

“The Good Old Days”

*The Holocaust as Seen by
Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*

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The firing-squad at the well consisted of Schutzpolizisten, Waffen-SS personnel and members of the SD. We Schutzpolizisten used our own carbines, the SD men used sub-machine-guns and pistols. At any rate everyone used his own weapon. All the ammunition we needed was kept ready in boxes. The execution area was a terrible sight. The ground round the well was covered in blood; there were also bits of brain on the ground which the victims had to step in when they were brought over. But it wasn't at that point that they first realized what lay ahead for them. They could already hear the shooting and screaming from the place where they were kept waiting. . . .

It took barely an afternoon before the last victim was in the well. Something I still remember clearly about this execution is that afterwards the SD people got drunk, so they must have received a special ration of schnapps. We Schutzpolizisten did not receive anything and I remember that we were very angry about that.

Statement of teleprinter engineer Kiebach, Einsatzgruppe C:

In Rovno I had to participate in the first shooting. . . . Each member of the firing-squad had to shoot one person. We were instructed to aim at the head from a distance of about ten metres. I can no longer say today who gave the order to fire. At any rate it was a staff officer. There were a number of staff officers present at the shooting. The order to fire was 'Ready to shoot, aim, fire!' The people who had been shot then fell into the grave. I myself was detailed to the firing-squad; however, I only managed to shoot about five times. I began to feel unwell, I felt as though I was in a dream. Afterwards I was laughed at because I couldn't shoot any more. A private or lance-corporal from the Wehrmacht, I don't know which unit, took my carbine from me and went and took my place in the firing-squad.

I went and stood about fifty metres away from the firing-squad. It was obvious that I was in no state to go on shooting. The nervous strain was too great for me. When I am asked whether I was reprimanded for my refusal, I have to say that this was not the case.

I still dimly recall our detachment executing fifteen to twenty Jews, including women and four or five children aged between six and nine months, on the march from Kiev to Poltava. . . . I can no longer describe the execution area today. I think that I also had to do some of the shooting, but I know for sure that I did not have to shoot any children. I still remember today one of the men saying that the children hung on to life like the adults. He must have shot children.

Viktor Trill, member of Sonderkommando 4a

2. 'It took nerves of steel'

The murder of 33,771 Jews in the Babi Yar ravine (29/30 September 1941)

Statement of truck-driver Höfer:

One day I was instructed to drive my truck outside the town. I was accompanied by a Ukrainian. It must have been about 10 o'clock. On the way there we overtook Jews carrying luggage marching on foot in the same direction that we were travelling. There were whole families. The further we got out of town the denser the columns became. Piles of clothing lay in a large open field. These piles of clothing were my destination. The Ukrainian showed me how to get in there.

After we had stopped in the area near the piles of clothes the truck was immediately loaded up with clothing. This was carried out by Ukrainians. I watched what happened when the Jews – men, women and children – arrived. The Ukrainians led them past a number of different places where one after the other they had to remove their luggage, then their coats, shoes and overgarments and also underwear. They also had to leave their valuables in a designated place. There was a special pile for each article of clothing. It all happened very quickly and anyone who hesitated was kicked or pushed by the Ukrainians to keep them moving. I don't think it was even a minute from the time each Jew took off his coat before he was standing there completely naked. No distinction was made between men, women and



The ravine of Babi Yar near Kiev. Execution site

children. One would have thought that the Jews that came later would have had a chance to turn back when they saw the others in front of them having to undress. It still surprises me today that this did not happen.

Reportedly 150,000 Jews present. Measures taken to register all Jews, execution of at least 50,000 Jews planned. Wehrmacht welcomes the measures and requests radical action.

From: *Ereignismeldung UdSSR*, No. 97, 28 September, 1941

Once undressed, the Jews were led into a ravine which was about 150 metres long, 30 metres wide and a good 15 metres deep. Two or three narrow entrances led to this ravine through which the Jews were channelled. When they reached the bottom of the ravine they were seized by members of the Schutzpolizei and made to lie down on top of Jews who had already been shot. This all happened very quickly. The corpses were literally in layers. A police marksman came along and shot each Jew in the neck with a sub-machine-gun at the spot where he was lying. When the Jews reached the ravine they were so shocked by the horrifying scene that they completely lost their will. It

may even have been that the Jews themselves lay down in rows to wait to be shot.

There were only two marksmen carrying out the executions. One of them was working at one end of the ravine, the other at the other end. I saw these marksmen stand on the layers of corpses and shoot one after the other.

The moment one Jew had been killed, the marksman would walk across the bodies of the executed Jews to the next Jew, who had meanwhile lain down, and shoot him. It went on in this way uninterruptedly, with no distinction being made between men, women and children. The children were kept with their mothers and shot with them.

I only saw this scene briefly. When I got to the bottom of the ravine I was so shocked by the terrible sight that I could not bear to look for long. In the hollow I saw that there were already three rows of bodies lined up over a distance of about sixty metres. How many layers of bodies there were on top of each other I could not see. I was so astonished and dazed by the sight of the twitching blood-smearred bodies that I could not properly register the details. In addition to the two marksmen there was a 'packer' at either entrance to the ravine. These 'packers' were Schutzpolizisten, whose job it was to lay the



Babi Yar: exhumed corpses

victim on top of the other corpses so that all the marksman had to do as he passed was fire a shot.

When the victims came along the paths to the ravine and at the last moment saw the terrible scene they cried out in terror. But at the very next moment they were already being knocked over by the 'packers' and made to lie down with the others. The next group of people could not see this terrible scene because it took place round a corner.

Most people put up a fight when they had to undress and there was a lot of screaming and shouting. The Ukrainians did not take any notice. They just drove them down as quickly as possible into the ravine through the entrances.

From the undressing area you could not make out the ravine, which was about 150 metres away from the first pile of clothes. A biting wind was blowing; it was very cold. The shots from the ravine could not be heard at the undressing area. This is why I think the Jews did not realize in time what lay ahead of them. I still wonder today why the Jews did not try and do something about it. Masses kept on coming from the city to this place, which they apparently entered unsuspectingly, still under the impression that they were being resettled.

Statement of Kurt Werner, member of Sonderkommando 4a:

That day the entire Kommando with the exception of one guard set out at about six o'clock in the morning for these shootings. I myself went there by lorry. It was all hands to the deck. We drove for about twenty minutes in a northerly direction. We stopped on a cobbled road in the open country. The road stopped there. There were countless Jews gathered there and a place had been set up where the Jews had to hand in their clothes and their luggage. A kilometre further on I saw a large natural ravine. The terrain there was sandy. The ravine was about 10 metres deep, some 400 metres long, about 80 metres wide across the top and about 10 metres wide at the bottom.

As soon as I arrived at the execution area I was sent down to the bottom of the ravine with some of the other men. It was not long before the first Jews were brought to us over the side of the ravine. The Jews had to lie face down on the earth by the ravine walls. There were three groups of marksmen down at the bottom of the ravine, each made up of about twelve men. Groups of Jews were sent down to each of these execution squads simultaneously. Each successive group

Einsatzgruppe C
Standort Kiev

In collaboration with the group staff and two Kommandos of Police Regiment South, on 29 and 30 September 1941 Sonderkommando 4a executed 33,771 Jews in Kiev.

Ereignismeldung UdSSR, No. 101, 2 October 1941

of Jews had to lie down on top of the bodies of those that had already been shot. The marksmen stood behind the Jews and killed them with a shot in the neck. I still recall today the complete terror of the Jews when they first caught sight of the bodies as they reached the top edge of the ravine. Many Jews cried out in terror. It's almost impossible to imagine what nerves of steel it took to carry out that dirty work down there. It was horrible. . . .

I had to spend the whole morning down in the ravine. For some of the time I had to shoot continuously. Then I was given the job of loading sub-machine-gun magazines with ammunition. While I was doing that, other comrades were assigned to shooting duty. Towards midday we were called away from the ravine and in the afternoon I, with some of the others up at the top, had to lead the Jews to the ravine. While we were doing this there were other men shooting down in the ravine. The Jews were led by us up to the edge of the ravine and from there they walked down the slope on their own. The shooting that day must have lasted until . . . 17.00 or 18.00 hours. Afterwards we were taken back to our quarters. That evening we were given alcohol (schnapps) again.

Anton Heidborn (Sonderkommando 4a) on the days that followed:

The third day after the execution we were taken back to the execution area. On our arrival we saw a woman sitting by a bush who had apparently survived the execution unscathed. This woman was shot by the SD man who was accompanying us. I do not know his name. We also saw someone waving their hand from among the pile of bodies. I don't know whether it was a man or a woman. I should think that this person was finished off by the SD man as well, though I did not actually see it.

The same day work began to cover up the piles of bodies. Civilians were used for this task. The ravine walls were also partly blown up.

After that day I never returned to the execution area. The next few days were spent smoothing out banknotes belonging to the Jews that had been shot. I estimate these must have totalled millions. I do not know what happened to the money. It was packed up in sacks and sent off somewhere.

In Kiev, difficulties that arose during the execution of a major action of this type – particularly with regard to registration – were overcome by the use of posters announcing that all Jews were to report for resettlement. Although it was initially thought that the action would only involve some 5,000 to 6,000 Jews, more than 30,000 Jews reported, who as a result of extremely efficient organization still believed they were going to be resettled right up until the time they were executed.

Despite the fact that up to now a total of some 75,000 Jews have been liquidated in this way, it has nevertheless become apparent that this method will not provide a solution to the Jewish problem.

Ereignismeldung UdSSR, No. 128, 3 November 1941

3. 'A new and better method of killing had to be found'

The gas-vans

Statement by August Becker, Ph.D., Gas-Van Inspector:

Until about 1941 I was involved in the euthanasia programme in Oberdienstleiter Viktor Brack's department at the Führer's Chancellery. I had been working as a specialist in the gassing processes involved in exterminating the mentally sick in the mental asylums and sanatoriums. Since this action had been suspended a short time before – I do not know why [gassings were suspended: the murders continued by means of drugs – Ed.] – I was transferred to the RSHA in

I cannot say whether I had misgivings about the use of gas-vans. What was uppermost in my mind at the time was that the shootings were a great strain on the men involved and that this strain would be removed by the use of the gas-vans.

SS-Standartenführer Walter Rauff

Berlin as a result of a private conversation between Reichsführer SS Himmler and Oberdienstleiter Brack. Himmler wanted to deploy people who had become available as a result of the suspension of the euthanasia programme, and who, like me, were specialists in extermination by gassing, for the large-scale gassing operations in the East which were just beginning. The reason for this was that the men in charge of the Einsatzgruppen in the East were increasingly complaining that the firing squads could not cope with the psychological and moral stress of the mass shootings indefinitely. I know that a number of members of these squads were themselves committed to mental asylums and for this reason a new and better method of killing had to be found. Thus in December 1941 I started working in RSHA, Amt II, in Rauff's department. . . . Rauff's deputy at the time was the then Hauptmann Pradel who later became a Major. Although Pradel also had an equivalent SS rank he called himself Major. I did not initially have any personal contact with Rauff. When in December 1941 I was transferred to Rauff's department he explained the situation to me, saying that the psychological and moral stress on the firing squads was no longer bearable and that therefore the gassing programme had been started. He said that gas-vans with drivers were already on their way to or had indeed reached the individual Einsatzgruppen. My professional brief was to inspect the work of the individual Einsatzgruppen in the East in connection with the gas-vans. This meant that I had to ensure that the mass killings carried out in the lorries proceeded properly. I was to pay particular attention to the mechanical functioning of these vans. I would like to mention that there were two types of gas-vans in operation: the *Opel-Blitz*, weighing 3.5 tonnes, and the large *Saurerwagen*, which as far as I know, weighed 7 tonnes. In the middle of December 1941, on Rauff's instructions, I left for the East to catch up with Einsatzgruppe A (Riga) . . . to inspect their Einsatzwagen [special vehicles] or gas-vans.

THE
EINSATZGRUPPEN
REPORTS



Selections from the Dispatches
of the Nazi Death Squads'
Campaign Against the Jews
in Occupied Territories
of the Soviet Union
July 1941 – January 1943

Edited by Yitzhak Arad • Shmuel Krakowski • Shmuel Spector

H O L O C A U S T L I B R A R Y

The Chief of the Security Police
and the SD

Berlin,
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Operational Situation Report USSR No. 80

.....
Einsatzgruppe C
Location: Novo-Ukrainka

Observations made and measures taken by the Security Police.

Besides the thorough liquidation of the Party organization and the operations to clear the country of Jews who constitute the most negative civilian element, the executive operations of Einsatzgruppe C at present also include: above all, the fight against all partisan activities, beginning with the well-organized bands and the individual snipers down to the systematic rumor mongers.

The rumor that the Germans shoot to kill all the Jews has advantages. This is probably the reason why all the time the EKs encounter fewer Jews. Thus, it should be noted that everywhere more than 70-90% of the original local Jews have fled. In contrast to the past, this concerns not only those Jews who once held influential positions.

Primarily in the large towns, the ever increasing security tasks cannot be solved by the Einsatzkommandos alone, since they are too small for this purpose. Mounting importance is being attached to the creation and organization of a regular police service. Well screened particularly reliable Ukrainians are employed for this purpose. Moreover, a network of confidential agents composed predominantly of ethnic Germans, has been created with great success. In the kolkhozes these tasks have mostly been conferred upon the kolkhoz managers (the starostas).¹

At Kirovo, the development has reached a stage where the men enlisted for this purpose are already being paid by the municipality from funds seized from Jews. They obtain their rations from a small farm that has been especially allocated to them.

In Narodichi, 208 terrorists, and, in a nearby barn, nearly 60 terrorists were arrested and shot in the course of a large-scale action.

In Andrushovka 6 more Bolsheviks were rendered harmless.

In Korosten, according to reports received, numerous Jews who had previously fled had gathered together again, constituting a source of continuous unrest.

238 Jews who were rounded up and driven to a special building by the Ukrainian militia were shot.

In Fastov, where the Secret Military Police of the local command post and a Defense Battalion had already liquidated about 30 snipers and 50 Jews, order was fully restored only after Sonderkommando 4a shot a former terrorist and all the Jewish inhabitants between the ages of 12 and 60, making a total of 262 heads.

August 24, 1941, the total of executions carried out by Sonderkommando 4a has thus reached the figure of 7,152 persons.

In Lisovishi three saboteurs, one of whom had destroyed several harvesters, were arrested and liquidated.

In Tarashcha, 17 executions were carried out.

In Kamenets-Podolsk 23,600 Jews were shot in three days by a Kommando of the Higher SS and Police Leaders.

1. The Elders.

Einsatzgruppe C
Location: Kiev

I. Kiev

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As a result of [war] destruction, especially of houses, and the forced order to evacuate endangered streets, about 23,000 persons became homeless and were forced to spend the first days of the occupation in the open. They accepted this inconvenience quietly and did not cause panic.

Meanwhile, locked and empty apartments, insofar as they had not been burned and damaged, were put at the disposal of the population. A corresponding number of apartments have also become available through the liquidation, thus far around 36,000 Jews on September 29 and 30, 1941. The housing of the homeless is assured and has also been taken care of in the meantime.

The population of Kiev before the start of the war numbered around 850,000. For the time being, no exact indication concerning its national composition can be given. The number of Jews is said to have been about 300,000. The total number of ethnic Germans living in Kiev is presently being counted by a Kommando. The final results will be available in ten days. The temporary appointed city administration has begun immediately to register all the inhabitants of Kiev. As a first measure, all males aged 15-60 must report.

Except for a small part, the non-Jewish population, as far as can now be established, seems to welcome the German Army, or at least to display loyal behavior. During the first days of the occupation, serious unrest could be detected within the population because of rumors that the German Army was leaving the city. These rumors were successfully squelched with proper official announcements. The population cooperates very readily by furnishing information on explosives or secret membership in the NKVD, the Party and the Red Army. Unlike the first days, one could note that this information was 90% correct. The reason for this is that the city inhabitants are less frightened than is the rural population, since they do not fear the possibility of a return of the Bolsheviks. The supply situation in Kiev is extremely poor. There are no food stocks and these must be provided. A staff in charge of economic affairs was created by the appointed city

administration. Its main task was, for the time being, the supplying of the most vital food. This economic staff supplied the required transportation and, thus, the most urgent needs could be met by bringing in supplies from the nearby collective farms.

II. Executions and other measures

The population was extremely infuriated against the Jews because of their preferential economical status under Soviet rule. It could also be proved that the Jews had participated in arson. The population expected adequate reprisals from the Germans. For this purpose, in agreement with the city military command, all the Jews of Kiev were ordered to appear at a certain place on Monday, September 29, by 6 o'clock. This order was publicized by posters all over the town by members of the newly organized Ukrainian militia. At the same time, oral information was passed that all the Jews of Kiev would be moved to another place. In cooperation with the HQ of EGC and two Kommandos of the police regiment South, Sonderkommando 4a executed 33,771 Jews on September 29 and 30.¹ Gold and valuables, linen, and clothing were secured. Part of it was given to the NSV (National-Sozialistische Versorgung = Nazi Welfare) for the ethnic Germans, and part to the appointed city administration for distribution among the needy population. The action was carried out smoothly and no incidents occurred. The population agreed with the plan to move the Jews to another place. That they were actually liquidated has hardly been made known. However, according to the experience gained so far, this would not meet with any opposition. The army has also approved the measures taken. The Jews that have not yet been caught or who will return will be treated accordingly. At the same time, a number of NKVD men and commissars were arrested and finished off.

The Bandera members lost power with the arrests made by the Kommandos. Their activity was restricted to the distribution of leaflets and posters. Three arrests were made; more are pending.

The HQ of EGC as well as Sonderkommando 4a and Einsatzkommando 5, both stationed in Kiev, have made connections with the proper offices. Constant cooperation with these offices was achieved, and imminent problems are discussed daily. Because of the

1. This took place in the ravine of Babi Yar outside Kiev.

vast amounts of information, each time [with each action] detailed operation reports must be submitted about the activity of the Einsatzkommandos.

III. Zhitomir, actions against the Jews

The Militia headquarters, according to a suggestion of Sonderkommando 4a, arranged a temporary, local concentration of the Jews in Zhitomir. This resulted in a quieter atmosphere, for example, in the markets, etc. At the same time, obstinate rumors diminished and it seemed that together with the concentration of the Jews, the Communists, too, lost much ground. However, it became obvious after a few days that concentration of the Jews without building a ghetto did not suffice, and that the old difficulties emerged again after a short while. Complaints about the impertinence of the Jews in their various places of work stemmed from several quarters. It was noted that strong propaganda activity among the Ukrainians, claiming that the Red Army would return very soon into the areas that had been taken away from them, had their origin in the Jewish quarter. The local militia was shot at, at night, and even in daytime from an ambush. It was also established that Jews exchanged their belongings for money in order to move into the Western Ukraine where a civil administration already exists.

All these phenomena could be observed. However, it was possible to get hold of the involved Jews only in the rarest cases, as they had sufficient opportunities to evade arrest. Therefore, a conference was called together with military H.Q. on September 10, 1941. The resulting decision was the final and radical liquidation of the Jews of Zhitomir, since all the warnings [threats] and special measures [punishments] had not led to any perceptible change.

On September 19, 1941, from 4 o'clock [a.m.], the Jewish quarter was emptied after having been surrounded and closed the previous evening by 60 members of the Ukrainian militia. The transport [deportation] was accomplished in 12 trucks, part of which had been supplied by military headquarters and part by the city administration of Zhitomir. After the transport had been carried out and the necessary preparations made with the help of 150 prisoners, 3,145 Jews were registered and shot.

About 25-30 tons of linen, clothing, shoes, dishes, etc. that had been confiscated in the course of the action were handed over to the officials of the NSV in Zhitomir for distribution. Valuables and money were conveyed to the Sonderkommando 4a.

The Chief of the Security Police
and Security Service

Berlin,
October 8, 1941

50 copies
(36th copy)

Operational Situation Report USSR No. 107

.....
Einsatzgruppe B
Location: Smolensk

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Oral Bolshevik-oriented propaganda continues as before. It is obviously systematically carried out by enemy agents and partisans as well as by the Jewish population. Together with the continually growing rumors and, due to the lack of effective counter-propaganda, this oral propaganda has the effects desired by the Bolsheviks.

Einsatzgruppe D
Location: Nikolayev

A small Vorkommando had entered Kherson on August 20, 1941, together with the army, and reported that the town was free of enemies. Consequently, a Kommando consisting of two officers and 13 men was sent to Kherson on August 22, 1941, in order to accomplish the task of Sonderkommando 11a. After the first two days, initial steps were taken towards the solution of the Jewish question, the protection of the ethnic Germans, and the fight against Bolshevism. Then, a change occurred in the situation in this town of some 100,000 inhabitants. Artillery fire began on August 24, 1941, at about 15 o'clock, and lasted, with some interruptions, until September 6, 1941, reaching on some days extraordinary force. Because of that situation, a number of German officers left Kherson again.