

“The Good Old Days”

*The Holocaust as Seen by
Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*

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'Pushed to their psychological limits'

Members of the Einsatzgruppen on the stresses and strains of killing



1. 'If the victims didn't do as they were told ...'

Problems during mass shootings

Affidavit of Otto Ohlendorf, Head of Einsatzgruppe D:

The Einsatzgruppen and Einsatzkommandos were led by personnel from the Gestapo, the SD or the Kriminalpolizei. Additional men were recruited from the Ordnungspolizei and the Waffen-SS. Einsatzgruppe D consisted of some 400 to 500 men and had about 170 vehicles at its disposal. When the German army advanced into Russia I was the commander of Einsatzgruppe D in the southern sector and during the year that it was under my command it liquidated about 90,000 men, women and children. The majority of those liquidated were Jews but there were also some Communist officials amongst them. For the purpose of carrying out this extermination programme the Einsatzgruppen were subdivided into Einsatzkommandos and these Einsatzkommandos subdivided into smaller units: the so-called Sonderkommandos and Teilkommandos. Generally the smaller units were commanded by members of the SD, the Gestapo or the Kriminalpolizei. . . . In Einsatzgruppe D I never sanctioned shootings by individuals. I always gave orders for several people to shoot simultaneously, in order to avoid any individual having to take direct, personal responsibility.

I would also like to mention that as a result of the considerable psychological pressures, there were numerous men who were no longer capable of conducting executions and who thus had to be replaced by other men. On the other hand, there were others who could not get enough of them and often reported to these executions voluntarily.

Gustave Fix, member of Sonderkommando 6

Statement of Schutzpolizist Tögel, member of Einsatzkommando 10a:

One further incident I remember was a large-scale execution by firing-squad which took place at a well on the way to Kachowka. There was a hole in the steppe measuring about six to seven metres on the upper edge. Near by there were piles of grain in rows.

The grain may have been haystacks or rings of sheaves drying out or something else. We Schutzpolizisten were driven to this well in troop carriers. There was not a village in sight for miles. There was not even a barn in the vicinity. The victims – several hundred, or even a thousand, men and women – were transported in trucks. I cannot recall whether there were any children. These people were made to lie or kneel about a hundred metres from the well in a depression which had been hollowed out by the rain and remove their outer garments there. They were lined up ten at a time at the side of the well and were then shot by a ten-man execution squad, which included myself. When they were shot the people fell forwards into the well. Sometimes they were so frightened that they jumped in alive. The firing-squad was switched a great many times. Because of the psychological pressures to which I too was exposed during the shooting I can no longer say today, try as I might, how many times I stood by the hole and how many times I was relieved from that duty.

Obviously these shootings did not proceed in the calm manner in which one can discuss them today. The women screamed and wept and so did the men. Sometimes people tried to escape. The people whose job it was to get them to stand by the well yelled equally loudly. If the victims didn't do as they were told there were also beatings. I particularly remember a red-haired SD man who had a length of cable on him with which he used to beat the people when the action was not going as it should. Many, however, came without resistance to the execution area. It is not as though they had any alternative. . . .

All the men coped with the tough physical stress well. No less considerable were the extreme psychological demands made on them by the large number of liquidations. The morale and self-possession of the men was kept up by personally reminding them constantly of the political necessity [of what they were doing].

Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht, No. 1, 31 July 1941

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.

Since December 1941, for example, 97,000 were processed using three vans, without any faults occurring in the vehicles.

Dr August Becker on 5 June 1942 to SS-Obersturmbannführer Rauff

On 14 December 1941, however, I had a car accident at Deutsch-Eylau. As a result of this accident, I was sent to the Catholic Hospital in Deutsch-Eylau and following my recovery was discharged from hospital on 23 or 24 December 1941. I am sure of this because I spent Christmas with my family in Berlin.

On 4 or 5 January 1942 I received a message from Rauff asking me to report to him. On reporting to him I was instructed to depart immediately. This time I was to travel directly to Einsatzgruppe D in the south (Otto Ohlendorf) in Simferopol. I was originally to have travelled by aeroplane but this did not work out because of icy weather conditions. I thus left by train on 5 or 6 January 1942 travelling via Cracow and Fastov to Nikolayew. From there I flew in the Reichsführer's plane to Simferopol in the Crimea. The journey took me about three weeks and I reported to the head of Einsatzgruppe D, Otto Ohlendorf, sometime in January. I remained with this group until the beginning of April 1942 and then visited each Einsatzgruppe until I reached Group A in Riga.

In Riga I learned from Standartenführer Potzelt, Deputy Commander of the Security Police and SD in Riga, that the Einsatzkommando operating in Minsk needed some additional gas-vans as it could not

Apart from that I gave orders that all men should stand as far away as possible from the van during the gassings, so that their health would not be damaged by any escaping gases. I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the following: some of the Kommandos are using their own men to unload the vans after the gassing. I have made commanders of the Sonderkommandos in question aware of the enormous psychological and physical damage this work can do to the men, if not immediately then at a later stage.

Dr August Becker on 16 May 1942 to SS-Obersturmbannführer
Rauff

manage with the three existing vans it had. At the same time I also learned from Potzelt that there was a Jewish-extermination camp in Minsk. I flew to Minsk by helicopter, correction, in a Fieseler Storch [light aircraft] belonging to the Einsatzgruppe. Travelling with me was Hauptsturmführer Rühl, the head of the extermination camp at Minsk, with whom I had discussed business in Riga. During the journey Rühl proposed to me that I provide additional vans since they could not keep up with the exterminations. As I was not responsible for the ordering of gas-vans I suggested Rühl approach Rauff's office.

When I saw what was going on in Minsk – that people of both sexes were being exterminated in their masses, that was it – I could not take any more and three days later, it must have been September 1942, I travelled back by lorry via Warsaw to Berlin.

I had intended to report to Rauff at his office in Berlin. However, he was not there. Instead I was received by his deputy, Pradel, who had meantime been promoted to Major. . . . In a private conversation lasting about an hour I described to Pradel the working method of the gas-vans and voiced criticism about the fact that the offenders had not been gassed but had been suffocated because the operators had set the engine incorrectly. I told him that people had vomited and defecated. Pradel listened to me without saying a word. At the end of our interview he simply told me to write a detailed report on the matter. Finally he told me to go to the cashier's office to settle up the expenses I had incurred during my trip.

Statement of Wilhelm Findeisen:

I was told that the whole operation and the van itself were secret. It was expressly forbidden to photograph the vans and I was ordered not to let anyone near the van. I then joined Sonderkommando 4 in Einsatzgruppe C. . . .

The van was not used immediately when we arrived in Kiev. When we first arrived they were only carrying out isolated actions. Being a driver, I had nothing to do with these isolated actions. One evening several officers appeared and ordered certain people to go with them. They went into a private flat where they picked up a professor and his daughter. These people were then taken to a spot close to a piece of open land where a grave was dug.

The people, i.e. the officers, then gave orders for these two people to be shot. One of the officers said to me, 'Findeisen, shoot these people