

Week Two—The Holocaust System of Systems.

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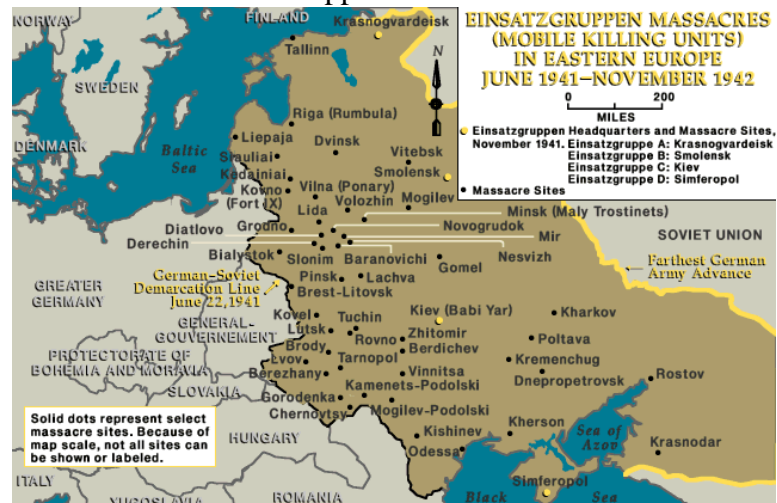
The task at hand for Nazi authorities was truly herculean, requiring meticulous planning, coordination, and implementation. The logistics behind the extermination of millions of Jews required a system of systems approach. Naturally, success also depended on the willing cooperation of all Europeans, not just Germans.

Attempting to transport and quarter the multitudes of Jews in one fell swoop would have overwhelmed the camp system, so the majority were moved into hundreds of ghettos located in Eastern Europe. Administered by Nazi-appointed Jewish councils, ghettos were walled or fenced-off enclosures, effectively imprisoning the Jewish populations under brutal conditions. Some ghettos served as forced-labor camps as well. While some ghettos lingered for years, the Germans closed most down as quickly once they had served their purpose, either executing and burying the residents nearby or deporting them to camps. Regardless, once emptied, the Germans razed the ghettos so as to erase all traces of their part in the system.



One problem confronting German officials was the dearth of railway infrastructure farther east, particularly in the territories of the Soviet Union. As a solution Einsatz Gruppen—

euphemistically called reserve units—were mobile execution units, which conducted operations in assigned areas (i.e., Poland, the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Russia) to round-up and eradicate all Jews. Under the command of the Security Service (Sicherheit Dienst) and Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei), SS and police battalions operated behind the front lines hunting down Jews primarily, but also targeting gypsies, captive Soviet government officials, and handicapped people (i.e., those who were perceived as a burden to society). Often employing the assistance of the local police and populace, the Einsatz Gruppen collected and transported their victims to prepared execution sites and buried them in mass graves. Aside from males, the innocents included women and children regardless of age, who were lined up to the trenches, shot, and thrown in. The killing process continued for hours, as the victims watched, awaiting their turn. When resources were not available, the victims were forced to dig the pits themselves. Understanding the psychological



strains which cold-blooded killing had on the executioners, Heinrich Himmler personally absolved them of murder, explaining it was necessary and for them to be strong. Not all could endure the burden and refused to participate any longer. These Germans were excused and released from duty, suffering no official punishment or apparent judgment. The message was clear: not all Germans were up to the task; however, good Germans would do their duty. Still, as the psychological burden took its toll, the regime began employing mobile gas trucks and facilities to make the system more efficient and to ameliorate the psyche of the executioners. Altogether, the Einsatz Gruppen murdered over one million Jews and other victims in the tens of thousands.

The Nazi regime operated over 20,000 SS-managed camps, falling into three broad categories: satellite, labor, and extermination. Falling under the management of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps, the camp system expanded from 1933 to 1944 as new territories fell under German occupation.

While the Reich imprisoned multitudes of political enemies, religious groups, other minorities, and homosexuals in concentration camps, they were not designated for the Final Solution—though thousands were murdered irrespectively. Satellite camps served as transit centers until room became available in the labor and death camps. Thousands of Jews met their fate in these camps as guards shot them with impunity. As the name implies, labor camps were established in support of the war effort. Though some of the labor was menial, much of it was debilitating and often lethal. Slave laborers, including prisoners of war, bore tunnels into mountains to create weapons factories, and thousands died excavating and carrying by hand rocks from quarries. What is clear, labor camps were no different than death camps for Jews, who received intolerable shelter, sustenance, medical care, and clothing.

The eight death camps (i.e. Maly Trostenets, Treblinka, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec, Auschwitz, and Jesenovac) operated mass gas chambers and incinerators to kill Jews as efficiently as possible. Paradoxically, less than half of all Jewish victims (i.e., 2,700,000) perished in these extermination camps.



The imminent liberation of concentration camps meant no reprieve from death for thousands of Jews. Many were marched out of these camps ahead of the Soviet advance and sent on death marches to the west. Without food, water, clothing, and medical care many collapsed in exhaustion and were summarily executed. Salvation for the few remaining only came once the advance units of the American and British armies advanced into Czechoslovakia and eastern Germany.

What is clear from the documentation surrounding the Final Solution is that the Holocaust system of systems sought to exterminate all European Jews as efficiently and cost effectively as possible. Remarkably, camp officials and guards used every opportunity to torment, torture, and abuse prisoners out of perverse motivations. The Holocaust was more than wholesale killing; it was also suffused with personal hatred.

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Next Week: Concentration Camp Liberations: Collecting the Evidence.