

Einsatzgruppen

(full name, Einsatzgruppen des Sicherheitsdienstes [SD] und der Sicherheitspolizei [Sipo]; Operational Squads of the Security Service and the Security Police), task force of mobile killing units operating in German-occupied territories during World War II. Einsatzgruppen made their first appearance 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 and the Sipo until such time as these formations established their permanent offices; they were immediately behind the advancing military units, and, as in the Reich, they 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.

Six Einsatzgruppen were organized on the eve of the Polish invasion; five were to accompany the invading German armies, and the sixth was to operate in the Poznan area, which was to be incorporated into the Reich as the Warthegau. Each Einsatzgruppe was subdivided into several Einsatzkommandos, one each to an army corps. There were fifteen Einsatzkommandos, each with a complement of one hundred twenty to one hundred fifty men. Einsatzgruppe personnel were recruited from among the SD, Sipo, and SS, on a regional basis. During the invasion of Poland, the Einsatzgruppen were disposed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Einsatzgruppe Commanding Officer Attached to Army Number
of

Commandos

I	Brigadeführer Bruno - Streckenbach	Fourteenth	4
II	Obersturmbannführer - Dr. Emanuel Schafer	Tenth	2
III	Obersturmbannführer - Dr. Ludwig Fischer	Eighth	2
IV	Brigadeführer Lothar Beutel	Fourth	2
V	Brigadeführer Ernst Damzog	Third	3
VI	Oberführer Erich Naumann	Posen	2

The Einsatzgruppen did their work in accordance with policy lines for foreign operations issued by the Sipo and SD. These policy lines had been laid down as early as August 1939 by Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office; RSHA), and by Generalquartiermeister Eduard Wagner, the Wehrmacht representative in that office. The basic instruction was to combat, in enemy countries, elements in the rear of the frontline units who were hostile to the Reich and to Germans.

A more detailed description of the Einsatzgruppen's mission is contained in an order of the day issued by the Eighth Corps: "To conduct counter-espionage, to imprison political suspects, to confiscate arms, and to collect evidence that is of importance to police intelligence work." In practice, "combating hostile elements" was given a broad interpretation and became terror operations on a

grand scale against Jews and the Polish intelligentsia, in which some fifteen thousand Jews and Poles were murdered.

On September 21, 1939, Heydrich sent a high-priority note to the Einsatzgruppe commanders giving instructions for the treatment of Jews in the conquered territories. The Jews were to be rounded up and concentrated in large communities situated on railway lines; Judenrate (Jewish councils; see Judenrat) were to be established; and operations against the Jews were to be coordinated with the civil administration and the military command.

On November 20 of that year, on orders from Berlin, the Einsatzgruppen's operations were terminated and their personnel were absorbed by the permanent SD and Sipo offices in occupied Poland. When the plans were drawn up for the attack on the Soviet Union, ample use was made of the experience these men had gained, and four Einsatzgruppen were reestablished as A, B, C, and D.

Invasion of the Soviet Union (June 1941):

In briefing sessions with the German army commanders on the planned "Operation Barbarossa," Adolf Hitler emphasized that the impending war with the Soviet Union would be a relentless struggle between two diametrically opposed ideologies. Its success would be determined not only by military victories, but also by the ability to root out and destroy the propagators of the rival ideology and its adherents. Hitler entrusted this job, of liquidating the personnel of the Soviet political and ideological apparatus, to Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS and of all German police formations (Reichsfuhrer-SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei). Decree 21, Hitler's order for "Operation Barbarossa," in the section "Instructions for Special Areas," states:

In areas where military operations are being conducted, the Reichsfuhrer-SS, in the name of the Fuhrer, will assume the special duties required for setting up the political administration. . . . In the discharge of these duties the Reichsfuhrer will operate independently and on his own authority. . . . The

Reichsführer will ensure that the pursuit of his objectives will not interfere with military operations. Details will be worked out directly between the High Command and the Reichsführer-SS.

After consultations between Heydrich (acting as Himmler's representative) and Eduard Wagner, Gen. Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander in chief of the army, issued an order stating that for the fulfilling of special security police assignments that went beyond the scope of military operations, special units of the SD would be employed in the army's operational area. These units were to proceed according to the following guidelines: "The special units will operate in the rear of the fighting forces and their task will be to seize archives, to obtain lists of organizations and anti-German societies, and to look for individuals such as exiled former political leaders, saboteurs, and the like; they will uncover any existing anti-German movements and liquidate them; and they will coordinate their activities in these areas with the military field-security apparatus." The order adds that while the Sipo and the SD (including the Einsatzgruppen) would be operating on their own responsibility, as far as logistics were concerned they would be attached to the armed forces and would depend upon the latter for housing, rations, transport, communications, and other matters. To ensure the proper coordination, representatives of the SD and Sipo would be attached to corps and army headquarters. In its concluding section, the order provides that the special units were empowered to take administrative action against the civilian population, on their own responsibility but in cooperation with the military police, and with the approval of the local Wehrmacht commander. (For example, the extermination of the Kiev Jews at Babi Yar was decided on at a meeting held in the office of the military governor of the city, General Eberhardt, with the general attending and concurring in the decision.)

By this order, which faithfully reflects the agreement arrived at by Heydrich and Wagner, the Wehrmacht relieved itself of the task of carrying out mass murder, and restricted its involvement to logistics. However, under the conditions that developed in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union, the

cooperation between the Wehrmacht and the Einsatzgruppen from time to time went beyond the provisions of the agreement, as when military units were deployed to stand guard over individuals or groups of persons who had been condemned to die, or over the area designated for their execution.

Organizing and Training the Einsatzgruppen.

Early in May 1941, the men who had been chosen as candidates for the Einsatzgruppen were assembled in the training school of the German border guard in Pretzsch (a town on the Elbe River, northeast of Leipzig). The school did not have enough space to hold all the candidates, and some had to be quartered in the neighboring towns of Duben and Bad Schmiedeberg. Most of the candidates had come from the RSHA, whose manpower division had ordered the SD and the Sipo to select suitable men for this purpose. Another group of candidates came from the Sipo senior officers' training school in Berlin; yet another group, of 100 men, had been attending an officer candidates' school of the Kriminalpolizei (Criminal Police), and were dispatched from there to join the Einsatzgruppe candidates at Pretzsch.

The commanding officers of the Einsatzgruppen, the Einsatzkommandos, and the Sonderkommandos were chosen by Himmler and Heydrich from a list prepared by Section I of the RSHA; most had been serving as senior officers of the SD (see Appendix, Volume 4). The technical staff of the Einsatzgruppen - radio operators, clerks, interpreters, drivers, and others - were recruited from among the staff of the RSHA and the SS. Three of the Einsatzgruppen - B, C, and D - had attached to them companies of Reserve Police Battalion No. 9, later replaced by men from Battalion No. 3, as well as companies of the Waffen-SS, for special duties.

Each of the reestablished Einsatzgruppen had sub-units, usually called Einsatzkommandos or Sonderkommandos. In theory, the Einsatzkommandos were to be attached to the armed forces behind the lines and the Sonderkommandos to those forces at the front. In practice, however, the

Einsatzgruppen and their sub-units were deployed according to geographic sectors and not according to rear or frontline areas. The distinction between the Einsatzkommandos and the Sonderkommandos evaporated. Both the Einsatzkommandos and the Sonderkommandos also had temporary sub-units, usually referred to as Teilkommandos (lit., "part commandos"). When they were charged specifically with entering a town or city, they were sometimes called Vorkommandos (forward commandos).

The composition of the Einsatzgruppen was as follows:

1. Einsatzgruppe A consisted of Sonderkommandos SK1a, SK1b; and Einsatzkommandos EK2, EK3.

Einsatzgruppe B consisted of Sonderkommandos SK7a, SK7b; Einsatzkommandos EK8, EK9; and Vorkommando (V-KO) Moskau (SK7c).

Einsatzgruppe C consisted of Sonderkommandos SK4a, SK4b; and Einsatzkommandos EK5, EK6.

Einsatzgruppe D consisted of Sonderkommandos SK10a, SK10b; and Einsatzkommandos EK11a, EK11b, EK12.

The first commander of Einsatzgruppe A, SS-Standartenfuhrer Dr. Franz Walter Stahlecker, had about one thousand men at his disposal. Einsatzgruppe A was attached to Army Group North; its area of operations covered the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) and the territory between their eastern borders and the Leningrad district.

The first commander of Einsatzgruppe B, SS-Brigadefuhrer (later Gruppenfuhrer) and Generalleutnant der Polizei Arthur Nebe, had 655 men under his command. The Einsatzgruppe was attached to Army Group Center, and its operational area extended over Belorussia and the Smolensk district, up to the outskirts of Moscow. The sub-unit of Einsatzgruppe B that was

deployed toward Moscow was called Vorkommando Moskau. When the German forces began their withdrawal from Moscow, the Vorkommando was disbanded.

The first commander of Einsatzgruppe C, SS-Standartenfuhrer Dr. Emil Otto Rasch, had seven hundred men under his command; the Einsatzgruppe was attached to Army Group South and covered the southern and central Ukraine.

Einsatzgruppe D, commanded by SS-Standartenfuhrer Professor Otto Ohlendorf, had a complement of six hundred men. It was attached to the Eleventh Army and operated in the southern Ukraine, the Crimea, and Ciscaucasia (the Krasnodar and Stavropol districts).

On the face of it, the units, relatively small in size, had a very large area to cover. However, when they were engaged in mass-murder operations, the Einsatzgruppen were assisted by large forces of German police battalions and local auxiliary police battalions - Ukrainian, Belorussian, Latvian, or Lithuanian. At times they also had rear echelon troops at their disposal, such as garrison battalions, military gendarmeries, or even soldiers of the organisation Todt.

In early June 1941, Bruno Streckenbach, head of Branch I of the RSHA, came to Pretzsch in order to explain, on behalf of Himmler and Heydrich, Hitler's orders concerning the liquidation of the Jews. After the war, Ohlendorf gave evidence on the meeting with Streckenbach before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals, at the subsequent nuremberg proceedings, as did Dr. Walter Blume, who had been the commanding officer of Sonderkommando 7a. In his statement, Blume declared that in June 1941 Heydrich and Streckenbach had briefed them on their assignment of exterminating Jews, and had explained the ideological background. A large number of Einsatzgruppe, Einsatzkommando, and Sonderkommando commanders had taken part in the briefing sessions. Another such session, attended by the commanders of all units and sub-units, took place on June 17, 1941, in Heydrich's office in Berlin.

At this time, Heydrich set out in detail the policy that was to guide the Einsatzgruppen in carrying out their assignments, among them the implementation of the Fuhrer's order to liquidate the Jews. A third such meeting, also very close to the date of the invasion of the Soviet Union (June 22, 1941), was held in the office of the chief of the Ordnungspolizei, Kurt Daluege. It was attended by the senior SS and police officers who had been designated to act as Einsatzgruppe commanders in the various parts of the Soviet Union, when these were occupied by the German army. On July 2, 1941, these officers also received written instructions from Heydrich, which contained the following passage:

The following is the gist of the highly important orders that I have issued to Einsatzkommandos of the Sipo and the SD, with which these two services are called upon to comply...

4) Executions.

The following categories are to be executed:

Comintern officials (as well as all professional Communist politicians); party officials of all levels; and members of the central, provincial, and district committees;

People's commissars;

Jews in the party and state apparatus;

and other extremist elements (saboteurs, propagandists, snipers, assassins, agitators, etc.).

The order affecting the "Jews in the party and state apparatus" encompassed, in practice, all the Jews in the Soviet Union. Einsatzgruppe Report No. 111 of

October 12, 1941, did in fact make it perfectly clear that the purpose was to kill all Jews.

The Einsatzgruppen's Itineraries.

With these orders in mind, the Einsatzgruppen began their march into the Soviet Union, in the footsteps of the German army. Einsatzgruppe A started out from East Prussia, and its units - the Sonderkommandos and Einsatzkommandos - rapidly spread out across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. On June 25, Einsatzgruppe A headquarters entered Kovno at the same time as the advance formations of the army, and at the beginning of July it moved to Riga. The local auxiliary police (made up of Lithuanians or Latvians), together with the Einsatzgruppe's various units, embarked upon the massacre of Jews, mainly in Vilna (Ponary), Kovno (the Ninth Fort), and Riga (Rumbula), as well as in many other cities and towns. Next, Einsatzgruppe A and several of its sub-units advanced toward Leningrad, so as to be able to enter the city together with the Totenkopf Division of the Waffen-SS. When the Leningrad front stabilized, Einsatzgruppe A was for the most part disbanded, and some of its personnel were used to establish and staff the regional SD and Sipo offices. At the end of September 1941 Dr. Stahlecker, the Einsatzgruppe A commander, was also appointed SS and Sipo commander (Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des Sicherheitsdienstes) of Reichskommissariat Ostland. Small and mobile sub-units of Sonderkommandos 1a and 1b continued to "clean up" the area between the Baltic States and the eastern front.

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. At the beginning of August 1941, Einsatzgruppe B headquarters moved to Smolensk, and some of its units were deployed in northern Belorussia, in places such as Borisov, Vitebsk, and Orsha. Two months later the headquarters moved again, to Mozhaisk, while its special advance unit, Vorkommando Moskau, established itself in Maloyaroslavets; both expected to enter Moscow with the Fourth Panzer group of the German army.

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 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. Einsatzgruppe C headquarters and Sonderkommando 4a went to Zhitomir, by way of Volhynia, with 4a carrying out massacres en route, in Dubno and Kremenets. On September 29 and 30, Sonderkommando 4a, commanded by Paul Blobel, perpetrated the mass slaughter of Kiev Jews at Babi Yar. This unit was also responsible for the murder of Kharkov's Jews, in early January 1942. Einsatzkommando 6 marched to the east and undertook the liquidation of the Jews of Krivoi Rog, Dnepropetrovsk, and Zaporozhye, proceeded to Stalino (Donetsk), and reached Rostov-On-Don. Einsatzkommando 5 was then broken up into SD and Sipo teams to staff local offices of the two organizations in such cities as Kiev and Rovno. In Rovno, the capital of Reichskommissariat Ukraine, these teams launched a large-scale Aktion at the beginning of November 1941, in which most of the Jewish inhabitants were murdered.

Einsatzgruppe D, as mentioned, 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).

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 other Soviet nationals, including prisoners of war. Jewish prisoners of war were separated from the rest and put to death at an early stage, in the advance transit camps. 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 killing by shooting, especially of women and children, had a devastating effect on the murderers' mental state, which even heavy drinking of hard liquor (of which they were given a generous supply) could not suppress. This was among the primary factors that led the RSHA in Berlin, in August 1941, 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 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 Sonderkommando 1005 (see Aktion 1005): to open the mass graves, disinter the corpses, cremate them, and spread the ashes over the fields and streams.

In practice, the Einsatzgruppen left behind an immense record of their deeds, in the form of summary reports drawn up in Berlin on the basis of detailed reports submitted by the various units in the field. Among the most comprehensive of these summary reports was the Ereignismeldung der USSR (Report of Events in the USSR), which was first issued on June 23, 1941, and was continued until Report No. 195, dated April 24, 1942. Next, and in continuation, came the Meldungen aus den Besetzten Ostgebieten (Reports from the Occupied Eastern Territories), which began on May 1, 1942, and were kept up until May 21, 1943. In addition, there were the reports on the

operations and the situation of the SD and Sipo in the USSR, covering the period from June 22, 1941, to March 31, 1942.

After the war, the Einsatzgruppe leaders were tried at the subsequent Nuremberg proceedings, in the ninth trial conducted by the Nuremberg Military Tribunals. The trial, *The United States of America v. Otto Ohlendorf et al.*, was presided over by Judge Michael A. Musmanno. It began on July 3, 1947, and ended on April 10, 1948; there were twenty-four defendants. Fourteen of them were sentenced to death, seven to periods of imprisonment ranging from ten years to life, and one to the time already served; two were not tried or sentenced. Four of the defendants were actually executed, and sixteen had their sentences commuted or reduced to periods extending from the time already served to life imprisonment. One defendant was released, one died of natural causes, one committed suicide, and the execution of one was stayed because of the defendant's insanity.

Following the establishment of the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen* (Central Office of the Judicial Administrations of the Lander) at Ludwigsburg, West Germany (see *Ludwigsburger Zentralstelle*), over one hundred more indictments were handed down against *Einsatzkommando* commanders, officers, noncommissioned officers, and privates. In the ensuing trials no death sentences were passed, since the Federal Republic of Germany had abolished capital punishment.