

Special Motivation - The Motivation and Actions of the Einsatzgruppen by Walter S. Zapotoczny

"...Then, stark naked, they had to run down more steps to an underground corridor that led back up the ramp, where the gas van awaited them."

Franz Schalling
Einsatzgruppen policeman

Like every historical event, the Holocaust evokes certain specific images. When mentioning the Holocaust, most people think of the concentration camps. They immediately envision emaciated victims in dirty striped uniforms staring incomprehensibly at their liberators or piles of corpses, too numerous to bury individually, bulldozed into mass graves. While those are accurate images, they are merely the product of the systematization of the genocide committed by the Third Reich. The reality of that genocide began not in the camps or in the gas chambers but with four small groups of murderers known as the *Einsatzgruppen*. Formed by Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer-SS*, and Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), they operated in the territories captured by the German armies with the cooperation of German army units (*Wehrmacht*) and local militias. By the spring of 1943, when the Germans began their retreat from Soviet territory, the *Einsatzgruppen* had murdered 1.25 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian and Soviet nationals, including prisoners of war. The *Einsatzgruppen* massacres preceded the invention of the death camps and significantly influenced their development. The *Einsatzgruppen* story offers insight into a fundamental Holocaust question of what made it possible for men, some of them ordinary men, to kill so many people so ruthlessly. The members of the *Einsatzgruppen* had developed a special motivation to kill.

Full name, *Einsatzgruppen des Sicherheitsdienstes und der Sicherheitspolizei* (Operational Squads of the Security Service and the Security Police) is the task force of mobile killing units operated in German-occupied territories during World War II. The fundamental structure of the *Einsatzgruppen* was in place during the *Anschluss*, the incorporation of Austria into the Reich in March 1938. These were intelligence units of the police accompanying the invading army. They reappeared in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, in March 1939, and of Poland, on September 1 of that year. In the invasions of Austria and Czechoslovakia, the task of the *Einsatzgruppen* was to act as mobile offices of the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*; Security Service), and the Sipo (*Sicherheitspolizei*; Security Police), which consisted of the Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*; Secret State Police) and the Kripo (*Kriminalpolizei*; Criminal Police) until these organizations established their permanent offices. The *Einsatzgruppen* were immediately behind the advancing military units and assumed responsibility for the security of the political regime. In the Sudetenland, the *Einsatzgruppen*, in close cooperation with the advancing military forces, lost no time in uncovering and imprisoning the Marxist traitors and other enemies of the state in the liberated areas.

In spring 1941, in contemplation of the coming assault upon the Soviet Union, the *Einsatzgruppen* were created as military units, but not to fight as soldiers. They were organized for murder. In his book, *Masters of Death*, Richard Rhodes describes how early in May 1941, the men who had been chosen as candidates for the Eastern Front *Einsatzgruppen* were assembled in the training school of the German border guards in Pretzsch (a town on the Elbe River, northeast of Leipzig), in the Saxony region. They were not told what their assignment would be, but the commonalities offered a clue. Many of them had served in the *SS* (*Schutzstaffel*; Protective Squadron) detachments in Poland and preference was given to men who spoke Russian. Large contingents from the Berlin-Charlottenburg *SS* leadership school, as well as *Gestapo* and *Kriminalpolizei* were also assigned there. Some of them were passed on gratefully by their home regiments because they were considered too wild.

The commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen* and the commanders of the *Sonderkommando* and *Einsatzkommandos* (sub-units of the *Einsatzgruppen*) were chosen by Himmler and Heydrich from a list compiled by the RSHA. Most of the handpicked leaders were lawyers. A few were physicians or educators and most had earned doctoral degrees. A reserve battalion of the regular *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police), completed the Pretzsch roster. In addition to *Sipo* and *SS* officers, a support staff of drivers, translators, radio operators, and clerks was also assembled. They later came from all over Germany, though most were members of the *SS*.

Many of the candidates assembled were former members of the *Hitler Jugend (HJ)* (Hitler Youth). Gisela McBride describes the Hitler Youth and the *Bund Deutscher Maedchen (BDM)* (The League of German Girls Branch of the Hitler Youth) in her book *Memoirs of a One Thousand-Year-Old Women*. She said: "The *BDM*'s purpose was to mold girls as closely as possible to conform to the Nazi ideal of womanhood. They were to learn to be obedient, dutiful, disciplined, and self-sacrificing. These virtues were to be emphasized and continually reinforced so the girls would become willing and faithful followers of Nazi doctrine." Of the Hitler Youth leaders McBride said, "The youth leaders were ardent Nazis. Adolf Hitler, the boys and girls were taught, was the infallible leader."

The training that *SS* recruits received before their arrival in Pretzsch, prepared them very well for the new mission of the *Einsatzgruppen*. The *SS* was to be the living embodiment of the Nazi doctrine of the superiority of Nordic blood, and of the Nazi conception of a master race. *SS* candidates were thoroughly examined and checked. They were asked for the political reputation record of their parents, brothers and sisters, the record of their ancestry as far back as 1750 and their physical examination and any records from the Hitler Youth. Further, they were asked for a record of hereditary health showing that no hereditary disease exists in their parents and in their family. Last, but perhaps most important, was a certification from the race commission. This examining commission was composed of *SS* leaders, anthropologists, and physicians. The very process of selection and acceptance gave the new member a sense of superiority. Only pureblooded Germans in good health could become a member. He must have been of excellent character, had no criminal record, and been well versed in all National Socialist doctrines. The members had to be ready and willing tools, prepared to carry out tasks of any nature, however distasteful. Absolute obedience was therefore the necessary foundation stone of the *SS*. Obedience had to be unconditional. It corresponded to the conviction that the National Socialist ideology must reign supreme. Every *SS* man was prepared, therefore, to carry out blindly every order that was issued by the Fuhrer. The *SS* troops were also taught a view of the past based on racial struggle and *Lebensraum* (Living Space). The past provided a sense of continuity and showed the recruit that the Jews and Slavs had always been the enemies of Germany. This meant that the need for living space and a solution to the Jewish question was deemed inevitable. The *SS* soldiers, as well as the other men who arrived in Pretzsch, had also been exposed to the ideas of Euthanasia.

The T-4 Euthanasia Program was established in the fall of 1939 in order to maintain the supposed purity (eugenics) of the so-called Aryan race by systematically killing children and adults born with physical deformities or suffering from mental illness. It put much emphasis on the survival of the fittest and argued that genetic selection should be practiced deliberately. This included the breeding of a racial elite and the extermination of racially inferior or damaging groups. Slavs, Gypsies, and Africans were considered racially inferior to a supposed race of German Aryans - a race that the Nazi ideologues believed to be weakened by what they called the Jewish cancer. This propaganda added to the overall state of mind of the soldiers assembled in Pretzsch and contributed to their special motivation.

The course of training given the *Einsatzgruppen* at Pretzsch consisted of lectures and speeches on their new and special functions. There were a number of briefings about the aims and activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Nazi-occupied territories of the Soviet Union. At a briefing, which probably took place shortly before June 22, 1941, high-level *SS* and Police chiefs attend. As Heydrich was unable to attend he sent them a memorandum specifying who was to be eliminated: "All the following are to be executed: Officials of the Comintern, together with professional Communist politicians in general, top and medium level officials and radical lower level officials of the Party, Central committee and district and sub-district committees. In addition, peoples commissars, Jews in Party and State employment, and other radical elements, saboteurs, propagandists, snipers, assassins, inciters, etc., insofar as they are, of special importance for the further economic reconstruction of the Occupied Territories." More details are contained in Report No. 111, dated October 12, 1941: "The principal targets of execution by the *Einsatzgruppen* will be political functionaries, Jews mistakenly released from POW camps, Jewish sadists and avengers, and Jews in general." The mission of the soldiers in Pretzsch was thoroughly understood, from the highest-ranking leader of a *Gruppe* down to the lowest *SS* man.

On 22 June 1941, Germany invaded Soviet Russia. The *Einsatzgruppen*, already alerted, fell in behind the marching columns of the *Wehrmacht* as an integral part of the machine constructed for swift and total war. Within a space of three days, the training grounds in Saxony were empty and all *Einsatzgruppen* had entered upon the performance of their various missions.

The *Wehrmacht* rapidly overran vast territory in the early months of the invasion of the Soviet Union. *Einsatzgruppe A* started out from East Prussia, and its units rapidly spread out across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. *Einsatzgruppe B* had Warsaw as its starting point. Some of its units passed through Vilna and Grodno on the way to Minsk, where they arrived on July 5, 1941. Other units belonging to *Einsatzgruppe B* passed through Brest-Litovsk, Slonim, Baranovichi, and Minsk, and from there proceeded to southern Belorussia: Mogilev, Bobruisk, and Gomel, advancing as far as Briansk, Kursk, Orel, and Tula. Along their route, in all the places through which they passed, they murdered masses of people - Jews, Gypsies, Communist activists, and prisoners of war. *Einsatzgruppe C* made its way from Upper Silesia to the western Ukraine, by way of Krakow. Two of its units, *Einsatzkommandos 5* and *6*, went to Lvov, where they organized a pogrom (from Russian meaning "wreaking of havoc") against the Jews with the participation of Ukrainian nationalists. *Sonderkommando 4b* organized the mass murders at Ternopol and Zolochiv, and then continued on its way to the east. On September 29 and 30, *Sonderkommando 4a*, commanded by Paul Blobel, perpetrated the mass slaughter of 34,000 Kiev Jews at Babi Yar. *Einsatzgruppe D* was attached to the Eleventh Army. During its advance, it carried out massacres in the southern Ukraine (Nikolayev and Kherson), in the Crimea (Simferopol, Sevastopol, Feodosiya, and other places), and in the Krasnodar and Stavropol districts (Maykop, Novorossisk, Armavir, and Piatigorsk). Jewish prisoners of war were separated from the rest and put to death at an early stage, in the advance transit camps.

Einsatzgruppen men were told of Joseph Stalin's order of July 3, 1941, calling on the entire Soviet civilian population to conduct a campaign of terror, sabotage, and guerrilla warfare against the Germans. The soldiers knew that Jews were especially active in this campaign, as numerous Jewish historians have proudly acknowledged. This news added to their motivation.

As the *Einsatzgruppen* moved east, political functionaries were shot where found. Prisoners of war who fell in the category of opponents of National Socialism were handed by the *Wehrmacht* to the *Einsatzgruppen* and killed. These swift methods were also applied in disposing of Jews, gypsies, and persons falling under that vague denomination - undesirables. The *Einsatzgruppen* first promoted pogroms by inciting already existing ant-Semitism and age-old grievances against the Jews by the local population. Many were killed by the locals, as the *Einsatzgruppen* assisted and watched. However, the number of humans marked for slaughter was too large to be disposed of by casual assassination. Their very numbers demanded that they be killed en masse.

The methods of extermination varied little. Mass shooting, the commonest means of slaughter, was described with classic simplicity by Herman Graebe, a German civilian, before the International Military Tribunal. Graebe was in charge of a building firm in the Ukraine:

I walked around the mound, and found myself confronted by a tremendous grave. People were closely wedged together and lying on top of each other so that their heads were visible. Nearly all had blood running over their shoulders from their heads. Some of the people shot were still moving. Some were lifting their arms and turning their heads to show that they were still alive. The pit was already 2/3 full. I estimated that it contained about 1,000 people. I looked for the man who did the shooting. He was an SS man, who sat at the edge of the narrow end of the pit, his feet dangling into the pit. He had a tommy gun on his knees and was smoking a cigarette. The people, completely naked, went down some steps, which were cut in the clay wall of the pit and clambered over the heads of the people lying there, to the place to which the SS man directed them. They lay down in front of the dead or injured people; some caressed those who were still alive and spoke to them in a low voice. Then I heard a series of shots. I looked into the pit and saw that the bodies were twitching or the heads lying already motionless on top of the bodies that lay before them. Blood was running from their necks. I was surprised that I was not ordered away, but I saw that there were two or three postmen in uniform nearby. The next batch was approaching already. They went down into the pit, lined themselves up against the previous

victims, and were shot. When I walked back around the mound, I noticed another truckload of people, which had just arrived. This time it included sick and infirm persons. An old, very thin woman appeared. Naked people held her up. The woman appeared to be paralyzed. The naked people carried the woman around the mound. I left and drove in my car back to Dubno. On the morning of the next day, when I again visited the site, I saw about 30 naked people lying near the pit—about 30 to 50 meters away from it. Some of them were still alive; they looked straight in front of them with a fixed stare and seemed to notice neither the chilliness of the morning nor the workers of my firm who stood around. A girl of about 20 spoke to me and asked me to give her clothes, and help her escape. At that moment, we heard a fast car approach and I noticed that it was an SS detail. I moved away to my site. Ten minutes later, we heard shots from the vicinity of the pit. The Jews still alive had been ordered to throw the corpses into the pit; then they had themselves to lie down in this to be shot in the neck.

The method that the *Einsatzgruppen* employed was to shoot their victims in ravines, abandoned quarries, mines, antitank ditches, or huge trenches that had been dug for this purpose. The brutality of many of the SS men is illustrated in a description of a typical Russian village. Hearing of the approach of a murder commando, the Jews of the village had gone into hiding. When the commando reached the village, the only person whom the SS men saw in the street was a woman with a baby in her arms. She refused to tell them where the Jews were hidden. One of the men snatched the baby from her, gripped it by the legs, and smashed its head against a door. An SS man recalled: "It went off with a bang." Beside herself, the woman gave away the hiding place. The *Einsatzgruppen* performed their murderous work in broad daylight and in the presence of the local population. Only when the Germans began their retreat was an effort made to erase the traces of their crimes. This was the job of *Sonderkommandos*: to open the mass graves, disinter the corpses, cremate them, and spread the ashes over the fields and streams.

The killing by shooting, especially of women and children, had a devastating effect on many of the *Einsatzgruppen* member's mental state, which even heavy drinking of hard liquor (of which they were given a generous supply) could not suppress. A few committed suicide and some asked for transfer to other units. Units began experimenting with methods that would ease the burden on the shooters. Some units experimented with using quick lime (Calcium Hydroxide). Used in the trenches between the layers of bodies, it was thought that if the victims were made to lie down on top of each other, quick lime could be spread over them and then water could be added. The Calcium Hydroxide reacted with the water and actually boiled away the flesh of the victims. This method proved too grotesque, since the victims were still alive when the water was added, and was discontinued. Other experiments such as alternating victims with wood in piles then burning the piles was attempted but found to be too time consuming.

After trying to dynamite the victims and burn them alive in their homes and barns proved unproductive, the RSHA in Berlin, in August 1941, began to look for an alternative method of execution. It was found in the form of gas vans (heavy trucks with hermetically sealed vans into which the trucks' exhaust fumes were piped). Within a short time, these trucks were supplied to all the *Einsatzgruppen*. The carbon monoxide from the car's exhaust would be channeled into the sealed cabin, in which the victims stood. The gassing process took between fifteen and thirty minutes. During this time, the van was driven from the loading site to prepared graves. The shootings continued, augmented with the gas vans. The gas vans led to the construction of the gas chambers at the concentration camps. With the construction of the camps with gassing facilities, the *Einsatzgruppen* would soon be out of the business of killing Jews. From the beginning of 1942 onward, the *Einsatzgruppen* increasingly turned to fighting Soviet partisans.

In his book *German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939-1945*, Colin Heaton describes how the SS was dispatched to handle the partisan/guerrilla threat in a unique way. *Generalfeldmarschall* Wilhelm Keitel ordered decrees allowing for the seizure of property and the execution without trial of all persons suspected of compromising German security in the occupied zones. Various SS units created their own counterinsurgency teams that were usually comprised of company sized elements numbering approximately 200 men. These units were motorized, well armed, and would be rushed

rapidly to an area of suspected partisan activity.

Clearly, the *Einsatzgruppen* record is one of brutality and devastation. They were indoctrinated to view Jews, Slavs, partisans, and Bolsheviks as threats to the German people. They viewed this people as sub-human. Through indoctrination and training, they developed a special motivation to conduct violence. This special motivation not only enabled them to kill, it enabled them to carry out cruel and bestial acts on their victims. One theory that accounts for their behavior is based upon causal rather than correlation evidence is the violent-socialization theory of the American criminologist Lonnie Athens. Richard Rhodes describes his theory, in detail. Athens did not study violent officials. Some violent officials (notably police) are self-selected and come to the profession already experienced with violence, as many of the *Einsatzgruppen* did. For those officials who acquire their violent skills in official training, there are clear parallels between their training experiences and the four-stage development process that Athens identified in the backgrounds of violent criminals.

Since violence, official or private, is learned through violent experience, such parallels are to be expected and should not be surprising. The violent socialization process, Athens found, divides into four stages, which he calls: brutalization; belligerency; violent performances and virulency. The stages are sequential. Each stage has to be fully experienced before the subject advances to the next one, a process that can occur cataclysmically in a short period of time or across a period of years. That violence is a choice rather than a compulsion or a release is taken for granted in the military and among police.

Brutalization, the first stage of violent socialization, Athens found to consist of three distinct but related significant experiences that might occur in any order and at differing times and places: (a) violent subjugation (an authority figure from one of the novice's primary groups uses violence or threat of violence to force the novice to submit to his authority by showing obedience and respect); (b) personal horrification (the novice witnesses people close to him undergoing violent subjugation); (c) violent coaching (to prompt violent conduct, people whom the novice perceives to be or to have been authentically violent instruct the novice in how to conduct himself when confronted with conflict, emphasizing that he has an inescapable personal responsibility to physically attack people who provoke him). Harsh military discipline had a long tradition in Germany. SS training, as Himmler organized it, was known for its brutality. Even ordinary police training before the war was brutalizing. This was in keeping in the Prussian tradition. All of the *Einsatzgruppen* members who came together in Pretzsch had had intense and brutal training.

Brutalization is an obvious and traumatic experience, Athens observes. It leaves the novice shaken, deeply troubled, and confused. Breaking down a recruit's identity is the purpose of military basic training. Moving into belligerency, the second stage of violent socialization, the novice questions his previous values. Brooding over his brutalization experiences, he comes to focus on his personal performance and responsibly, finally identifying the specific question he has to answer: What can I do to stop other people from violently subjugating me and people I value? When people have undergone social trauma and fragmentation, they seek guidance from others who successfully overcome comparable experiences. The *Einsatzgruppen* members had plenty of violence coaches to provide guidance. Struck by his insight, which takes on the force of personal revelation, and convinced of its correctness, the belligerent subject now firmly resolves to resort to violence in his future relations with people. The subject is prepared to use violence defensively, to protect himself or the people he values against imminent danger. The Nazi propaganda the *Einsatzgruppen* members had been exposed to clearly couched that the Jews, Slavs, and Bolsheviks would bring destruction to the German way of life and to the Aryan race, if not eliminated.

The final components of violent socialization constitute stage four, virulency. However personally satisfied a violent performer may be with his defensive victories, they will not change this fundamental view of himself, his self-conception, his identity, unless other people acknowledge them and demonstrate their full significance to him by their actions. When people learn of a successful violent performance by someone whom they previously judged not to be violent, they act differently toward him. They begin treating him as if he were dangerous. For the first time, the subject keenly senses genuine trepidation when he approaches people. These heady experiences of violent notoriety, especially when combined with his painful memories of feeling powerless and inadequate during the

brutalization and belligerency stages, encourage the subject to believe that violence works. Once the *Einsatzgruppen* members reached this point, they were firmly resolved to attack people physically for the slightest or no provocation whatsoever.

One factor must be made clear regarding the average German soldier and his participation in what may be deemed atrocities. Men who are fighting for their lives, especially against a cloaked enemy hiding among the local population, uncertain as to their duty and without proper leadership and guidance seldom take the time to disseminate between friendly and hostile indigenous personnel. Regardless of the individual's thoughts and beliefs, it mattered very little, for the killing of even suspected Jews in even the most anti-Semitic region only fanned the flames of resistance among the civilian population. Another detrimental factor was the propaganda issues facing the German, as well as the fact that the primitive living conditions of the average peasant and the seemingly endless numbers of non-European races impressed upon the Germans their own sense of cultural and ethnic superiority. The German was also psychologically unprepared for what awaited him. He was subjected to many varieties of friendly propaganda, although all forms continued to purport his racial superiority. One day he may hear, that all of the sub-humans must be relocated further east, especially Jews. Later he would hear that they must be eradicated, eliminated from potentially poisoning the pure German blood supply, that they were deemed to be a biological threat to the German people. He would also be told that not all Russians were Communists, and that the German crusade was established to free the Russians from Bolshevism, while at the same time condemning all Russians for supporting the Bolsheviks, while the Jews supported and assisted the powers in Moscow.

In conclusion, we can see how the *Einsatzgruppen* grew out of a Germany that was economically crippled by World War I reparations, global depression and a national sense that the Jew was significantly to blame for their problems. Fostered by the ideals of National Socialism, the naivety of youth, the sense of pride and accomplishment that military service gave them, the members of the *Einsatzgruppen* became fully indoctrinated into the beliefs of Adolph Hitler. They accepted Hitler's anti-Semitism by placing his desire to remove the Jews in the context of a wider theory of the struggle between races for living space. They accepted Hitler's view that the Jews, lacking a state of their own, were parasites trying to destroy those states, which had been established by superior races. They accepted that Bolshevism was a threat to the survival of Germany and to Europe. They believed their duty was to eliminate the threats. As there were some who asked to be relieved or transferred from their killing responsibilities, there were more to take their place. They moved through the stages of violent socialization rather quickly due to the support of an entire government system. When one believes so strongly in his cause that he will do anything, then he truly has a special motivation.

The results of the *Einsatzgruppen* help in understanding the magnitude of their deeds. They averaged over thirteen hundred and fifty murders per day during a two-year period. Thirteen hundred and fifty human beings were slaughtered on the average each day, seven days a week for more than one hundred weeks. That is over three hundred thirty seven murders per average day by each group of five to nine hundred men during the two-year period. All these thousands of men, women, and children had first to be selected, brought together, held in restraint and transported to a place of death. They had to be counted, stripped of possessions, shot or gassed and buried. In addition, burial did not end the job, for all of the possessions taken from the dead had to be salvaged, crated and shipped to the Reich. Finally, books were kept to cover these transactions. Details of all these things has to be recorded and reported.

The attitude of most of the *Einsatzgruppen* can be summed up in a quote from SS General Otto Ohlendorf, commander of *Einsatzgruppen* D, during the Nuremberg Trials:

The men, women, deeply excavated antitank ditches. Then they were shot, kneeling or standing, and the corpses thrown into the ditch. I never permitted the shooting by individuals in group D, but ordered that several of the men should shoot at the same time in order to avoid direct personal responsibility.

He, like most of the *Einsatzgruppen*, expressed no remorse for his actions and was more concerned about the moral strain on those carrying out the executions than those actually being executed. He went to the gallows believing he had done his duty for his country. He, like most of the

Einsatzgruppen, had a special motivation to carry out their work.

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