

CHAPTER SIX

Massacres on the Eastern Front, 1941-1942

IN DARKEST SECRECY the Nazi Reich made its feverish preparations for the invasion of the USSR. The vast territories to be conquered raised serious police problems; these questions were studied with the minuteness typical of the German High Command. Among these, of course, were the measures for extermination.

FORMATION AND TASKS OF THE ACTION GROUPS

As Hitler presented the matter to the Wehrmacht chiefs, the coming conflict was going to be essentially a new kind of war, "a conflict of ideologies in the broadest sense of the word." Fighting the ideological enemy called for very special measures, measures which necessarily fell under the jurisdiction of the RSHA. For this reason the details of the projected police operations were worked out toward the middle of May 1941 in negotiations between the RSHA and the Wehrmacht Oberkommando, the latter represented by SS General Müller, head of section IV (Gestapo), and the former by Quartermaster General Wagner. (1)

(1) Deposition by SS General Walter Schellenberg before the Nuremberg Tribunal (session of January 4, 1946). This high functionary of the RSHA was in charge of arranging the sometimes difficult contacts between the military and the SS.

During supplementary meetings at the beginning of July which concentrated on the problem of prisoners of war, the "moderate" generals obtained a single concession: insofar as possible, the executions would be carried out quietly, in deserted and isolated places. "It is essential to make our ideas clear to the officer corps, which behaves as though it thinks we are in the stone age, and not in the era of National Socialism," General Reinecke, chief of the administrative service of the Wehrmacht, declared. (Deposition by General Lahousen to the Nuremberg Tribunal, session of September 30, 1945.)

The agreement that they arrived at was extremely simple. It stipulated that any "representative of enemy ideology" who fell into German hands was to be done away with. This included Communist officials, political commissars—a vague but useful term—and all Jews. A special order by the Führer (whose text has not been found) gave effect to the decision.

The police detachments formed by the RSHA were joined to the Wehrmacht, on whose heels they were to follow; however, they kept their autonomy and remained administratively subordinate to the RSHA.

In May 1941 several dozen officials of the different RSHA services (Gestapo, SD, criminal police) were brought together in the village of Pretsch, in Saxony, where they underwent intensive and highly secret training. The instruction consisted of drill and target practice, and "ideological indoctrination." Heydrich himself went there to speak on the dangers of Judaism (an "intellectual reservoir of Communism") and reveal the different jobs they would have to handle in Russia. He developed these considerations at a last meeting in Berlin, a few days before the June 22 attack, insisting particularly on the necessity of including women and children in the operations—as potential avengers and sources of future corruption. The goal aimed at was "permanent security, for otherwise children whose parents had been killed, when they grew up, would constitute no less a danger than their fathers"—so General Ohlendorff explained it before the Allied Court.¹

Thus the *Einsatzgruppen* (2) were formed, special detachments assigned to the job of exterminating Jews in Russia. These detachments, as well as the men in the Waffen-SS under their orders, were picked in the regular army way; that is, it was essentially chance that ruled in the selection of the men, who came from the different police units of the Third Reich. It is noteworthy that the personnel of the action groups were not sadists lusting for blood, but an average and representative selection from the German police corps of 1941.

Each group thus formed consisted of five to eight hundred men. There were four groups, designated as A, B, C, D; the first three

(2) Meaning approximately "action groups" or "operation groups." This is one of those numerous Nazi neologisms which it is impossible to translate.

were assigned to the three army groups (von Leeb's, von Bock's, and von Rundstadt's) covering the Russian front from north to south. The fourth, intended for the army group that was to be formed later on in the Caucasus, operated along the shores of the Black Sea and in the Crimea. The names of the different commanding officers were Stahlecker, Nebe, Thomas, and Ohlendorff; all had the rank of SS General. The groups were subdivided into commandos (*Einsatzkommandos*), which could be broken up in turn into "special commandos" or "partial commandos" (*Sonderkommandos* and *Teilkommandos*).

Two or three days after the outbreak of the war with Russia, the groups were on the move. The speed of their advance was determined by the movement of the armies in whose steps they followed. This accounts for the great speed with which they traversed the western areas of the USSR, the very regions where the Jewish population was most dense. At the rate they advanced it was impossible for them to do their job; the very density of the Jewish population, which furnished the only manpower for certain industries, made them temporarily indispensable to the economic life of the region. Thanks to this, the Jews of the Baltic countries, White Russia and the Western Ukraine—i.e., those for the most part living in the regions incorporated into the USSR in 1939—enjoyed respites of varying lengths. They were thrust into ghettos and put to different kinds of work. Besides, the conquered regions were soon handed over to the civil administration. Eastern Galicia was incorporated into the Government General; the Ukraine, White Russia, and the Baltic countries were organized as *Reichskommissariats* (*Ukraine* and *Ostland*) under the jurisdiction of Alfred Rosenberg's Ministry for Occupied Territories. Some delegates of the RSHA worked with the commissariats; new action groups were formed and placed under their orders.

Only when the German advance drove more deeply into Russia and began to slow down were the action groups able to carry out systematic and wholesale exterminations. They functioned with maximum efficiency, one might say, starting at the line of the Dnieper. And it was actually in the direction opposite to the German advance that the inexorable sword of complete genocide slowly swept, from east to west.

The first concern of the extermination squads as they went along was to excite pogroms and "spontaneous" massacres among the native populations. This had the double advantage of placing the burden of responsibility on the latter, and winning to the Germans men for their future bands of auxiliaries. This was how the nucleus of the Lithuanian, Latvian, Galician, and other auxiliary police was formed; subsequently these detachments played a very important role. Though sometimes successful, the German efforts apparently did not have the results the Nazi leaders expected. Stahlecker, chief of Group A, described the tactic as follows:

Anti-Communist forces made up of natives have been engaged in pogroms against the Jews. . . . It was desirable that the security police not show themselves immediately, for these extremely severe measures were of a kind to arouse the emotions even of German people. It was necessary to show the world that the native population itself took the initiative in reacting against the Jews. . . .²

Later Stahlecker gave an account of the results achieved by these tactics. In Lithuania,

to our astonishment, it was at first difficult to start a vast pogrom against the Jews. It was Klimatis, leader of a group of partisans, who, at our urging, launched a pogrom that showed no signs of a German order or suggestion. He had taken his directives from a small forward detachment engaged at Kovno. During the first pogrom on the night of June 25th, the Lithuanian partisans got rid of more than 1,500 Jews. . . . Nearly 2,300 Jews were made harmless during the following nights. The Kovno example was followed in other part of Lithuania, though on a smaller scale.³

In Latvia the Germans experienced an even greater disappointment. "It was considerably more difficult to launch similar actions and pogroms in Latvia. Nevertheless, we were able to put enough pressure on the Latvian auxiliary police to start a pogrom at Riga; this pogrom caused the destruction of all synagogues and took the lives of 400 Jews."⁴ In Esthonia, complete failure. "It was impossible to set off a pogrom, since the population was not sufficiently enlightened."⁵ This in spite of the fact that these regions were often backward and anti-Semitic by tradition, and would seem to have been a particularly favorable recruiting ground for the Germans. Farther south in Galicia, especially in the town of Lwow, the Nazis

apparently had better success. The pogroms of June 29 and 30, followed by the "Petlura" action (3) of July 25, 26, and 27, took the lives of at least 10,000 Jews. But new mishaps awaited the Nazis in the Ukraine proper. "Our careful efforts to incite pogroms unfortunately did not have the success we expected. Only at Tarnopol and Chorostkow did we succeed in getting rid of 600 and 110 Jews respectively."⁶ In the south as well as in the north the action groups had to do the job themselves.

Most of the time the extermination squads worked as follows: After going into a place, they would have the leading Jews pointed out to them, in particular the rabbi. These Jews they would charge with organizing a Jewish council. A day or so later the council would be notified that the Jewish population was to be registered for transfer to a "Jewish territory" being organized in the Ukraine or some other region. The council would then be ordered to call the Jews together; in the larger localities this was also done by posting notices. (4) Given the haste of the operation, the order was on the whole pretty well obeyed by the inhabitants, who were still ignorant of German methods. (Later, when the last ghettos in White Russia and the Baltic countries were being closed down, the victims had to be rounded up by force in indescribable manhunts.) The Jews were crowded into trucks, or freight cars, and taken a few kilometers out of town to some ravine or anti-tank ditch. There, after being stripped of their money, valuables, and often even their clothing, men, women, and children were shot on the spot.

This was the usual procedure, though every action group and

(3) So called in memory of the Ukrainian separatist *hetman*, Simon Petlura, initiator of numerous pogroms in the Ukraine during 1919-20. (S. Tenenbaum, *In Search of a Lost People*, p. 114-16.)

(4) Here is the text of one of these proclamations, posted in the town of Kislovodsk in the Caucasus:

To all Jews! In order to populate the sparsely settled regions of the Ukraine, all Jews living in Kislovodsk and those with no established residence must appear at the Kislovodsk freight station on Wednesday, February 9, 1943, at five in the morning, Berlin time (six o'clock, Moscow time). Each Jew can bring baggage not to exceed forty pounds in weight, including food for two days. Food will be provided in stations *en route* by the German authorities.

The two thousand Jews of Kislovodsk were massacred in the nearby locality of Mineralniye Vody. (Account by Col. L. Smirnov, Attorney General of the USSR, presented to the Nuremberg Tribunal, session of February 8, 1946.)

squad had its preferred methods. Certain squads forced their victims to lie face down and fired a pistol point blank into the back of their necks. Others made the Jews climb down into the ditch and lie on top of the bodies of those already shot so that the pile of corpses steadily mounted. Still others lined the victims up along the edge of the ditch and shot them in successive salvos; this way was considered the "most humane" and the "most military." (5) Sometimes only a few hours elapsed between the time the notices were posted and the execution.

The Germans preferred warmer seasons for carrying out the executions. A report from Group A complained about the difficulties of the work.

The cold has made the executions much more difficult. Another difficulty is the fact that the Jews are scattered all over the territory. The long distances, bad roads, lack of trucks and gasoline, and inadequate number of men strain our forces to the limit.

Later the author of the report promised to finish with the Jews of that region within two months "if weather conditions permit."⁷

A new and more appalling link was thus added to the chain of massacres running through Jewish history. The victims behaved for the most part like their forefathers, whose martyrdom is movingly recorded in the medieval chronicles. They faced death with quiet and resigned courage, as the eyewitness reports which we shall read later show; the killers' own stories testify to this. "I was surprised to see how calm they were, almost too calm. The tranquillity with which these people accepted their fate seemed horrible to me," one witness testified.⁸ Another wrote: "It was surprising to see how the Jews descended into the ditches while consoling one another to keep up their courage. Some prayed."⁹ Ohlendorff himself told how the Russian Jews sang the *Internationale* during the massacre.¹⁰ The speed with which things went left the moral strength of the victims intact, sparing them the slow disintegration that we find

(5) All these detailed explanations on the different proceedings used by the commandos were furnished at the trial of the *Einsatzgruppen* before the Nuremberg Tribunal. As far as the "humane and military way" is concerned, see in particular the depositions of SS Colonel Haensch and SS General Ohlendorff.

in the concentration camps; perhaps, too, the element of shock and stupefaction had a merciful effect.

Shooting was not the only method the commandos used. On the shores of the Black Sea there were mass drownings; at Bachtchisarai, that pearl of the Crimea which Pushkin sang about, the drowning of 1,029 Jews during the period July 1-15, 1942, was reported.¹¹ There were cases of Jews being burned alive, especially at Minsk in White Russia.¹² Finally in the spring of 1942, mobile gas chambers, designed and manufactured in Berlin and disguised as gas trucks, made their appearance all over Russia.

As we shall see, these death chambers were still very rudimentary machines which the homicide or "euthanasia" section of the Führer's chancellery had devised in Berlin. By a very simple arrangement, the exhaust gases of the Diesel motor, essentially carbon monoxide, were piped into the hermetically sealed interior of the truck instead of out into open air. Such trucks were put at the disposal of all commandos. We have a great number of documents, veritable manuals on the use of the trucks, describing their operation.

The gas is generally not used in the right way. To get things over with as soon as possible, the driver presses the accelerator to the floor. This kills the people by suffocation instead of making them gradually doze off. My directives have proved that, with the correct adjustment of the levers, death comes quicker and the prisoners sleep peacefully. There are no more of the contorted faces or defecations there used to be.

This was written by SS Lieutenant Becker on May 16, 1942; his job was to check on the functioning of the trucks. He added,

I had ordered the trucks of Group D to be camouflaged as houses on wheels by hanging a pair of shutters on each side, a sight that is frequently seen on our farms in the country. But these vehicles got to be so well-known that not only the authorities but the civil population called them "death trucks" as soon as they appeared. In my opinion, these vehicles, even when camouflaged, cannot long be kept a secret.¹³

The commando men stated during their trial that they disliked using these trucks. Besides, they gave mediocre results, at the most fifty to sixty people per execution. Shooting continued to be the chief mode of execution during one period of the chaotic extermina-

tions in Russia. Here is a clear and exact description of what they were like, by the witness Hermann Graebe:

I, the undersigned, Hermann Friedrich Graebe, make the following declaration under oath:

From September 1941 to January 1944 I was director and chief engineer of the Sdolbunow branch of the Josef Jung Construction Company of Solingen. In this capacity I had, among my other duties, to visit the firm's projects. Under the terms of a contract with the army construction services, the company was to build grain warehouses on the old Dubno airfield, in the Ukraine.

On October 5, 1942, at the time of my visit to the construction offices in Dubno, my foreman, Hubert Moennikes, living at 21 Aussemuehlenweg, Hamburg-Haarburg, told me that some Dubno Jews had been shot near the building in three huge ditches about 30 metres long and 3 metres deep. The number of people killed daily was about 1,500. The 5,000 Jews who had lived in Dubno before the pogrom were all marked for liquidation. Since the executions took place in the presence of my employee, he was painfully impressed by them.

Accompanied by Moennikes, I then went to the work area. I saw great mounds of earth about 30 metres long and 2 high. Several trucks were parked nearby. Armed Ukrainian militia were making people get out, under the surveillance of SS soldiers. The same militia men were responsible for guard duty and driving the trucks. The people in the trucks wore the regulation yellow pieces of cloth that identified them as Jews on the front and back of their clothing.

Moennikes and I went straight toward the ditches without being stopped. When we neared the mound I heard a series of rifle shots close by. The people from the trucks—men, women, and children—were forced to undress under the supervision of an SS soldier with a whip in his hand. They were obliged to put their effects in certain spots: shoes, clothing, and underwear separately. I saw a pile of shoes, about 800-1,000 pairs, great heaps of underwear and clothing. Without weeping or crying out, these people undressed and stood together in family groups, embracing each other and saying goodbye while waiting for a sign from the SS soldier, who stood on the edge of the ditch, a whip in his hand, too. During the fifteen minutes I stayed there, I did not hear a single complaint or a plea for mercy. I watched a family of about eight: a man and woman about fifty years old, surrounded by their children of about one, eight, and ten, and two big girls about twenty and twenty-four. An old lady, her hair completely white, held the baby in her arms, rocking it, and singing it a song. The infant was crying aloud with delight. The parents watched the group with tears in their eyes. The father held the ten-year-old boy by the hand, speaking softly to him: the child struggled to hold back his tears. Then the father pointed a finger to the sky and, stroking the

child's head, seemed to be explaining something. At this moment, the SS near the ditch called something to his comrade. The latter counted off some twenty people and ordered them behind the mound. The family of which I have just spoken was in the group. I still remember the young girl, slender and dark, who, passing near me, pointed at herself, saying "Twenty-three." I walked around the mound and faced a frightful common grave. Tightly packed corpses were heaped so close together that only the heads showed. Most were wounded in the head and the blood flowed over their shoulders. Some still moved. Others raised their hands and turned their heads to show they were still alive. The ditch was two-thirds full. I estimate that it held a thousand bodies. I turned my eyes toward the man who had carried out the execution. He was an SS man; he was seated, legs swinging, on the narrow edge of the ditch; an automatic rifle rested on his knees and he was smoking a cigarette. The people, completely naked, climbed down a few steps cut in the clay wall and stopped at the spot indicated by the SS man. Facing the dead and wounded, they spoke softly to them. Then I heard a series of rifle shots. I looked in the ditch and saw their bodies contorting, their heads, already inert, sinking on the corpses beneath. The blood flowed from the nape of their necks. I was astonished not to be ordered away, but I noticed two or three uniformed post men nearby. A new batch of victims approached the place. They climbed down into the ditch, lined up in front of the previous victims, and were shot.

On the way back, while rounding the mound, I saw another full truck which had just arrived. This truck contained only the sick and crippled. Women already naked were undressing an old woman with an emaciated body; her legs frightfully thin. She was held up by two people and seemed paralysed. The naked people led her behind the mound. I left the place with Moennikes and went back to Dubno in a car.

The next morning, returning to the construction, I saw some thirty naked bodies lying thirty to fifty yards from the ditch. Some were still alive; they stared into space with a set look, seeming not to feel the coolness of the morning air, nor to see the workers standing all around. A young girl of about twenty spoke to me, asking me to bring her clothes and to help her escape. At that moment we heard the sound of a car approaching at top speed; I saw that it was an SS detachment. I went back to my work. Ten minutes later rifle shots sounded from the ditch. The Jews who were still alive had been ordered to throw the bodies in the ditch; then they had to lie down themselves to receive a bullet in the back of the neck.

(Signed) Graebe
Wiesbaden, November 10, 1945¹⁴

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE EXECUTIONERS

The action groups kept records of their massacres. Commando reports were collected at group headquarters and sent on to Berlin, where the RSHA assembled the figures in the form of a daily bulletin. Though written in the terse style of military communiqués, these reports enable us to penetrate deeper into the psychology of genocide.

The standard sentence is short and simple: "During the action against the Jews, 3,412 were shot" (Minsk, March 1942); "10,600 Jews were shot" (Riga, November 1941); "1,000 Jews and gypsies were executed" (Crimea, December 1941). More detailed reports give us a better notion of the mechanical and bureaucratic character of the Nazi officials, conscientiously doing their work and trying to increase their efficiency within the means available to them. The following lines, for example, conclude a report describing the extermination of the Jews of Pinsk.

Conclusions to be drawn:

1. The forces assigned to the rounding up [of Jews] absolutely have to be furnished with axes, hatchets, or similar instruments, since almost all the doors, etc., are bolted or locked and can only be forced.
2. Even if access to the attic cannot be discovered at first, it must be considered possible that people may be found there. Each attic must eventually be carefully searched, from the outside if necessary.
3. Even if there is no cellar, a large number of people may be found in the little space between the floor and the ground. In such places it is advisable to lift the flooring from the outside and to send in police dogs (during the Pinsk action, the police dog Oste performed wonders) or to throw in a grenade, which inevitably forces the Jews out of their holes.
4. It is advisable to explore the ground around the houses with a hard object, for many people hide away in well-camouflaged holes.
5. In order to uncover the hiding places, it is recommended that the aid of adolescents be enlisted, on the promise of their lives. This method is always effective.¹⁵

This is in the style of a report on the campaign against the potato bug, a detailed report on the conscientious performance of an allotted task. We even come across one of these terrible killers sending several thousand recently expelled Rumanian Jews back into Rumanian territory simply because their execution was not one of

his responsibilities, his province being limited to the Jews of his jurisdiction. "We don't want to do this work for the Rumanians."¹⁶

Extermination of the sub-men was thus considered a routine business. The Nazi training which we described at length seems to have caught hold very well. SS General Bach-Zelewski, commander-in-chief of the anti-partisan forces, characterized this mentality in striking fashion when he was questioned about the massacres committed by the action groups:

It's my opinion that when the doctrine that the Slavic race is inferior and the Jews not even human has been preached for years and decades, such a result is inevitable.¹⁷

How deeply rooted this mentality was is apparent in many private letters, of which the following is an eloquent example. A police officer is writing to a Wehrmacht general.

Kamenetz-Podolsk, May 5, 1942

My dear Lieutenant-General,

I have been here at K . . . for a month. The territory I administer, with 23 [of my own] men and 500 Ukrainian police, is as big as a German Government District. . . . As commanding officer, I am simultaneously prosecuting attorney, judge, executioner, etc.

Needless to say, we do quite a bit of clean-up work, especially among the Jews. But the population also has to be kept firmly in hand. You have to keep your eyes open. We guard the grain. Well, we shall be able to go home all the quicker. My family is very unhappy. I have been away for two years. . . .

I have a fine apartment in a former children's home. Bedroom and living room, everything that one needs; nothing lacking except of course my wife and children. You understand. My Dieter and my little Lina write often. Sometimes I want to scream. It is not good to love your children the way I do. I hope the war will soon be over. . . .

June 21, 1942

Dear Lieutenant-General Querner,

I am answering your letter of the tenth immediately. . . . Thank you for your reprimand. You are right. We men of the new Germany must be stern with ourselves, even if it means long separation from our family. Because we have to finish matters once and for all and finally settle accounts with the war criminals, so as to create a better and eternal Germany for our descendants. We are not sleeping here. Three or four actions a week. Sometimes Jews, sometimes Bohemians, partisans, and all kinds of trash. . . .

I do not know if the Lieutenant-General saw such frightful kinds of Jews in Poland. I thank my stars for having been allowed to see this

bastard race close up. If destiny permits, I shall have something to tell my children. Syphilitics, cripples, and idiots were typical of the lot. One thing was plain; they were materialists to the last. Phrases like "We are good workers, you won't assassinate us," were in everybody's mouth. They weren't men, but monkeys in human form.

Oh, well, there is only a small percentage of the 24,000 Jews of Kamenetz-Podolsk left. The kikes in the surrounding country are also clients of ours. We are ruthlessly making a clean sweep and then. . . . "The waves die down and the world is at peace." (6) One request, my dear General. Write me from time to time. It is good to get news from the beloved fatherland.

Permit me to send you greetings from a distant country.

Heil Hitler!

(Signed) Jacob
Police Officer

These letters are typical of the moral depravity of the SS. One looks in vain for any sign of moral concern or even of conscious revulsion; and yet the phrase "terrible job," applied to the extermination work, runs like a *leitmotiv* through all the documents.

The reports of the action groups show a semantic peculiarity which deserves some consideration. Besides such terms as "shot," "executed," or "liquidated," we find the most varied and ingenious circumlocutions which the exterminators coined for their operations. For example, the reports often stated that such-and-such a number of Jews had been "rendered inoffensive." Authors of other reports boasted of "having got rid" of Jews. Other expressions are much more vague: "At Nicolaiev and at Kherson respectively, 5,000 Jews were treated. . . ." Sometimes the idea was conveyed quite tacitly; thus the reports of Group A were supplemented by a map. (7) Areas were spoken of as being "liberated" or "swept clean" of their Jews, or again they were "taken care of." "Special treatment" was another frequent euphemism; but the most subtle, discreet, and definitive term was "final solution"; in such-and-such a place "the problem of the Jews has been definitively solved."

Here are the words in which Group C reported 50,000 executions:

Executions have taken place in the following categories: political officials, active Communists, thieves and saboteurs, Jews with false pa-

(6) Line from the *Horst-Wessel Song*, the favorite of the Hitler youth.

(7) See the map at the beginning of this book.

pers, NKVD agents, denouncers of ethnic Germans, revengeful and sadistic Jews, undesirable elements, partisans, [people creating] a danger of epidemics, members of Russian bands, insurgents caught with arms in hand, suppliers of the partisans, rebels and agitators, young vagrants, and *Jews in general*.¹⁸

Sometimes the reports described or justified the operations: the commentaries then have a more cynical style. Thus, in White Russia a commando chief stated that "the Jewish women were particularly recalcitrant in their behavior; for this reason 28 Jewesses were shot at Krougloye and 337 at Moguilev."¹⁹ Elsewhere, the Jews "displayed an impudent and provocative attitude," "were unwilling to work," or, "were suspected Communists and arsonists." The danger of epidemics furnished another pretext. Group B declared that an epidemic of mange had broken out in the Nevel ghetto: "In order to prevent contagion, 640 Jews were liquidated." Group C reported that at Radomychl, "it was impossible to provide food for the Jews and their children, which increased the danger of epidemics. To put an end to this situation, 1,107 adult Jews were shot by the commando and 561 children by the Ukrainian militia."

In trying to probe the depths to which Nazi indoctrination had penetrated, the degree of callousness it had produced in the officers and men of the action groups, it is well to remember that a criminal's cynicism and braggadocio are often only an expression of deep uneasiness. This cynicism, as well as uneasiness, was still more disconcertingly evident at the time the killers were being questioned before the Allied court. All the pity of which they were capable they reserved for themselves (or their subordinates). Not a word, not a thought, for their victims. "Our men taking part in the executions suffered more from nervous exhaustion than those who were to be shot." (Colonel Paul Blobel)²⁰ "Many men suffered terribly, and had to be sent home for all sorts of reasons, either because their nervous systems were shattered or because they were not able to stand it morally." (General Otto Ohlendorff)²¹ "The Waffen-SS men said that they would have preferred fighting in the front lines to staying here. I asked why and they answered: 'We don't want to say.'" (Corporal Graf)²²

This seems most significant. We thus learn that the exterminations were considered an unlucky assignment—and destructive—of

the health of the slaughterers. A report dated July 1941, after recalling the fatigue of the first weeks of the campaign—"but the hard physical trials were overcome by all of our men"—continued as follows: "Not to be underestimated is the extreme psychic tension induced by the great number of liquidations."²³ It was made a rule not to create special squads for the actual shootings, that is to say, "the same men must not be used for one execution after another." (Lieutenant Colonel Haensch)²⁴ Ohlendorff criticized a certain Jeckeln, who had organized "special detachments just for executions; this clearly ruined the men spiritually and brutalized them completely." Later on he said that he himself had authorized his subordinates to return to Germany or to ask for rotation when they felt too much "internal resistance." Such cases were not too frequent. The men of the action groups sought to distinguish themselves in the service of Greater Germany; they aspired to be "hard," and competition in savagery played a considerable role. "Paper soldier" was the scornful nickname with which Commando 6 of Group C dubbed Corporal Matthias Graf, who was in charge of the intelligence section of his group and never had—and never sought—an occasion to take part in the massacres.²⁵ Again, it should be remembered that these were men mobilized in the regular way, that is, picked at random for the most part from the German police. Such a milieu bred complete monsters, real legendary ogres. There was, for example, the police constable who afterwards at Lwow used to kill Jewish children to amuse his own children; or another who used to bet that he could cut off the head of a ten-year-old boy with a single saber stroke.²⁶ Alcohol was an important ingredient in the activity of the group. Heavy drinking preceded the executions, and also followed them. We find the interpreter for the superintendent of police of the region of Slonim, one Metzner, using this terrible phrase in his testimony: "The action [at Novogrodek] was the work of a special SS commando that carried through the exterminations out of idealism, without using schnapps."²⁷

We can see from this the extent of the resistance and "psychic inhibitions" which the masters of the Third Reich had to overcome. Such inhibitions were drowned in alcohol and a frantic blood lust; but by a process of displacement they would often reappear in the strangest forms, such as the self-pity we have already noted. The

inner resistance against which the men of the commandos contended, however, was incapable of restraining their fury even a little bit, and only made them sneer more cynically as they went about their bloody work.

The attitude displayed by the leading members of the action groups in the course of their trial at Nuremberg several years later throws light on the astonishing confusion that reigned in the Nazi mind. Among the twenty-two accused were a university professor, eight lawyers, a dental surgeon, an architect, an art expert, and even a theologian, a former pastor. (8) All pleaded not guilty; not one expressed the least regret; at most, they mentioned the harsh necessities of war and the fact that they were acting under orders. And yet in their defense they referred to the same values of Western civilization that they had trampled under foot for years. Their witnesses and lawyers praised their honesty, their familial virtues, their Christian feelings, and even their gentleness of character.

THE ATTITUDE OF WEHRMACHT AND CIVIL AUTHORITIES

The four action groups made up a force of approximately 3,000 men. They operated over a territory of more than a million square kilometers which was administered by officials of the Ministry for Occupied Territories, or, near the front lines, by the Wehrmacht; in this area German soldiers were counted by the millions and German civilians by the hundreds of thousands. Since they were carried out openly, the exterminations were necessarily matters of public knowledge. Though the groups took their orders directly from Heydrich, the attitude of the local authorities—high officials, generals, and officers—constituted a factor of prime importance. An examination of this matter makes possible an initial analysis of the reactions of the German people as a whole to the massacres.

This is a delicate question if there ever was one. It should be borne in mind that these millions of men consisted on the one hand of ordinary soldiers of an army at war, and on the other, of very

(8) Biberstein-Szymanowski. We cite the incredible reply of the latter when the president of the tribunal asked him whether, as a former ecclesiastic, he did not deem it useful to speak words of consolation, as well as to hear the confessions, of the Jews who were about to be slain. "Mr. President, one does not cast pearls before swine." (Session of November 21, 1947)

carefully selected functionaries. It should also be said that some of the soldiers were shaken enough by what they saw for Bormann to mention it in a decree of October 9, 1942: "There are rumors circulating among the people of the different regions of the Reich concerning the 'very severe' measures applied to the Jews. . . . Investigations have proved that these rumors—in a distorted and exaggerated form, moreover—have been spread by soldiers on leave from the different units in the east, who were eyewitnesses to the execution of the measures."²⁸

By the terms of the agreements of May 1941 the Wehrmacht Supreme Headquarters had committed itself to assisting the groups in their work. But the army commanders were in fact allowed considerable latitude in the zeal with which they might follow their instructions. Some of them seem to have shown only a perfunctory zeal; von Rundstedt, for example, forbade members of the Wehrmacht to help in the executions or to photograph them (the need for such an order is itself significant).²⁹ No longer, however, are there open protests based on principle, like that of Blaskowitz in February 1940. Other commanders, like von Reichenau, only added fuel to the flames; in 1941 he addressed his soldiers as follows:

As far as the attitude of the troops is concerned . . . many vague ideas are still current. The most important goal of the war against the Jewish-Bolshevik system is the complete destruction of its means of action. . . . This is why the soldier must thoroughly understand the necessity for the harsh but just punishment we must lay on that inferior humanity which is Jewry.³⁰

Commando chief Blobel has left an impressive description of his reception by von Reichenau, to whom he had come to introduce himself on June 26, 1941. This warlord had established his headquarters on a splendid Polish estate. While strutting about in a pair of bathing trunks he commented to Blobel on the "Führer-order" and recommended absolute and total ruthlessness.³¹

The vastness of Russia made it possible to find this same latitude in the lower echelons. Major Rossler, a regimental commander, in a report on the "Attitude Toward the Civilian Population in the East," after vividly describing the extermination of the Jews of Zhitomir at the end of July 1941, concluded as follows:

I saw nothing like it either in the First World War or during the Civil War in Russia or in the Western campaign; I have seen many unpleasant things, having been a member of the Free Corps in 1919, but I never saw anything like this. I cannot begin to conceive the legal decisions on whose basis these executions were carried out. Everything that is happening here seems to be absolutely incompatible with our views on education and morality. Right out in the open, as if on a stage, men murder other men. I must add that according to the accounts of the soldiers, who often see spectacles of this kind, hundreds of people are thus killed daily.³²

This report is taken from a file entitled "Report of the Commander of the IXth Army Corp, Schirwindt, and of Major Rossler on the Mass Executions of Soviet Citizens." It is clear from this that officers with some backbone were able to protest and do something, but such cases were quite rare. It is easier to find cases of officers who granted some protection to the Jews for their own convenience; for example, at Baranovitche, the civilian superintendent of police reported that the Wehrmacht "made use of Jews right from the start; it was easier to make oneself understood [in Yiddish] to them. . . . The Wehrmacht supply services not only made use of qualified Jewish workers, but used Jews for personal services, for cleaning, and even as guards. In one typical case a Jew walked around with an armband that said 'Supply Sergeant, German Army.' . . . Even among officers in responsible posts one often encountered a complete lack of any instinctive understanding of the Jewish question."³³

This same report protesting against the Wehrmacht's attitude goes on to point out that it was a member of the Wehrmacht, the local commandant at Mir, who had all the Jews of that town shot. On the whole, however, the following excerpt from a divisional log is much more characteristic of the attitude of the officers corps:

On the morning of August 5 [1941], one hundred Jews were shot at Rositten by the Lettish Free Corps. To forestall any false interpretation of this, the division had it confirmed by the High Command that the special action had been ordered and carried out by the SD. At a meeting of the officers of the divisional general staff, the division commander announced this fact and then warned officers and men to refrain from taking any political or personal stand on these matters.³⁴

It is always dangerous to generalize. But the facts speak with enough eloquence to permit us to say the following: In the immense reaches of Russia some thousands of SS executioners, helped by an international riffraff and also by amateur murderers from the Wehrmacht, exterminated Jews with complete freedom "as if on a stage," while the Wehrmacht staff and the civil authorities turned their eyes the other way. The protests, for there were a great many, some of them strong and even violent, were limited to the criticism that it was not in this ostentatious and brutal fashion that German soldiers should solve the Jewish problem inside the limits of the New Europe, though it was well understood that any "solution" could mean but one thing—the total disappearance of the Jews.

"The mass executions have been carried out in a way which does not fit our German conceptions," complained an official attached to the army groups of the center; if we refer to the context, we get some notion of what he understood as corresponding to "German conceptions." "The sparse front line and rear occupation make it easy for civilians to escape in wagons to the Soviet lines and to keep the Soviets informed of happenings. In this way the mass executions of the Jews, some of which have been carried out in a way that does not correspond to our German conceptions, have become known to the Soviets."³⁵ Even more revealing is a report signed by Gauleiter Heinrich Lohse, Reich Commissioner for the East:

We must apply the special treatment to the Jews; this needs no comment. But it seems hardly credible that there could have been such things as are indicated in the enclosed report. What is Katyn in comparison? Imagine if our enemies found out about these things and exploited them; if such propaganda proved ineffectual, it would only be because those who read it and heard it would not believe it.³⁶

One begins to understand what was meant by the "German way": The extermination of the Jews, tacitly accepted by the great majority, was a matter of course and "needed no comment." But the massacres had to be carried out without offending German sensibilities; above all, it had to be done discreetly, silently, without people's knowledge. Without the knowledge of world opinion; so far as possible, without the knowledge of the Germans themselves. A technical effort of considerable scope, carried out at Auschwitz

and other places, as well as a determined will not to know, would subsequently satisfy in a large measure this veritable collective wish of Hitler Germany. We shall return to this subject; it is enough to point out here the resemblance between this ostrich-like policy and a basically irrational primitive mentality. Responsible only to Heydrich, the action groups came and went at will over the Russian plains. High officials or Wehrmacht generals must sometimes have been shaken by the bloody orgies they saw. Their dismay is reflected in various reports in which protests concerning "non-German" ways of doing things are strangely mixed with economic considerations.

As for the execution of the operation, I must say, to my regret, that it borders on sadism, [wrote the regional commissioner of Slutsk]. It went beyond an anti-Jewish operation. Rather it resembled a revolution. . . . The picture was still more sinister. In the afternoon, a great number of wagons, abandoned with their horses, were found in the streets, and I had to order the municipality to take care of these vehicles. It was later discovered that they were Jewish vehicles in which the Wehrmacht had transported ammunition. The drivers had simply been snatched off their seats and carried off, and nobody bothered in the least about the wagons.³⁷

In other words, a threat to the complicated and intricate Wehrmacht system! But the Wehrmacht, while protesting, did not fail to recognize that the operations were carried out "in evident conformity with considerations of ideological principle." A highly qualified spokesman, the inspector of ordnance in the Ukraine, described the situation in a confidential report to his superiors:

Immediately after hostilities, the Jewish population was at first left in peace. The special police squads only turned to organized shooting weeks, at times months, later. This action was essentially carried out from east to west. The Ukrainian militia participated in this completely officially, often, too, alas, with volunteer help from the Wehrmacht. The action, which included old and young men, women and children, was handled in a frightful way; up to now none in the Soviet Union has been so gigantic. The number of arrests easily reached 150,000-200,000 Jews in the area of the Ukraine, and this without so far taking economic necessities into account.

To sum up, it can be said that the manner of resolving the Jewish problem in the Ukraine, in evident conformity with considerations of

ideological principle, has had the following consequences:

- a) Removal of some of the useless mouths in the cities.
- b) Removal of a section of the population that could not fail to hate us.
- c) Removal of workers who are absolutely indispensable, often even to the Wehrmacht.
- d) Obvious consequences for foreign policy propaganda.
- e) Disadvantageous repercussions for the troops who take even an indirect part in these executions.
- f) A degrading influence on the security police detailed to these executions.³⁸

This, we repeat, is a confidential report addressed in December 1941 to General Thomas, the head of the Reich's military economy. Imperturbably, like the able technician he was, his representative weighed the pros and cons of the matter.

Although a small minority protested against the whole idea of the exterminations, the majority of Germans, military and civilian, demurred only against their manner or occasion; they did not dare or did not wish to attack the executions themselves. Such was the hold the Hitler myth had gained over what Blaskowitz called "the national German body."

BALANCE SHEET OF THE CHAOTIC EXTERMINATIONS

The first year of war also yielded the bloodiest harvest. In important centers, especially those farthest back, "economic needs" sometimes temporarily won out. But not for long. A combined report of Group A, dated June 1942, tells us how far the extermination had progressed during the first year. At that time, fewer than 4,000 Jews were left (out of 70,000) in Latvia; close to 35,000 (out of 150,000) in Lithuania; and 120,000 (out of 450,000) in White Russia.³⁹ We do not have the combined figures for Group B. Group C's reports give the figure of 75,000 victims for the period June 22-November 3-33,771 in the city of Kiev alone on September 29 and 30, 1941.⁴⁰ Ohlendorff, head of Group D, estimated at 90,000 the number of executions carried out by his group.⁴¹ For the second half of the year 1942, a combined report submitted to the Führer by Himmler stated that during August-November (that is, at the time of the German drive toward Stalingrad and the Caucasus), 363,211 Jews were executed.⁴²

These figures are incomplete and therefore have an illustrative value only, especially as they could have been inflated by particularly zealous commandos (9) or minimized by omitting the massacres carried out by the Rumanian allies in the southwest or by the auxiliary legions and Ukrainian, Balt, and other bands. However, Adolf Eichmann estimated the number of Jews exterminated in Russia at two million.⁴³ Estimates based on demographic data for the Jewish population of the territories in question both before and after the war are more reliable. An economist and statistician, Jacob Lestchinsky, arrived at a total of 1,500,000 victims in the USSR.⁴⁴

The hunt for the hidden or camouflaged Jews went on continuously. Some of the bigger executions took place on the very eve of the Gennan retreat. Commandos chosen from the most experienced groups continued their activity in Poland, where the machinery for the "final solution" had meanwhile been perfected. After May 1942, however, the RSHA was preoccupied with wiping out evidence left behind by the action groups.

This evidence consisted of thousands of graves, lightly covered with earth, scattered over the territory; they had to be destroyed. A drunken and decayed intellectual, SS Colonel Paul Blobel, had been chosen for this grisly assignment. Blobel had been an architect in civilian life. Was this why he was picked for the job of giant grave digger? Blobel does not seem to have stood too well with his chiefs:

Your belly is bigger [Heydrich was supposed to have told him during their interview at Berlin in May 1942], you are far too flabby. You are fit only to mend crockery. But I am going to stick your nose far deeper into all of that stuff.⁴⁵

Blobel perfected special combustibles in Berlin and left with his commando for the eastern territories. Known as "Commando 1005," it was not subordinated to any other group, but came directly under section IVb of the RSHA, that is, under Adolf Eichmann.⁴⁶ Blobel's work consisted of running all over Russia looking for common graves, digging up the bodies, sprinkling them with a special preparation, and burning them.

(9) This is what seems to stand out particularly from the trial of the *Einsatzgruppen* before the Nuremberg Tribunal.

Here is Blobel's own description of the liquidation of the cemetery at Kiev:

I was present at the incineration of the bodies taken from a common grave near Kiev during my visit in the month of August (1942). The tomb was 55 yards long, 3 wide, and 2½ deep. After the tomb was opened, the bodies were sprinkled with a combustible and burned. The cremation took nearly two days. I was careful to see that the tomb turned cherry red right down to the bottom. In this way all traces were destroyed.⁴⁷

Blobel became a great expert in his specialty. In Berlin he gave lectures to Eichmann's colleagues on the process he had perfected.⁴⁸ However, his work remained unfinished. The front was moving rapidly toward the west, and Commando 1005 had to move west with it. Hoess, the commandant of the Auschwitz camp, reported that he put teams of Jewish workers at Blobel's disposal several times; these teams were "gradually" shot and replaced by others.⁴⁹ He also reported that Blobel tried to work out more efficient methods, particularly with the use of dynamite, "but this method did not yield good results." The exhumation of most of the graves fell to the lot of the German soldiers taken prisoner by the advancing Russian army.