**Einsatzgruppen**

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| [http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/pic/einsatzk.jpg](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/pic/bigeinsatzk.jpg) |
| SD Men |

*Einsatzgruppen* (Special Task Forces) were mobile killing units that operated in German-occupied Europe. Members came from the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), SD (*Sicherheitsdienst* / Security Service of the SS), Sipo (*Sicherheitspolizei* / Security Police) and the Orpo (*Ordnungspolizei* / Order Police).   
They first appeared during the *Anschluss* (unification with Austria), reappearing on the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In both of these countries they served as mobile offices of the SD and Sipo, responsible for the security of the regime. But it was with the invasion of Poland that the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* escalated from occasional to wholesale murder.

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| A killing site |
| A killing site |

By an agreement between the military and the SS of 31 July 1939, the task of the *Einsatzgruppen* (EG) in Poland was defined as the "combating of all anti-German elements in hostile country behind the troops in combat."   
Initially [**5 Einsatzkommandos**](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/einsatzkommandos.htm) were formed, subsequently increased by the addition of two further *Einsatzgruppen* and a separate *Einsatzkommando* from **Gdansk (Danzig)**. In total they numbered some 3,000 men.   
Many of the leaders were representative of the intellectual elite of the Nazi party. Of the 25 *Einsatzgruppen* and *Einsatzkommando* leaders, 15 of them bore the title of PhD, most of them doctors of jurisprudence or philosophy. Their task was the elimination of Polish political opponents and Jews. In theory, the army exercised control of the conquered territories, being permitted to not only use force against armed resistance, strikes and sabotage, but also to arraign irregulars and spies before a court-martial and sentence them to death. However, this did not satisfy [**Reinhardt Heydrich**](http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/heydrich.html). Although 200 executions were occurring daily, he complained that the courts-martial were much too slow:   
"The people must be shot or hanged immediately without trial. The little people we want to spare, but the nobles, priests, and Jews must be killed."

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| [http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/pic/bydgoszcz01.jpg](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/pic/bigbydgoszcz01.jpg) |
| Bydgoszcz |

In the first weeks of the Polish campaign the *Einsatzgruppen* carried out more than 10,000 arrests. On 3 September 1939 [**Heinrich Himmler**](http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/himmler.html) ordered them to shoot all insurgents, defined as anyone who endangered German life or property. Innumerable atrocities occurred. In **Bydgoszcz (Bromberg)**, where killings of *Volksdeutsche* by Poles had occurred in the first days of the war, mass shootings were carried out by police, *Einsatzgruppen* and troops. By 10 September, 340 - 540 Polish civilians had been shot in the town. In other incidents, Jewish victims became increasingly prominent. On 20 September the 14th Army reported mass shootings, especially of Jews by the "*Einsatzgruppe* **Woyrsch**". The same day the *Einsatzgruppen* were disbanded and their personnel absorbed by the permanent SD and Sipo in Poland. By that time about 15,000 persons had been killed. Infinitely worse bloodshed would take place following the attack on the Soviet Union.

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| [http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/pic/police.jpg](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/pic/bigpolice.jpg) |
| Questioning of Jews |

Following consultations that had taken place between **Heydrich** and the army's *Generalquartiermeister* **Eduard Wagner** in connection with the planning of "Operation Barbarossa", General **Walter von Brauchitsch**, commander in chief of the army, issued an order stating that units of the SD would be responsible for "special security matters" in the army's operational area. Although the *Einsatzgruppen* would be operating on their own responsibility, they would depend on the army for logistical support. The order concluded by stating that the special units were empowered to carry out "executive measures against the civilian population."   
  
During May and June 1941, those assigned to the *Einsatzgruppen* gathered at the border police training school at **Pretzsch** in Saxony. **Heydrich** and **Heinrich Müller**, head of the *Gestapo*, reportedly visited them on one or more occasions. The leaders of the *Einsatzgruppen* received their orders from either **Heydrich** or **Bruno Streckenbach**, head of the personnel department of the *RSHA*. Evidence was produced before the Nürnberg Military Tribunal indicating that these orders included the killing of Soviet Jews. **Karl Jäger** of EK3 recalled a meeting of about 50 SS leaders with **Heydrich** in **Berlin**, where **Heydrich** declared that in the event of war with the Soviet Union, the Jews in the east would have to be shot. A *Gestapo* man asked: "We shall shoot the Jews?" **Heydrich** replied: "Of course."

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| Streckenbach |
| B. Streckenbach |

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| Stahlecker |
| F. W. Stahlecker |

Four *Einsatzgruppen* were created, lettered A - D, and attached to Army Group North (EG A - 1,000 personnel – covering the Baltic States to **Leningrad**), Centre (EG B - 655 – Byelorussia to **Moscow**), South (EG C - 700 – northern and central Ukraine) and the 11th Army (EG D - 600 - southernmost Ukraine and the Caucasus), respectively.   
Each of the *Einsatzgruppen* was divided into two or three *Sonderkommandos* (SK) and *Einsatzkommandos* (EK). In theory, the *Sonderkommandos* operated in the army operational areas whilst the *Einsatzkommandos* were to function in the rear army areas. In practice, however, the distinction disappeared. Both *Einsatzkommandos* and *Sonderkommandos* also had temporary sub-units, usually referred to as *Teilkommandos* (Part Detachments). When allocated to a specific city or location they were called *Vorkommandos* (Advance Detachments). *Vorkommando* ***Moskau***, for example, was attached to *Einsatzgruppe* B.

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| Otto Rasch |
| Otto Rasch |

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| Arthur Nebe |
| Arthur Nebe |

As in Poland, the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders and their subordinate officers were carefully selected by **Heydrich** from among the best-educated and dedicated Nazis. Three of the four commanders held doctorates; **Franz Walter Stahlecker** (EG A), **Otto Rasch** (EG C – a double PhD), and **Otto Ohlendorf** (EG D). The commander of *Einsatzgruppe* B was **Arthur Nebe**, then head of the Kripo (*Kriminalpolizei* – Criminal Police). Of the 17 initial SK, EK, and *Vorkommando* leaders, a further 7 held a doctorate. Subsequent leaders included an ex-pastor (**Ernst Szymanowski alias Biberstein**), a physician (**Weinmann**), and a professional opera singer (**Klingelhöfer**). These were clearly no gangsters. They represented those who, in a different time and a different culture, might have been considered among the brightest and the best of their generation.

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| Szymanowski |
| Szymanowski |

On 22 June 1941, approximately 3 million German soldiers invaded the Soviet Union. The four *Einsatzgruppen* followed close on their heels. Until that time, their instructions had all been given orally, and those instructions did not explicitly include the extermination of **all** Jews. On 2 July 1941 **Heydrich** wrote to the Higher SS and Police Leaders (HSSPF) in the occupied Soviet territory setting out the verbal instructions he had given to the *Einsatzgruppen*. Regarding executions, **Heydrich** wrote:

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| Rudolf Lange |
| Rudolf Lange |

"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; People's Commissars; Jews in Party and State employment, and other radical elements (saboteurs, propagandists, snipers, assassins, inciters, etc.)... "   
The list was of those to be executed immediately. However, it is considered very likely that the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders were aware that the longer-term future intention was the killing of Soviet Jews in toto. In January 1942, **Rudolf Lange** of EK 2 wrote:   
"The goal that *Einsatzkommando* 2 had in mind from the beginning was a radical solution to the Jewish problem through the execution of all Jews."

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| Ohlendorf |
| Otto Ohlendorf |

**Felix Landau** was a member of an *Einsatzkommando*, based first in **Lviv (Lwow)** and then in **Drohobycz**. In July 1941 he began to record his daily experiences in a diary, a mixture of saccharin sentimentality and dispassionate brutality:   
"**Lwow** - 5 July 1941... There were hundreds of Jews walking along the street with blood pouring down their faces, holes in their heads, their hands broken and their eyes hanging out of their sockets. They were covered in blood. Some were carrying others who had collapsed. We went to the citadel; there we saw things that few people have ever seen. At the entrance to the citadel there were soldiers standing guard. They were holding clubs as thick as a man's wrist and were lashing out and hitting anyone who crossed their path. The Jews were pouring out of the entrance. There were rows of Jews lying one on top of the other like pigs, whimpering horribly. The Jews kept streaming out of the citadel completely covered in blood. We stopped and tried to see who was in charge of the Kommando. Nobody. Someone had let the Jews go. They were just being hit out of rage and hatred...   
**Drohobycz** - 12 July 1941... At 6:00 in the morning I was suddenly awoken from a deep sleep. Report for an execution. Fine, so I'll just play executioner and then gravedigger, why not?... Twenty-three had to be shot, amongst them ... two women ... We had to find a suitable spot to shoot and bury them. After a few minutes we found a place. The death candidates assembled with shovels to dig their own graves. Two of them were weeping. The others certainly have incredible courage... Strange, I am completely unmoved. No pity, nothing. That's the way it is and then it's all over... Valuables, watches and money are put into a pile... The two women are lined up at one end of the grave ready to be shot first... As the women walked to the grave they were completely composed. They turned around. Six of us had to shoot them. The job was assigned thus: three at the heart, three at the head. I took the heart. The shots were fired and the brains whizzed through the air. Two in the head is too much. They almost tear it off..."   
  
In practice, the *Einsatzgruppen* found most of the political candidates for liquidation had fled. The great majority of executions in the first five weeks of Barbarossa were therefore aimed at those who were immediately accessible – Jewish males, particularly those in leadership positions and members of the intelligentsia. But late July 1941, the killing escalated to include all Jewish men, women and children. If there had ever been any doubt about what Nazi policy was to be in the Soviet Union, during the course of a conversation **Hitler** had with **Göring**, **Lammers, Rosenberg** and **Keitel** on 16 July 1941, it was now made abundantly clear. Victory over the Soviet Union was imminent. To create a "Garden of Eden" in the east, "all necessary measures – shootings, resettlements, etc." would be undertaken. It was fortunate that the Russians had given the order for partisan warfare, for "it gives us the opportunity to exterminate anyone who is hostile to us." **Hitler** did not issue an explicit order (he rarely did), but the intention was obvious. Within a week of this speech, **Himmler** had more than quadrupled the number of SS men operating behind the advancing German army. At least a further 11 battalions of Order Police were assigned to the HSSPF. Local auxiliaries in *Selbstschutz* battalions were recruited; they numbered 33,000 by the end of 1941, 165,000 by June 1942, and 300,000 by January 1943.   
If the task of killing Soviet Jewry with the 3,000 men of the *Einsatzgruppen* had been impossible, by the end of July 1941, the manpower had become available for the execution of the task. By the end of 1941 between 500,000 and 800,000 Jews had been murdered – an average of 2,700 - 4,200 per day.   
  
Communist officials, resistance fighters, POWs, Romany and especially Jews were killed throughout the Soviet Union. The victims were rounded up and taken to secluded sites outside of cities, towns and villages. There they were shot and buried in anti-tank ditches, quarries, gorges and other similar sites. The killers mercilessly murdered men, women and children. The *Einsatzgruppen* and their assistants ultimately killed more than 1.2 million individuals. There were very few survivors of these massacres. Many of the killing squad members drank vast quantities of alcohol to withstand the physical and psychological stress caused by their inhuman and bestial duties. Others found it possible to rationalise their behaviour. In the autumn of 1942, *Obersturmführer* **Karl Kretschmer**, serving with SK 4a (one responsible for the [**Babi Jar**](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/babi_yar.html) massacre) wrote a series of letters to his wife and children:   
"... I am no longer in the area of **Stalingrad** but further north in the middle of the front... The sight of the dead (including women and children) is not very cheering. But we are fighting for the survival or non-survival of our people... As the war is in our opinion a Jewish war, the Jews are the first to feel it. Here in Russia, wherever the German soldier is, no Jew remains. You can imagine that at first I needed some time to get to grips with this... We happen to be in possession of old clothes, which are very much sought after. We can get everything here. The clothes belonged to people who are no longer alive today...   
... We have got to be tough here or else we will lose the war. There is no room for pity of any kind... There are no Jews here anymore...I have already told you about the shooting – that I could not say 'no' here either... We have to eat and drink well because of the nature of our work, as I have described to you in detail. Otherwise we would crack up... If it weren't for the stupid thoughts about what we are doing in this country, the *Einsatz* here would be wonderful, since it has put me in a position where I can support you all very well. Since, as I already wrote to you, I consider the last *Einsatz* to be justified and indeed approve of the consequences it had, the phrase 'stupid thoughts' is not strictly accurate. Rather it is a weakness not to be able to stand the sight of dead people; the best way of overcoming it is to do it more often. Then it becomes a habit..."

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| Franz Six |
| Franz Six |

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| Erwin Schulz |
| Erwin Schulz |

It was a myth that refusal to participate in killings was impossible. Professor Dr **Franz Six**, in charge of *Vorkommando* ***Moskau***:   
"During the war a person could at least try to have himself transferred from an *Einsatzgruppe*. I myself managed to do this successfully… I was not demoted as a result of my transfer and not disadvantaged, apart from remaining on very bad terms with **Heydrich** until his death. There were without doubt cases where people who were transferred from an *Einsatzgruppe* suffered disadvantage. I can no longer recall individual cases. None the less, as far as I know, nobody was shot as a result."   
  
Similarly, **Erwin Schulz**, head of *Einsatzkommando* 5:   
"I do not know of or recall any order that stated that SS chiefs or members of the SD or the police would be sent to concentration camps if they refused to carry out an order. I also never heard of such an order during the course of conversations I had on the subject or indeed from rumours."   
  
There was no attempt to hide or disguise the killings. A *Wehrmacht* officer, Major **Karl Rösler**, stationed in **Zhytomyr**, reported on how he had witnessed an execution in the summer of 1941. Hearing rifle volleys and pistol shots he had hurried towards a railroad embankment, accompanied by many soldiers and civilians. What he saw was so "brutally base that those who approached unprepared were shaken and nauseated." He stood above a ditch with a mound of earth on one side. The wall of the ditch was covered in blood. Policemen were standing around with bloodstained uniforms, soldiers, some in bathing shorts, were congregating in groups, and civilians were watching with their wives and children. The pit so was full of corpses of all ages and sexes that it was not possible to estimate its depth. **Rösler** concluded his report:   
"I have seen many unpleasant things, being a member of the *Freikorps* in 1919, but I have never seen anything like this. I cannot begin to conceive the legal basis on which 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 killed in this way every day."   
  
Very precise records of *Einsatzgruppen* activities were maintained. The commanders were required to send regular operational reports to **Heydrich** in **Berlin**. Many of these reports have survived and provide a chilling catalogue of mass murder. The incoming reports were edited at the RSHA, and distributed to other government agencies. It is known that copies were produced in a suitable format for **Hitler**'s scrutiny. Given the number of military and civilian eyewitnesses of massacres and the wide circulation of the reports, there can be no doubt that the barbaric nature of *Einsatzgruppen* operations were widely known.

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| v.d. Bach-Zelewski |
| v.d.Bach-Zelewski |

Shooting on this scale, particularly of women and children, was destroying the morale of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Some committed suicide, or were admitted to mental asylums. As **Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski** allegedly said to **Himmler** after the latter had witnessed a shooting action at **Minsk** in August 1941:   
"Such men are finished for the rest of their lives! What kind of followers are we creating? Either neurotics or brutes."   
  
As a consequence, it was decided to introduce "a new and better method of killing" – better, that is, for the executioners, not for the victims. The result was the *Gaswagen* ([**gas vans**](http://www.deathcamps.org/gas_chambers/gas_chambers_vans.html)). 15-20 of these had been delivered to the *Einsatzgruppen* by late June 1942. They were used by *Einsatzgruppe* A in **Riga**, and probably in Estonia, Latvia and the **Leningrad region**. *Einsatzgruppe* B utilised them in the **Minsk area**. In the Ukraine, *Einsatzgruppe* C took advantage of the new method, as did *Einsatzgruppe* D in the Crimea and Caucasus. The transition from shooting to gas vans was not entirely successful, the use of the latter being hardly less stressful for the *Einsatzgruppen* than the butchery of the former.   
It was time to move to a new killing phase, one that would involve bringing the victims to the executioners, rather than transporting the killers to their prey. By the late autumn or early winter of 1941, [**Belzec**](http://www.deathcamps.org/belzec/belzec.html) had been surveyed as a prospective killing site, and the first experiments with "Zyklon B" had been conducted at [**Auschwitz**](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/auschwitz.html). The rate of murder was set to increase exponentially in 1942.

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| Cremating the Corpses |
| Cremating the Corpses |

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| Bone Crushing Machine |
| Bone Crushing Machine |

There was now the problem of how to remove the evidence of the *Einsatzgruppen*'s crimes. Special units (**[Sonderkommandos 1005](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/1005.html)**) were activated. They had to exhume and cremate the corpses throughout the *Einsatzgruppen*'s area of operations. Prisoners, mainly Jews, were ordered to undertake this gruesome task. The bodies were stacked between logs of wood and petrol poured over the pyres, which were then set alight. Workers used bone crushing machines or hammers to destroy all that then remained and scattered the ashes or buried them in the pits from which the corpses had been removed. When this was completed the workers were shot. A few of them managed to escape, some surviving to describe their experiences.   
  
In his masterpiece, 'Life and Fate', **Vasily Grossman** wrote an imaginary final letter from his mother. She had been a resident of **Berditchiv** in the Ukraine, where *Sonderkommando* 4a annihilated the Jewish population of 30,000 in September 1941. Although a work of fiction, it provides some of the most eloquent victim testimony:   
"They say that children are our future, but how can one say that of these children? They aren't going to become musicians, cobblers or tailors. Last night I saw very clearly how this whole noisy world of bearded, anxious fathers and querulous grandmothers who bake honey-cakes and goose-necks – this whole world of marriage customs, proverbial sayings and Sabbaths will disappear for ever under the earth. After the war life will begin to stir once again, but we won't be here, we will have vanished – just as the Aztecs once vanished.   
The peasant who brought us the news about the mass graves said that his wife had been crying at night. She'd been lamenting: 'They sew, and they make shoes, and they curry leather, and they mend watches, and they sell medicines in the chemist's. What will we do when they have all been killed?'"   
  
*Einsatzgruppen* did not operate solely in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Soviet Union. They were active in hunting and killing Jews in many of the other countries occupied by the Nazis, including France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Greece, Serbia, and even Tunisia. After the war some *Einsatzgruppen* leaders were [**tried**](http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/einsatztrial.html) in **Nürnberg**. In addition, proceedings were initiated against somewhat in excess of 100 former *Einsatzgruppen* members by West German courts. It is apparent that the great majority of the *Einsatzgruppen* perpetrators were neither indicted nor convicted.

**Justify the following statement: The creation of the gas chambers can be directly linked to the experiences of the Einsatzgruppen.**