in search of what his grandfather had witnessed in World War II in war-torn Rawa-Ruska, Ukraine.⁶ An unsuspecting Christopher Columbus, Father Desbois began his quest for one answer to a very specific question but discovered a land bubbling with answers that had been a secret for over sixty years—unmarked mass graves of Jews buried in Rawa-Ruska.⁷ While he never found the answer entirely, his connection to the Holocaust spurred an “irrevocable decision to search” for answers to larger questions about humanity,⁸ provided closure to a generation of Jewish families who lost their loved ones,⁹ and impacted research around the globe.¹⁰

III. Opening Act

For many readers, the foreword of a book is either read swiftly, often out of a sense of obligation, and quickly forgotten or simply skipped to get the reader to the real reason he selected the book, the story. This book is an exception. The foreword in this book is riveting, enlightening, and informative; it sets the tone for the remainder of the book. Also, unless the reader possesses an extensive working knowledge of these events and the Holocaust in general, it is an essential reading for a complete understanding of the work.¹¹ In fact, it should be read again upon completion of the book because it succinctly ties all of the book's information and historical references together, something Desbois does little of. Paul Shapiro, Director, Center for Advance Holocaust Studies, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C., expertly proclaims the value and significance Desbois's book represents to the

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¹ FATHER PATRICK DESBOIS, *THE HOLOCAUST BY BULLETS: A PRIEST'S JOURNEY TO UNCOVER THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MURDER OF 1.5 MILLION JEWS* (2008).

² *Id.* at 29.

³ *Id.* at vii.

⁴ *Id.* at viii.

⁵ *See, e.g., id.* at vii, 174.

⁶ *Id.* at 8 (recalling a break in his grandfather's silence about Rawa-Ruska, stating: “For us, the camp was difficult; there was nothing to eat, we had no water, we ate grass, dandelions. But it was worse for the others!”).

⁷ *Id.* at 35.

⁸ *Id.* at 15.

⁹ *Id.* at 101.

¹⁰ *Id.* at xii.

¹¹ Kyle Jantzen, Book Review, *Uncovering the Holocaust in Ukraine*, H-NET (July 2009), <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24952> (reviewing DESBOIS, *supra* note 1).

Jewish community and the world; something Desbois, a seemingly humble and dutiful Catholic priest, would likely never overtly state or covertly imply. The reader is put on notice that a different, but equally horrifying, version of the Holocaust awaits when Shapiro summarizes the murders of 1.5 million Jews.

These victims—mostly women, children, and old people—were taken from their homes, on foot or by cart or by truck, to locations just outside the towns and villages where they lived, if even that far. There they were shot, usually the same day or hour, at close range, face to face or in the back, one human being killing another, and all in the presence of local residents, the victims' non-Jewish neighbors, even friends.¹²

He further details the rigor applied and the accuracy demanded by Desbois in the crafting of this account. Simply stated, the foreword reaches out to the reader and provides a gripping preview of what is looming inside.

IV. Facts and Diligence

You will not find pithy quotes or complex words here: just a fair mix of personal stories from the author and historical context that are artistically welded to the core structure of the book—the cold, hard facts. If you are desperately searching for voluminous paragraphs requiring multiple readings to glean the pearl of wisdom, look elsewhere. But if your aim is a book based on solid research, coupled with a passion for the truth and some outrageous but dutifully researched facts, you are in the right place. Desbois researched millions of pages of archives, traveled to all ends of Eastern Europe to question emotionally scarred Ukrainians about the horrors they had experienced, and ultimately produced an enjoyable read—a feat in and of itself. Moreover, Desbois's humble and workmanlike prose proves to be effective: the result is a simple yet captivating story.

If your inclination is not World War II history or you have concerns that the subject matter is not interesting enough to keep your attention, fear not. The book is certainly not an autobiography or a dull non-fiction. It is, however, a well written, methodical piece that efficiently and effortlessly guides the reader through an incredibly complex period in World War II history. The book is a quick read at 220 pages of text, sixteen pages of pictures that breathe life into the many names and scenes, and three pages of regional maps detailing the Jewish population and the Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. The pictures

and maps are neither a necessity nor a distraction, but will likely appeal to most readers in some regard. Finally, if you like to peruse the table of contents before beginning, you will note that the book's organizational structure is difficult to decipher, but such difficulty is ultimately forgotten once the reader begins the story.

Those who are concerned that their World War II historical knowledge base may not be sufficient to undertake such a book can take solace in the fact that Desbois presents a quaint mixture of simple geography and history to sufficiently orient the reader. The foreword and narrative of the story combine to provide the reader with sufficient information to grasp the material. The descriptions of the people, landscape, and emotion are well detailed,¹³ preserving for the reader an opportunity to climb into the story and live for a moment in 1942.

V. Colloquy and Methodology

For those who may question the truth of the statements rendered or facts espoused, or feel the previously unknown or seemingly unfathomable atrocities appear to have sprung to life at the tip of Desbois's pen, the veracity of the almost unbelievable eyewitness accounts of the murders is bolstered by his subsequent verification of key facts extracted from other, unrelated sources.¹⁴ These colloquies open a secret societal door, bringing to light the dark and unpalatable truth; many Ukrainian citizens witnessed and participated in the murder of over 1.5 million Jews. Desbois discovered many of these people are alive and willing to recite, some for the first time, the painful memories.

The stories are brought to life by the face-to-face interviews with eyewitnesses, most of which are not simply summarized, but published in a raw question and answer format. Desbois provides a mixture of several detailed question and answer transcript excerpts that add a sense of credibility to the eyewitness accounts. While at first this practice interrupts the pace of the book and has a tendency to leave the reader wondering why the excerpts, which pale in comparison to the facts developed to that point, were provided at all, the question and answer sessions do become more interesting and relevant as the book progresses. The colloquies ultimately add an element of realism to the emotion in the answers that could be fairly summarized.¹⁵ On more than one occasion, it felt possible to see the pain on the face of an elderly Ukrainian woman recalling her worst childhood memories, those of her Jewish schoolmates being marched outside of town, stripped naked, robbed of their jewels, slaughtered, and pushed into a pit of bleeding,

¹² Paul A. Shapiro, *Foreword to DESBOIS, supra note 1, at vii–viii.*

¹³ See, e.g., DESBOIS, *supra* note 1, at 68–71, 88–94, 156–59.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 173.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 90, 198.

moaning human waste.¹⁶ This practice legitimizes the work significantly and adds a layer of personality to each witness, all of which aids the reader in truly gaining a perspective of the acts detailed. Whether by design or happenstance, this practice systematically dispels any doubts of the veracity of the facts presented.

These interviews, coupled with the millions of documents his team reviewed to verify the accuracy of these stories,¹⁷ leave the world to wonder how a generation of Jews could vanish from the Earth without a trace. Desbois distills years of work into a manageable and enjoyable written history.¹⁸ The facts uncovered are placed neatly into context, the underlying and overarching history is thoroughly explained, but not cumbersome, and the processes used by the author are detailed and meticulous. While the book is very ably written, Father Desbois's genius is not, however, in his literary gift, but rather in his tremendous passion for the truth, unwavering commitment to revealing the human toll to protect future generations,¹⁹ and his incredible dedication to preparation.²⁰ It is obvious that many of the eyewitnesses interviewed had survived over sixty years without telling their story and could, without any reservation, have lived out their remaining days without revealing the horror they witnessed or participated in.²¹ Many people refused to speak out of a lingering fear of persecution or prosecution.²² For them, it appeared easier to deny any knowledge and move on with their lives,²³ but Desbois's preparation left the villagers with little choice but to tell their respective stories once confronted with facts about their knowledge of the atrocities.²⁴

Desbois's decision to detail his childhood may not appeal to all readers, but does provide the reader with a rather interesting, although lengthy, description of his path to priesthood.²⁵ Given the premise for the research was a journey to find answers about his grandfather and not an academic research project, these facts provide a better

understanding of how Desbois evolved as a man.²⁶ This serves as a benefit, not a detriment or distraction. It was also rather enjoyable to read about the author, now a middle-aged Catholic priest, searching to find his way as a young man, making a pass at a young woman who, in the process of rebuffing his advances, set him on a path to God and ultimately priesthood. Desbois's background aids the reader in gaining a better understanding of the author's purpose, experience level, and background. It also serves to amplify the fact that Desbois is a novice investigator who, like many of his readers, will empathize with his reaction to the gruesome details he discovers.²⁷

VI. The Requisitioned

Uncovering the secret execution of 1.5 million Jews would seem to be a significant discovery in its own right. While these deaths at the hands of Nazi soldiers is tragic and masked by over sixty years of secrecy, the unimaginable human dynamic discovered by Desbois is the plight of the requisitioned Ukrainian citizens—men, women, and children—who were often initially detailed at gunpoint by Nazi soldiers, but ultimately walked a fine line between simply being requisitioned and being guilty of murder themselves.²⁸ Their participation was essential to the death of so many Jews.

There were those who mixed lime with the blood of Jews; those who tied the Jews' clothes up in bundles and loaded them onto carts; those who patched up the clothes; those who prepared food for the oppressors during the executions; those who drove carts full of hemp or sunflowers with which to burn the bodies; . . . those who tore out the Jews' gold teeth while they awaited their execution . . . ; those who transported Jews in their carts from villages to the pits; . . . those who packed down the bodies of Jews in the pits and covered them with sand between shootings; those who surrounded the groups of Jews who arrived at the pits until all the families were shot; those who guarded the Jews . . . from escaping; and those who brought ash to clean up the ground after the executions.²⁹

¹⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 96, 97, 155, 177, 200.

¹⁷ *Id.* at x.

¹⁸ See Jantzen, *supra* note 11.

¹⁹ Randy Herschaft, *Priest Documents 'Holocaust by Bullets' in Eastern Europe*, WASH. TIMES, Feb. 2, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/feb/2/priest-documents-holocaust-by-bullets-in-eastern-e/?page=all#ixzz25WRL5sk9>.

²⁰ DESBOIS, *supra* note 1, at 105 ("Thorough and competent archival research was vital for my work. One cannot simply saunter nonchalantly into a Ukrainian farm without having first carried out solid historical research."); see also *id.* at 105, 175, 177.

²¹ *Id.* at 74.

²² *Id.* at 206.

²³ *Id.* at 206–07.

²⁴ *Id.* at 166.

²⁵ Jantzen, *supra* note 11.

²⁶ Jake Turk, Book Review, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, UNIVERSAL BOOK REVIEWS (Mar. 16, 2009), <http://universalbookreviews.com?p=118>.

²⁷ DESBOIS, *supra* note 1, at 109 (describing the horror confronted during the interviews) ("We had to calm ourselves down, catch our breath, drag ourselves out of the narrative, and detach ourselves from the obscenities performed on women and children.").

²⁸ *Id.* at 96.

²⁹ *Id.* at 97.

Despite their inextricable ties to these murders, Desbois managed to not only locate many of those requisitioned, but also to secure their gut-wrenching statements.³⁰ Desbois's persistence provides an insight into the last moments of these victims before being shot and exhumes the memory of countless innocent Jews killed at the hands of murderers.³¹ With history void of the term "requisitioned,"³² Desbois sufficiently exposes the brutal reality that ordinary citizens played such an integral role in the death of their Jewish friends and neighbors.

VII. Failure to Report

Avoided almost entirely by Desbois was one unique fact: the rampant sexual abuse of young Jewish girls by the Nazi soldiers.³³ Several times the witnesses alluded to, or directly referenced, Nazi soldiers taking attractive, young, naked girls, who were awaiting execution, and temporarily sparing them from death.³⁴ They lived with the German soldiers, served as sex objects, and were described as later becoming pregnant and being killed. Notably, Desbois never asked a follow-up question when a witness posited these incidents, nor did he asked for greater clarification or even seem interested in exploring the sexual abuse when the witnesses mentioned the abuse spontaneously.³⁵ These facts are simply cast into the background.

Desbois's failure to analyze the sexual abuse signals a missed opportunity. The references were not excluded from the book entirely so it is fair to assume Desbois wanted to reveal the sexual abuse. All evidence suggests he chose not to ask follow-up questions about sexual abuse to the witnesses.³⁶ Hidden is the human dynamic wherein the Nazi soldiers were unable, or unwilling, to carry out the executions of the Jewish girls they had impregnated, instead requisitioning other people to kill them.³⁷ Ironically, despite committing callous murders of Jewish men, women, and children without any regard for their status as humans, they were unable or unwilling themselves to kill the girls they had become intimate with. This fact certainly opens a door to the psyche of Nazi soldiers, raising the potential that Nazi soldiers could not kill women bearing their children: it signals the potential effect intimacy has on humanity and

exposes a weakness of these hardened executioners. Failure to seize, exploit, and further examine and investigate these facts in the heat of an interview appears to be a misstep by Desbois. Deciding to abandon the discussion altogether is an epic failure of Desbois to satisfy his main purpose for creating the work.

VIII. Conclusion

Father Desbois's *Holocaust By Bullets* is a must-read for anyone with knowledge of the Holocaust, but military leaders could benefit as well. The book provides a better appreciation for the harsh realities resulting from armed conflicts. Understanding that the true human toll is critical to a leader's development, regardless of experience, and recognizing that great atrocities can go unnoticed and unreported, regardless of the magnitude of the conflict or the technology available. This account of the Holocaust reminds our leaders to not only protect human rights in the midst of the conflict, but to strive to preserve an accurate portrayal of history for the future.

³⁰ *Id.* at 74.

³¹ *Id.* at 82.

³² *Id.* at 104.

³³ *Id.* at 168 (stating many witnesses recount Jewish women being used as sex slaves by the German soldiers and later killed, but noting his archival research failed to confirm these accounts and acknowledging this area constitutes a chapter that has barely been opened).

³⁴ *See, e.g., id.* at 126, 167, 168, 182, 185.

³⁵ *Id.* at 126.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*