

Einsatzgruppen or "Special Action Squads"

Specially trained units of the S.S. followed the first wave of German army troops in the invasion of the Soviet Union (June 1941). Their orders were to execute on the spot all Communists, Jews, and Gypsies.

It is estimated that by the end of 1942, they had killed more than a million Soviet Jews. These victims were shot or loaded into enclosed trucks modified for the introduction of carbon monoxide to asphyxiate its victims. (these were the infamous Gas Vans, which in the fall of 1941 could be considered the beginning of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question which was to be discussed in detail at the Jan 30, 1942 Wannsee Conference. An additional 400,000 were killed by other S.S. units, anti-Semitic native civilians, police units, and the German army.

From the mid-1300's, Jews had begun to concentrate in a large strip of eastern European territory known as the "Pale of the Settlement." By 1900, there were, perhaps, as many as 7 million Jews living in this area bounded by Germany on the east, the Baltic sea on the north, the Black Sea on the south and the Dnieper River in Russia on the east. The Jewish population of Poland in 1939 was about 3.3 million with an additional 2.1 million in the occupied Russian provinces. There were also heavy concentrations of Jews in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to the north and Hungary and the Slavic states to the south.

It should be noted that these large numbers of Jews in occupied Poland and Russia added to the dilemma of the Nazis: how to get rid of this enemy? The Wannsee Conference with the ultimate establishment of killing centers (concentration camps in the Eastern territories) was the ultimate goal; but the mass killings already began with the Einsatzgruppen open pit killings and the use of gas vans--later to be conducted at the Chelmno Concentration camp in Poland.

Immediately following the invasion, Heinrich Himmler (no link here) was appointed to take measures to strengthen German ethnicity in the occupied territories and to create lebensraum, or living space for German citizens. To this end, Himmler created special task forces within the SS, the Einsatzgruppen, and placed them under the command of Reinhard Heydrich.

On September, 21, 1939, Heydrich instructed those under his command to observe a distinction between the "final aim," which would take some time and "the steps necessary for reaching it which can be applied more or less at once." The Einsatzgruppen became "mobile killing units" charged with liquidating all political enemies of the Reich. According to historian, Raul Hilberg, the mobile killing units murdered 1.4 million Jews between 1941 and the end of the war in 1945.

The commanders of the armed forces were not ignorant of the task of the Einsatzgruppen. Hitler himself instructed them that it was the mission of these special task forces to exterminate all Jews and political commissars in their assigned territories .

And it is very important that you are aware that many of these Einsatzgruppen leaders had university education and many had Ph.D's (for more information, see under Wannsee Conference Course Document)

The normal strength of the Einsatzgruppen was from 500 to 800 men.

On 22 June 1941, with no previous warning, Germany invaded Soviet Russia. The Einsatzgruppen, already alerted, fell in behind the marching columns of the Wehrmacht as an integral part of the machine constructed for swift and total war.

Within a space of three days the training grounds in Saxony were empty and all Einsatzgruppen had entered upon the performance of their various missions. The Wehrmacht rapidly overran vast territory in the early months of the invasion of the Soviet Union.

By December 1941, the eastern front extended from Leningrad on the north to the Crimean Peninsula in the south. The Baltic States, White Ruthenia, and most of the Ukraine were in German hands. In this wide land the Einsatzgruppen moved behind the lines of combat. They were deployed from north to south in alphabetical order across the east of Europe.

Go to the following web-site (page 7) for a photo of the open pit killings:

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href=<http://www2.dsu.nodak.edu/users/dmeier/Holocaust/mobile.html>>Einsatzgruppen

These swift methods were also applied in disposing of Jews, gypsies, and persons falling under that vague denomination "undesirables." But these latter classes of humans marked for slaughter were large-too large to be disposed of by casual assassination. Their very numbers demanded that they be killed en masse.

Accordingly, we find plans and methods adapted to this necessity. We must remember that the Einsatzgruppen were small forces of 500 to 800 men. Four of these small forces totaling not more than 3,000 men killed at least 1,000,000 human beings in approximately two years' time. These figures enable us to make estimates which help considerably in understanding this case. They show that the four Einsatzgruppen averaged some 1,350 murders per day during a 2-year period; 1,350 human beings slaughtered on the average day, 7 days a week for more than 100 weeks. That is 337 murders per average day by each group of 500 to 800 men during the 2-year period. All these thousands of men, women, and children killed had first to be selected, brought together, held in restraint, and transported to a place of death. They had to be counted, stripped of possessions, shot, and buried. And burial did not end the job, for all of the pitiful possessions taken from the dead had to be salvaged, crated, and shipped to the Reich. Finally, books were kept to cover these transactions. Details of all these things had to be recorded and reported.

STOP FOR A MOMENT: WHY DID THE DETAILS OF ALL THESE THINGS HAVE TO BE RECORDED AND REPORTED. MOST OF THE RECORDS REMAIN TODAY! WHAT DO YOU LEARN FROM THIS?

READ THE REMARKS OF A CIVILIAN EYEWITNESS:

"I walked around the mound, and found myself confronted by a tremendous grave. People were closely wedged together and lying on top of each other so that their heads were visible. Nearly all had blood running over their shoulders from their heads. Some of the people shot were still moving. Some were lifting their arms and turning their heads to show that they were still alive. The pit was already 2/3 full. I estimated that it contained about 1,000 people. I looked for the man who did the shooting. He was an SS man, who sat at the edge of the narrow end of the pit, his feet dangling into the pit. He had a tommy gun on his knees and was smoking a cigarette. The people, completely naked, went down some steps which were cut in the clay wall of the pit and clambered over the heads of the people lying there, to the place to which the SS man directed them. They lay down in front of the dead or injured people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching or the heads lying already motionless on top of the bodies that lay before them. Blood was running from their necks. I was surprised that I was not ordered away, but I saw that there were two or three postmen in uniform nearby. The next batch was approaching already. They went down into the pit, lined themselves up against the previous victims and were shot. When I walked back around the mound, I noticed another truckload of people which had just arrived. This time it included sick and infirm persons. An old, very thin woman with terribly thin legs was undressed by others who were already naked, while two people held her up. The woman appeared to be paralyzed. The naked people carried the woman around the mound. I left with Moennikes and drove in my car back to Dubno. "On the morning of the next day, when I again visited the site, I saw about 30 naked people lying near the pit-about 30 to 50 meters away from it. Some of them were still alive; they looked straight in front of them with a fixed stare and seemed to notice neither the chilliness of the morning nor the workers of my firm who stood around. A girl of about 20 spoke to me and asked me to give her clothes, and help her escape. At that moment we heard a fast car approach and I noticed that it was an SS detail. I moved away to my site. Ten minutes later we heard shots from the vicinity of the pit. The Jews still alive had been ordered to throw the corpses into the pit; then they had themselves to lie down in this to be shot in the neck."

WHAT IS YOUR REACTION TO THE SS OFFICER DOING THE SHOOTING?