CHAPTER 4

Operation Barbarossa and the Holocaust by Bullets—Top-Down Forces

This chapter explores the top-down forces utilized by the SS leadership to encourage ordinary and moderately antisemitic Germans to participate in the genocide of Jewish men, then women, and finally all Jews, including children and babies. It delineates the SS leadership's central role in driving the extermination of Soviet Jewry. This chapter supports the previous argument that *before* the campaign, the SS leadership desired, but did not directly order, the extermination of Soviet Jewry. More specifically, because ordinary Germans had participated in the killings of fairly large numbers of "Untermenschen" over the previous few years, the SS leadership suspected before Operation Barbarossa that their men might willingly exterminate every Soviet Jew encountered. They could not, however, be certain, and consequently, they felt it unwise to set out by issuing direct orders. Instead, during the invasion Himmler and Heydrich planned to do all they could to socially engineer their desire—the so-called Führer's wish—into reality. I would argue that the SS leadership's rational intention to convert Hitler's desires into reality shares some similarity with the initially uncertain Milgram where, while inventing his baseline procedure, he did all he could to maximize his participants' participation in harm doing.

But if, from the start of the Soviet campaign, there were no direct official orders to kill all Jews, then the "staggering…speed with which the wave of mass murder gathered pace" remains a mystery.[1] The next two chapters aim to shed some new light on this mystery. This depressing chapter in history begins with the so-called Holocaust by bullets.

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Operation Barbarossa

Operation Barbarossa began on 22 June 1941 when three million German troops entered Soviet territory. Following the Wehrmacht came the 3000 or so members of the four Einsatzgruppen units and at least nine thousand Order Police—about 18 battalions in all.[2] As the Germans rapidly advanced into Soviet territory, large numbers of Red Army soldiers were, as Himmler had predicted, captured and sent to Nazi labor camps like Auschwitz I. Himmler had instructed Einsatzkommando Tilsit to carry out executions in response to sniper attacks against Germans. Between 24 and 27 June, Tilsit undertook three separate executions killing a total of 526 (mostly Jewish) Lithuanian men.[3] These deaths signaled the start of the Holocaust in the Soviet interior.[4] Himmler and Heydrich were apparently delighted with this early first effort.[5]

On 25 June, the leader of Einsatzgruppe A, Franz Stahlecker, entered the Lithuanian city of Kaunas (or Kovno).[6] In compliance with Heydrich's orders, Stahlecker assessed the intensity of local antisemitic fervor and released convicts from a prison, thus instigating possibly the first pogrom of the campaign. On 27 June, a colonel in the Wehrmacht unwittingly stumbled on the pogrom. He saw a cheering crowd and, curious as to what was taking place, inquired further.

> …I was told that the 'Death-dealer of Kovno' was at work and that this was where collaborators and traitors were finally meted out their rightful punishment! When I stepped closer, however, I became witness to probably the most frightful event that I had seen during the course of two world wars. […] a blond man of medium height, aged about twenty-five, stood leaning on a wooden club, resting. The club was as thick as his arm and came up to his chest. At his feet lay about fifteen to twenty dead or dying people. […] Just a few steps behind this man some twenty men, guarded by armed civilians, stood waiting for their cruel execution in silent submission. In response to a cursory wave the next man stepped forward silently and was then beaten to death with the wooden club in the most bestial manner, each blow accompanied by enthusiastic shouts from the audience. At the staff office I subsequently learned that other people already knew about these mass executions, and that they had naturally aroused in them the same feelings of horror and outrage as they had in me.[7]

As bizarre as it might sound, it was not unusual for members of the German armed forces to find this brutal hands-on brand of violence so

offensive that they would step in to save the Jewish victims, at least for the time being.[8] During the above three-week-long pogrom, Lithuanians killed about 3500 Jews.[9] Jewish women and children were not targeted. In other locations across the Eastern front, there was more,[10] less, and no interest at all in killing Jews.[11] Lithuanians may not have killed all or even most Jews, but fewer Jews still meant a smaller Soviet "Jewish problem" for the SS to later deal with. On 29 June, Heydrich issued a written order to "remind" the Einsatzgruppen commanders of his earlier verbal instruction to encourage "self-defense circles…."[12]

At this very early stage of the invasion, however, only a minority of German security forces set out to kill all Jews. One salient example occurred as early as 27 June, thus in violation with the Commissar Order, which never demanded such wide-sweeping actions. In the city of Bialystok, Major Weiss encouraged Police Battalion 309 and the Wehrmacht's 221st Security Division to kill over 2000 Jews—men, women, and children.[13] At one point, at least 500 people were herded into a synagogue, which was dowsed in petrol and set alight with a stick of dynamite thrown through a window. When people desperately tried to escape the inferno through the building's windows, Weiss's men mowed them down with machine guns.[14] One German police officer expressed his reservations over what was taking place and was informed, "You don't seem to have received the right ideological training yet."[15] Even though these Germans exceeded their official orders—how are children instigators of "active or passive resistance" and a threat to security?—Matthäus suspects Himmler approved.[16] Massacres early in the campaign where all Jews were killed were, however, exceptions to the rule. Typically, only Jewish men were targeted during these early executions.[17] There were also examples of behavior at the very opposite end of this violence spectrum. For example, for almost a month following the Commissar Order (until mid-July 1941) the 10th Regiment of the 1st SS Brigade chose only to guard bridges.[18] But it was not long before the demands of the SS leadership increased in both clarity and breadth. For example, on 2 July 1941 Heydrich instructed that, "all Jews in state and party positions" were to be executed.[19]

Then at a 16 July meeting that Browning regards as a "turning point" for the Holocaust,[20] Hitler informed a variety of inner-circle Nazis that Soviet territory was to be transformed into a "Garden of Eden."[21] Browning adds that Hitler, per usual, did not give explicit orders, but the meaning behind his words was clear. "What role could

Jews have in a German Garden of Eden?"[22] Congruent with Himmler and Heydrich's strategy of controlled escalation, the next day the broadest killing orders yet were committed to writing for the first time: From 17 July 1941, according to Heydrich, "all Jews" in the Soviet interior were to be shot.[23]

Einsatzgruppe B commander, Artur Nebe, suggested around mid-July 1941 that with so few men, what was demanded was simply unachievable.[24] Nevertheless, some leaders in the field came up with their own solution to this problem. For example, in early July the German security police in Kaunas formed a battalion consisting of Lithuanians, which came under the control of Karl Jäger's Einsatzkommando 3 (a sub-unit of Stahlecker's Einsatzgruppe A).[25] Also in early July, a fifth Einsatzgruppe was formed.[26] As early as 27 June 1941, Himmler reacted to the emerging manpower issue when he commandeered his Kommandostab Reichsführer SS brigades from the army (a total of 25,000 men), arguing, "I need these units for other tasks."[27] Out of the 25,000 men, Himmler only intended to use Higher SS and Police Leader Friedrich Jeckeln's 7000-strong SS Brigade One and SS and Police Leader Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski's 4000-strong SS Cavalry Brigade to kill civilians.[28] There was also another SS Brigade headed by Higher SS and Police Leader Hans-Adolf Prützmann.[29] These men under Himmler's "personal command" mainly provided a second wave to the Einsatzgruppen's first murderous sweep of the new territories.[30] According to Breitman, the men in these Brigades were, relatively speaking, "a less politicized force than the Einsatzgruppen," and "not part of a political-ideological elite."[31]

In terms of their destructive tasks, how did these ideologically more moderate Germans fare? By 10 July, Himmler had decided to use Bach-Zelewski's men to search for Jews hiding in the Pinsk or Pripet marshes to the east of Lublin. About a week later, on 19 July, these men received orders to engage in the mass murder of all Jews.[32] These orders—directly from Himmler—were repeated on 27 July.[33] Although like many units elsewhere, Bach-Zelewski's men found it fairly stressful to execute Jewish men, they found shooting women and children greatly exacerbated their stress.[34] The existence of psychological difficulties among the execution forces is confirmed in the letters these men sent back to their families in Germany.[35]

Shooters were not the only ones to suffer from intense bouts of stress. Early in the Soviet campaign, SS-Obersturmführer August Häfner

described Sonderkommando 4a leader Paul Blobel's mental breakdown in July 1941, and his desperate call for a less stressful and more efficient killing method.

> I found my unit, they were all running around like lost sheep. I realized that something must have happened and asked what was wrong. Someone told me that [Standartenführer] Blobel had had a nervous breakdown and was in bed in his room. […] He was talking confusedly. He was saying that it was not possible to shoot so many Jews and that what was needed was a plough to plough them into the ground. He had completely lost his mind.[36]

Other squad commanders who did not have to directly kill anybody also proved susceptible to mental breakdowns, including Einsatzkommando 3's Karl Jäger,[37] Higher SS/Police Leader Bach-Zelewski,[38] and (twice) Einsatzgruppe B commander Nebe.[39]

As Himmler and Heydrich had suspected, the order to shoot defenseless civilians *en masse* generated what the men in the field themselves termed Seelenbelastung or "burdening of the soul."[40] The SS Cavalry Brigade's mass shootings of all Jews in the Pripet marshes started to flounder. Similarly, despite Einsatzkommando Tilsit's promising early efforts, Kwiet notes that some of the shooters also started to struggle to implement their orders.

> [T]he attrition rate from psychological problems connected to the killings was not insignificant. Some marksmen in *EK* Tilsit succumbed to feelings of nausea and nervous tension during the massacres. […] In many cases killers suffered vomiting attacks or developed severe eczema or other psychosomatic disorders.[41]

In fact, when Einsatzkommando Tilsit was instructed to also shoot women and children, a small proportion of the men flatly refused to do so. These men were pulled out of the extermination campaign.[42] Such cases of insubordination between the end of July and mid-August of 1941 caused a patently frustrated Himmler to regularly criticize his Einsatzgruppen and police forces.[43] To make matters even more stressful for Himmler, the Einsatzgruppen commanders were instructed on 1 August 1941 that, "the Führer [was] to be kept informed continually from here about the work of the Einsatzgruppen in the East…."[44]

With Hitler having implied only two weeks earlier that he desired that all Jews be shot, Himmler must have wondered if his men were up to the task. The SS leadership was equally interested in knowing how far their officers would go and, as a result, they developed "an almost obsessive interest in receiving information about events in the field."[45] The day after Hitler's request, 2 August, Himmler criticized his SS Cavalry for their "soft behavior," and again demanded they kill more Jews.[46] Both Himmler and Heydrich became notorious for categorizing functionaries as either "soft" or "hard."[47] In response to Himmler, Bach-Zelewski's SS Cavalry Brigade and some local militias continued to shoot at least 3000 Jewish males over the age of five on a daily basis.[48] However, despite Himmler's direct order that the Pinsk action was to be completed, the men flatly refused—thus disobeying direct orders—to kill *all* Jews. This refusal was indicative that these men deemed Himmler's orders unacceptable—tasks they obviously placed outside the parameters of their *Zone of Indifference*. In fact, by the evening of 8 August the action was abandoned.[49]

To halt this kind of insubordination, Himmler and many other senior SS officers below him personally visited the troops in the field and directly instructed them to do as the SS-Reichsführer wanted and kill more Jews.[50] Because the men were struggling, during these visits Himmler also attempted to personally reinforce, as dictated by Nazi ideology, the great necessity of the men's difficult duties.[51] If this did not have the desired effect and the men still refused to kill all Jews, the SS leadership applied more coercive techniques to encourage them to do what they desired. For example, during field visits, Himmler and his most senior commanders told their men that having shot Jewish men they had to eliminate the risk of revenge attacks by also killing the women and children.[52] Officers in the field soon started to rely on this justification for their destructive actions. One, for example, wrote in a letter to his wife, "But we are fighting this war for the survival and non-survival of our people. […] My comrades are literally fighting for the existence of our people."[53] As in Milgram's web of obligation, once one starts moving in such a radical direction, suddenly deciding to stop becomes increasingly difficult. Abruptly stopping, for example, would not erase the fact that, by any definition, these Germans had already become killers of civilians. Primo Levi more specifically terms this manipulative mafia-like technique the "bond of complicity"[54]—where, as Hannah Arendt notes, Germans in the East were encouraged to kill at least one person, and

on performing this "irreversible act" they then entered a "community of violence" that suddenly and forever cut them off from "respectable society."[55] After this, there could be no going back.

If Himmler's persuasions failed to work, one officer noted the SS leadership had other, perhaps even more "malicious," strategies. "Himmler issued an order stating that any man who no longer felt able to take the psychological stresses should report to his superior officer. These men were to be released from their current duties and would be detailed for other work back home."[56] Himmler planned to replace any dropouts with new men. But, this seemingly attractive offer was an "evil trick" designed to highlight those who were "too weak" to be an officer.[57] The officer also suspected (correctly as it turned out) that any declaration of softness would be detrimental to their career path. As Westermann states, "In cases where a final determination was made by the SS-Reichsführer against a policeman, the remark 'unsuited for duties in the East' was added to his personnel file, precluding the opportunity for further promotion."[58] To accept the offer to be released from shooting duties, the men had to be willing to dent the quality of their organizational membership—along with all the fruits associated with it.[59] As a last resort, Himmler could and did fall back on the "Führer Principle" that required "unquestioning obedience to a single leader."[60] As Breitman observes, the SS leadership relied heavily on "the weight of authority to override qualms of conscience or simple distaste for unpleasant tasks."[61]

One limitation of these and other top-down initiatives designed to socially engineer what the SS leadership desired was that they did nothing to physically shield the shooters from the cause of their stress. The closest Himmler came to suggesting such an initiative was when he told Bach-Zelewski's cavalry that, "All [male] Jews must be shot. Drive Jewish females into the swamps."[62] Himmler, it seems, was trying to spare his men from the intense mental anguish associated with being directly responsible for murdering women. The quicksand, Himmler envisioned, would do the dirty work for them. However, the quality of his idea hints at the SS-Reichsführer's desperate state. In early August, SS Sturmbannführer Franz Magill informed Himmler that his idea had failed. "The driving of women and children into the marshes did not have the expected success, because the marshes were not so deep that one could sink. After a depth of about a meter there was in most cases solid ground (probably sand) preventing complete sinking.…"[63]

These women and children—about 20,000 people—lived for another year until they were killed during an independent sweep.[64]

Further north, Gustav Lombard, the commander of the Mounted Unit of the 1st SS Cavalry Regiment, continued to push his men hard: "Not one male Jew is to remain alive, not one remnant family in the villages."[65] Between 1 and 11 August, Lombard's men killed about 1000 Jewish men, women, and children per day.[66] It is no coincidence that soon afterward Himmler promoted Lombard but demoted Magill.[67] Certainly, this was, as Matthäus notes, one effective way to ensure that the "…unit commanders of the Security and Order Police got the message about the desired course of action and adapted in order to please their superiors. Clearly, these officers were talking to each other and observing what their colleagues elsewhere were doing."[68]

Finally the SS-Reichsführer "Understands"

Himmler, incensed by the refusal of some men to carry out his orders, and constantly reminded of their emotional difficulties, asked Einsatzgruppe B commander Nebe on 15 August 1941 to organize an execution while he (Himmler) was in Minsk.[69] Having heard so much fuss, Himmler wanted to "see what one of these 'liquidations' really looked like."[70] The SS-Reichsführer's Chief of Personal Staff, Karl Wolff, later stated that, "from his own mouth," Himmler had never seen people killed before.[71] Nebe, in the presence of Bach-Zelewski, arranged for about 100 people to be executed—two of whom were women. Before the mass shooting, Himmler conveyed an air of casual indifference as he asked the Jews some questions. However, his blasé attitude disintegrated as the first volley of shots was fired. His lack of experience of killing was exposed to all present.

> Both Wolff and Bach-Zelewski remembered that Himmler was shaken by the murders. "Himmler was extremely nervous," Bach-Zelewski testified. 'He couldn't stand still. His face was white as cheese, his eyes went wild and with each burst of gunfire he always looked at the ground.'[72]

Much as in the first Obedience pilot series where some participants engaged in avoidance-type behaviors, Himmler looked away from the disturbing things happening in front of him; unlike the executioners, who could not do so.[73] Kwiet notes the inspection "caused Himmler

nausea (Unwohlsein) and symptoms of nervous collapse."[74] When the two women lay down to be shot members of the squad lost their nerve, and fired badly, injuring, rather than killing them. At that point, Himmler "panicked [and] […] jumped up and screamed at the squad commander: 'Don't torture these women! Fire! Hurry up and kill them!'"[75] This event illustrates how Himmler's idea of shooting did not equate with the task's disturbing perceptual reality. "Almost fainting, pale, limbs quivering" Himmler had come to understand personally the problem his men were facing.[76] Bach-Zelewski must have felt vindicated because he then told Himmler, "*Reichsführer*, those were only a hundred. […] Look at the eyes of the men in this *Kommando*, how deeply shaken they are! These men are finished [*fertig*] for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages!"[77] Adolf Eichmann felt similarly. "I said [to the local SS Commander in Lwów] young people are being made into sadists. How can one do that? Simply bang away at women and children? That is impossible. Our people will go mad or become insane…."[78]

As the leading figure present at the Minsk execution, Himmler felt compelled to try to reduce his men's distress by providing them with a variety of strain resolving justifications. He reminded them that they need not feel guilty over what they did because—relying on the ability to displace individual responsibility elsewhere in the division of labor—they were only following his, and therefore Hitler's, orders. Somewhat related to this, Himmler understood, as presumably they should, that these difficult and repulsive tasks were absolutely necessary. Finally, Himmler reminded the men that although vermin has a purpose in life, this did not mean that humankind could not defend itself.[79] This kind of strain resolving speech was in line with Himmler's preconceived strategy of providing the men with a reason to kill.[80] On the eve of a *Judenaktionen*, execution squads were purposefully flooded with a deluge of antisemitic propaganda—speeches, literature, films, and documentaries.[81] Nonetheless, as this event—and the last month or so—had illustrated, a determined Himmler did everything he could think of to best ensure his men killed all Jews.[82]

After the mass shooting in Minsk, Himmler, Wolff, Bach-Zelewski, and Nebe visited a recently formed ghetto, which included a large institution housing the mentally ill. Himmler, who by this time had clearly calmed down, suggested in strain resolving, euphemistic terms that Nebe "release" (i.e., kill) the patients.[83] But for reasons discussed below, the

shooters found killing such people nerve wracking. In fact, Nebe had already informed his deputy Paul Werner that he (Nebe) "could not ask his troops to shoot these incurably insane people."[84] Nebe therefore inquired how Himmler thought he might carry out the task. Himmler replied "that today's event had brought him to the conclusion that death by shooting was certainly not the most humane"[85] and asked Nebe "'to turn over in his mind' various other killing methods more humane than shooting."[86] This was not a throwaway request. Himmler knew that Nebe had overcome similar killing-related obstacles during his time working in the T4's euthanasia program.[87] This single conversation, as we shall see, powerfully influenced the fate of massive numbers of Jews and other groups such as the German Gypsies, who were also forced into the Polish ghettos.[88]

Pilot Studies in Killing Mid-to-Late 1941

Nebe went on to consult a former colleague from the euthanasia program, chemist Albert Widmann, one of the inventors of the bottled (pure) carbon monoxide gassing technique. Widmann came from the Reich Security Main Office's (RSHA) Criminal Technology Institute in Berlin. During the middle of September 1941, Nebe and Widmann engaged in their first ad hoc experiment. Just as Milgram had done by introducing a wall into his basic procedure, if Nebe and Widmann were to successfully diminish the "burdening of the soul," they would need to reduce the perceptual intensity associated with the act of harming. The duo's first experiment using explosives intuitively moved in this direction, but failed to achieve the goal. "Twenty-five mentally ill people were locked into two bunkers in a forest outside Minsk. The first explosion killed only some of them, and it took much time and trouble until the second explosion killed the rest. Explosives therefore were unsatisfactory."[89] Wilhelm Jaschke, a captain in Einsatzkommando 8, provides a more detailed account of what happened.

> The sight was atrocious. The explosion hadn't been powerful enough. Some wounded came out of the dugout crawling and crying. […] The bunker had totally collapsed. […] Body parts were scattered on the ground and hanging in the trees. On the next day, we collected the body parts and threw them into the bunker. Those parts that were too high in the trees were left there.[90]

Obviously, this pilot was a total failure.

A month later, in October 1941, a group of men under Odilo Globocnik (commander of Lublin's SS and Police) independently developed a remarkably similar method of killing. Their technique required victims to lie in a ditch head-to-toe in batches of ten. Then, Globocnik's men would seek cover and lob hand grenades on top of them. Again, body parts filled the air. Although this method enabled the perpetrators to avoid the horrific visual spectacle when killing, occasionally some victims were not killed outright. The severely wounded required what the perpetrators, using strain resolving euphemistic language, called "mercy shots"—a visually disturbing task they did not enjoy. Though Globocnik's men are believed to have killed about 75,000 civilians using this technique,[91] it would seem that its distasteful side effects led to the grenade technique's eventual abandonment.

Two months earlier in August 1941, hundreds of miles away in Austria's Mauthausen concentration camp, Himmler had (as part of the 14f13 program) begun organizing for those prisoners no longer capable of labor to be gassed at the T4 facility in Hartheim, located about 30 kilometers to the west.[92] This approach was costly and time-consuming, and so in October—the same month Globocnik's men were trialing their grenade killing technique—staff at Mauthausen started experimenting with a new method of their own. Inmates sentenced to death were deceived into thinking they were to have their photograph taken. After being instructed to stand opposite a camera-like device and pressing their back up against a section of wall vertically lined with small holes, an SS man on the other side would then surreptitiously shoot the inmate in the back of the neck. After the execution, another inmate would quickly transfer the body to an adjoining mortuary and clean away all traces of what had just taken place, resetting the scene for the next victim. This shooting technique was capable of killing about 30 inmates per hour.[93] However, this killing method must have been abandoned because up until February 1942 Mauthausen continued shipping its unproductive prisoners to Hartheim.[94] The prisoner manifest at Mauthausen continued to grow and so did the expense of getting rid of so-called useless mouths. Camp staff continued to search for a better—cheaper, efficient yet, for the perpetrators, inoffensive—means of ending the lives of unproductive prisoners.

Back in the Soviet interior, the failure of Nebe and Widmann's explosives experiment did not dent their motivation to continue searching for

a more "humane" way of killing civilians. At an asylum in Mogilev, the duo embarked on a second experiment. Nebe, with Widmann's help, drew on his own previous experience and intuition to develop a method of killing that he thought ordinary Germans might willingly use. Nebe recalled an experience many years earlier when, after having driven home drunk one evening, he nearly killed himself after failing to turn the vehicle's engine off inside a garage.[95] Drawing on this near-death experience, Nebe connected one end of a hose to the exhaust pipe of a running motor vehicle and the other end to a hermetically sealed room containing 20–30 mentally ill patients. The people inside the room soon died. A cheap, abundant, and mobile alternative gas to that used in the T4 euthanasia program had been found.

Widmann's trial after the war revealed that, "Nebe discussed the technical aspects of the idea with Dr. Heess and together they brought the proposal before Heydrich who adopted it."[96] When Heydrich caught wind of this experiment, he contacted some subordinates in the RSHA, and they asked Friedrich Pradel and his chief mechanic Harry Wentritt[97] if exhaust gas could be directed into a truck's sealed cargo cabin. The reasoning behind this idea was because "the firing squads in Russia suffered frequent nervous breakdowns and needed [what Pradel termed] a "more humane" method of killing."[98] Based on Nebe's idea, Wentritt constructed the first exhaust gas van prototype and in early November a killing pilot test was conducted on a group of Soviet POWs in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.[99] The results were so satisfactory that from November 1941 the van prototype was put into production.[100] The first vans constructed in Wentritt's garage were sent to the East.

As Nebe and Widmann conducted their trial-and-error experiments in the East, in Auschwitz I a similar yet completely independent set of experiments was taking place. Soon after the start of Operation Barbarossa, Soviet POWs began arriving at Auschwitz I. The camp's Commandant, Rudolf Höss, had been ordered to immediately execute the officer ranks.[101] The Soviet officers were shot in small groups at the infamous Black Wall.[102] Despite initial enthusiasm, the German guards soon tired of the bloody task. As elsewhere, Höss and his men "had had enough of…the mass killings by firing squad ordered by Himmler and Heydrich."[103] The shootings were moved to a more secluded location, and it was not long before the task started to fall on the shoulders of a select few who decided,

> it would be more efficient to bring the condemned to the crematorium and kill them in the mortuary. "The walls were stained with blood, and in the background there lay the corpses of those already shot," [Pery] Broad [who worked in Auschwitz's Political Department] wrote after the war. "A wide stream of blood was flowing towards the drain in the middle of the hall. The victims were obliged to step quite close to the corpses and formed a line. Their feet were stained with blood; they stood in puddles of it. […] The right-hand man of the camp leader, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Palitzsch, did the shooting. He killed one person after another with a practiced shot in the back of the neck." The stench was so foul that in the summer of 1941 the chief of the political department, Grabner, prevailed on Schlachter to install a more sophisticated ventilation system that not only extracted the air he found sickening but also brought in a fresh supply from outside.[104]

Höss' deputy, Karl Fritzsch, also soon tired of these mass shootings. One day when Höss was away, Fritzsch decided to pursue an experiment. The idea for his experiment was stimulated by the camp's omnipresent vermin problem: Some of Fritzsch's men had been sent back to Germany to receive training in the use of Zyklon-B, an effective and deadly pesticide. Zyklon-B consisted of small pellets that turned into gas when exposed to oxygen at a temperature of (or above) 25.7 degrees Celsius.[105] If Zyklon-B could easily kill vermin, it probably could kill humans as well.

On 3 September 1941 (less than two weeks before Nebe's experiments), a large group of Soviet and Polish prisoners were placed in a sealed detention cell known as Block 11. Pellets of the pesticide were then dropped into a small number of re-sealable vents in the roof. The victims died soon afterward.[106] Upon Höss's return, Fritzsch replicated his experiment. Höss later admitted being surprised that Zyklon-B killed the victims so quickly. "A short, almost smothered cry, and it was all over."[107] And it was cheap—it was established that around this point in time, it costs less than one US cent per victim killed.[108] But most pleasing for Höss was that he was "relieved to think that we were to be spared all those blood-baths…."[109] Unlike stressful shootings, for Höss "the gassings had a calming effect on me…."[110] By instituting what Höss and his men found to be a less stressful method of killing, Fritzsch had secured for his German executioners a feeling of sufficient indifference needed to ensure they remained within their *Zone of Indifference*. Consequently, Himmler's higher "orders for actions" had, thanks to Fritzsch, become sufficiently inoffensive and thereafter "unquestionably acceptable."[111]

After Fritzsch's experiments, Block 11 was abandoned and the morgue where Gerhard Palitzsch had been undertaking his shootings was converted into a gassing facility. The morgue had an attached crematorium so the victims' bodies would not have to be carted through the camp streets for disposal. Conversion of the mortuary into a gas chamber both reduced prisoner awareness of gassings[112] and made the killings more efficient.[113] The morgue's new ventilation system, initially installed to remove the nauseating smells generated by the mass shootings, serendipitously contributed to the viability of the gassing process by rapidly expelling the poisonous gas.[114] With little delay between gassings, bodies could be transferred to the incinerator located close by in the crematorium.[115] Thus was invented the gas chamber/body disposal unit called Crematorium I, which stimulated a major shift in Nazi killing techniques. Crematorium I's 77.28 square meter gas chamber[116] was capable of killing up to 900 prisoners per gassing[117] several times per day. The only limiting factor was the crematorium's 70-body per day disposal capacity.[118]

As the end of 1941 approached, increasing numbers of prisoners—Soviet officers and non-workers targeted by Operation 14f13—were cheaply gassed and disposed of on-site, thus eliminating the need to shoot the former and, somewhat expensively, ship the latter by train to a T4 gas chamber hundreds of miles away in Germany.[119] Word about Fritzsch's discovery must have spread quickly because soon after the fall of 1941 Mauthausen in Austria started constructing a permanent Zyklon-B gas chamber.[120] Upon the gas chamber's completion in March 1942, transports of prisoners to the T4 facility at Hartheim ceased. On-site gassings with Zyklon-B at Mauthausen continued to 28 April 1945.[121]

Back at Auschwitz I, on 1 October 1941 Karl Bischoff was hired to manage the construction of the massive 100,000-person satellite camp that Himmler had promised to IG Farben officials back in March 1941.[122] This new camp, located about 1.5 kilometers from the main camp, was called Auschwitz II, but is now more infamously known as Auschwitz-Birkenau. Soon after hiring Bischoff, the late fall weather caused an increase in the Soviet POW death rate.[123] The advancing cold and damp conditions, in conjunction with Auschwitz I's new efficient gassing method, caused an accumulation of bodies requiring cremation. Furthermore, Bischoff anticipated on the horizon a second and much greater body disposal problem: Himmler's 100,000-person

satellite camp would, through the attrition associated with a camp with little food or heating, likely generate an even greater number of bodies in need of disposal. On 11 November, Bischoff addressed the first relatively minor problem with a plan to increase Crematorium I's 70-body per day incineration capacity. He did so by requesting that engineer Kurt Prüfer from the firm Topf & Sons (designers and builders of Crematorium I) install a third incinerator.[124] The potentially greater second problem was addressed during a meeting on 21 and 22 October 1941 when Prüfer convinced Bischoff to commission his company to build an industrial-sized crematorium. The new structure was to be built behind Crematorium I in Auschwitz I.[125] Prüfer estimated that this massive crematorium would be capable of incinerating about 1440 bodies every 24 hours.[126] This industrial crematorium even came with an elevator, making it easier to transport any bodies in excess of this number to what Bischoff and Prüfer anticipated would be two large basement-level morgues.[127]

By mid-1941 to late 1941, then, as a result of experiments conducted by a variety of Nazi officials in places as far apart as Minsk, Mogilev, Lublin, Auschwitz I, and Mauthausen, new killing techniques had been discovered in an effort to find less stressful methods of disposing of large numbers of civilians than those offered by military-style mass shooting. Most of these experiments failed, or for some reason or another proved unviable, but as will be shown, further refinements—ironing out the kinks—ensured that Nebe and Fritzsch's discoveries would gain prominence. With exhaust fumes (carbon monoxide) and Zyklon-B, from September 1941 the Nazis had two cheap, plentiful, and mobile gases. They were the final remaining ingredient Himmler and Heydrich needed to convert the "Führer's wish" into a reality. The gaps in the theoretical formula that made total extermination possible were closing and a feasible "rough outline" was emerging.[128] The gassing option was now a topic that any ambitious, goal-orientated, problem-solving Nazi bureaucrat could raise in discussions of how to rationally and permanently resolve the "Jewish question." September 1941 is therefore another important date in the history of the Holocaust. With Germany on the verge of gaining total hegemony over continental Europe, exterminating all of European Jewry was becoming increasingly possible. These discoveries therefore injected enormous power into any decision to exterminate European Jewry.[129] However, the careful design, construction, and testing of a large-scale gassing enterprise would take some time. So in the

succeeding months after Himmler observed the mid-August mass execution in Minsk, the shootings had to continue.

The Holocaust by Bullets Continues

Himmler's insistence that shootings continue saw more squad leaders directly confront the SS-Reichsführer over the effect that the "burdening of the soul" was having on their men.[130] By 1942, Heinz Jost, the new commander of Einsatzgruppe A, had become so concerned about the mental state of some of his men that he felt it necessary to directly challenge Himmler. Jost, however, got no further than others before him. Himmler snapped back, "Are you a philosopher? What is the meaning of this? What do you mean, problems? All that is concerned are our orders."[131] Himmler's response may have been strategic. By refusing to sympathize with his squad leaders' concerns, he ensured that most returned to their troops with nothing but bad news: They had to follow the SS-Reichsführer's original command. The leaders in the field would keep pushing their men until they grew accustomed to their grisly tasks, or else broke down. When some did break down, Himmler simply advised that these men be sent home and replaced with new shooters. As Gustave Fix of Sonderkommando 6 said, "I would also like to mention that as a result of the considerable psychological pressures, there were numerous men who were no longer capable of conducting executions and who thus had to be replaced by other men."[132] Without access to new killing methods, Himmler must have felt this was the only way to deal with the ongoing problem with shooter stress.

Himmler's attrition and replacement policy were likely to have had another, albeit unanticipated, effect on the rates of killing. As Arendt insightfully noted, time saw the attrition and replacement policy eventually produce a concentration of ordinary men who differed from the ordinary men who dropped out—they could more regularly handle the intense strain associated with their bloody tasks.[133] Therefore, the Germans who remained differed significantly from those who dropped out in that the former were not just willing, they were also able. Consider, for example, Einsatzkommando 3's leader Karl Jäger who submitted a ledger-style progress report to Berlin that denoted over 130,000 victims killed between 7 July and 25 November 1941. Before

presenting this astounding statistic, Jäger wrote, "Following the formation of a raiding squad under the command of SS-Obersturmführer Hamann and *8-10 reliable men* from the Einsatzkommando the following actions were conducted in cooperation with Lithuanian partisans" [italics added].[134] Such "reliable men"—selected by superiors because of their "strong nerves"[135]—earned the term "Dauer-Schützen" (permanent shooters).[136]

It would seem, therefore, that the SS leadership's gradually escalating orders and exertion of unrelenting top-down pressure started to have its desired effect. In June 1941, only men were targeted; however, by July women were regularly being killed. And by mid-August children were targeted.[137] This general pattern—initial apprehension through to embracing the shooting of all Jews—is reflected in the body counts. Consider the Einsatzgruppen, for example. From 22 June to mid-August 1941—that is seven weeks into Operation Barbarossa and over a month after the first direct orders were issued that all Jews be killed—the numbers of Jews shot varied from squad to squad, and region to region. Karl Jäger's Einsatzkommando 3 achieved unusually high numbers; 9188 civilians shot (10% of whom were women, with children spared).[138] Conversely, the entire Einsatzgruppe D commanded by Otto Ohlendorf only shot 4425 Jews during the same period.[139] By the end of July, the sum total of victims killed by all Einsatzgruppen units came to 62,805 civilians,[140] most of whom (about 90%) were Jews.[141] The victims were again almost exclusively males.[142] However, after mid-August the death toll rapidly escalated. In the two weeks ending the month, Jäger's Einsatzkommando 3 killed 33,000 civilians (including an increasing proportion of females and now also children). The same pattern applied to the previously sluggish Einsatzgruppe D whose death toll before the end of September rose to 36,000.[143] From August onward, entire Jewish communities started disappearing. Perhaps even to the surprise of Himmler and Heydrich, the German security forces and their Eastern European collaborators ended up exterminating about 1.4 million Jews.[144] In his summary of these events, Friedländer captures this almost exponential escalation in death rates and the ongoing mystery surrounding them:

> There is something at once profoundly disturbing yet rapidly numbing in the narration of the anti-Jewish campaign that developed in the territories

> newly occupied by the Germans or their allies. History seems to turn into a succession of mass killing operations and, on the face of it, little else. […] All there is to report, it seems, is a rising curve of murder statistics, in the North, the Center, the South, and the Extreme South.[145]

Conclusion

What factors explain this rapid change from small- to large-scale slaughter? It would seem the SS leadership's persuasive, forceful, and sometimes coercive orders exerted a key top-down pressure. As Bloxham and Kushner argue, Himmler, often after meetings with Hitler, was instrumentally involved in "driving the murder process" forward.[146] And once it was clear that all Jews were to be killed, shooters either pulled out or continued to participate. Those that remained were the men capable of fulfilling their superior officers' seemingly incontestable orders. As Matthäus argues, "Undoubtedly, encouragement from above had the effect of speeding things up."[147] Thus, it is tempting to argue that obedience to authority played *the* key role in these destructive actions. When, however, a so-called tendency to obey is used to explain obedience, the logic is tautological, as was the case with Milgram's theoretical assertions (see Volume 1). Nevertheless, the perpetrators later interpreted their own actions in this way: They just followed orders from above. And the shooters frequently looked lost for words to find a better explanation. But, despite a common reliance on this defense, the subsequent war crimes trails highlight a glaring weakness. Take, for example, a question by one judge directed at Ohlendorf's assistant, SS Lieutenant Colonel Willy Seibert, who adamantly claimed that he was *only* following orders.

> "Now…after receiving an order…from a superior officer, to shoot your own parents, would you do so?" He blinked his puffy eyes as if to prolong his deliberations and then scanned the courtroom. […] Then, taking a deep breath, he expelled the words like one who had been hit in the chest: 'Mr President, I would not do so.'[148]

And as shown, some Germans refused to participate in the shootings. The shooters, therefore, did not *have* to follow their orders. Instead, they *chose* to do so.

When, however, one considers the interactive effect of the SS leadership's unrelenting top-down pressure *in conjunction* with bottom-up

forces generated by those in the killing field (men who happened to be armed with a means of inflicting harm that, in terms of perceptual stimulation, could potentially be lowered to the point that killing other humans became psychologically less burdensome), the mystery behind Friedländer's so-called rising curve of murder statistics becomes much more comprehensible.

Notes

1. Matthäus (2007, p. 219).
2. Breitman (2000, p. 41). For variations on the variety and number of security forces personnel, see Browning (1995, p. 105) and Kwiet (1993, p. 78).
3. Kwiet (1998, pp. 4, 6).
4. Breitman (2000, p. 43).
5. Longerich (2012, p. 525).
6. Kwiet (1998, p. 14).
7. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, pp. 28–29).
8. See, for example, Arendt (1984, p. 190).
9. Kwiet (1998, p. 14).
10. See, for example, Matthäus (2004, pp. 260–261).
11. See, for example, Corni (2002, p. 34), Gerlach (1997, p. 56, as cited in Matthäus 2004, p. 273), and Longerich (2005, p. 209).
12. Quoted in Browning (2004, p. 228). See also Cesarani (2016, p. 358).
13. See Goldhagen (1996, pp. 188–191) and Matthäus (2004, p. 255).
14. See also Browning (2004, p. 233).
15. Quoted in Matthäus (2007, p. 224).
16. Matthäus (2007, p. 224). See also Browning (2000, p. 142).
17. Kwiet (1998, p. 17). See also Streim (1981, p. 89, as cited in Kershaw 2000, p. 117).
18. Matthäus (2004, p. 256).
19. Quoted in Streit (1994, p. 105).
20. Browning (1995, p. 111).
21. Quoted in Browning (2004, p. 309).
22. Browning (2004, p. 310).
23. Streit (1994, pp. 108–109).
24. Browning (2004, p. 313).
25. Matthäus (2007, p. 231).
26. Longerich (2010, p. 185).
27. Quoted in Büchler (1986, p. 14). See also Browning (2004, p. 233).
28. Büchler (1986, pp. 15–18).

29. Cesarani (2016, pp. 357–358).
30. Büchler (1986, p. 15).
31. Breitman (2000, p. 41). In relation to the much larger Wehrmacht, Neitzel and Welzer (2012, p. 319) go even further than Breitman: "As a rule German soldiers were not "ideological warriors." Most of them were fully apolitical […] In war, soldiers tended to behave alike, regardless of whether they were Protestants or Catholics, Nazis or regime critics, Prussians or Austrians, university graduates or uneducated people."
32. Büchler (1986, p. 15).
33. Matthäus (2007, pp. 225–226).
34. See Lifton (1986, p. 15) and Matthäus (2007, pp. 226–227).
35. See, for example, Sereny (2000, p. 141).
36. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, p. 111)
37. Fleming (1984, p. 98).
38. Rubenstein and Roth (1987, p. 134).
39. Gisevius (1966, p. 244, as cited in Rubenstein and Roth 1987, p. 134). See also Browning (1992, p. 69).
40. Quoted in Hilberg (1980, p. 91).
41. Kwiet (1998, p. 20).
42. Kwiet (1998, p. 19).
43. Browning (1992, p. 11; 2004, p. 312), Longerich (2012, p. 539), Lower (2002, p. 5), and Pohl (2000, p. 143, as cited in Bloxham and Kushner 2005, p. 136).
44. Quoted in Fleming (1984, pp. 109–110).
45. Matthäus (2007, p. 232).
46. Büchler (1986, p. 16).
47. See Earl (2009, pp. 156–157), Fleming (1984, p. 85), and Hilberg (1992, p. 55).
48. Büchler (1986, p. 16).
49. Büchler (1986, pp. 16–17).
50. See Bloxham and Kushner (2005, p. 136), Hilberg (1961, pp. 218–219), Kwiet (1998, p. 10), and Matthäus (2007, p. 226).
51. See Kwiet (1998, p. 10), Hilberg (1961, pp. 218–219) and Matthäus (2007, p. 229).
52. Longerich (2012, p. 539). Himmler continued to rely on this argument (see Toland 1976, pp. 701–702).
53. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, p. 163).
54. Levi (1988, p. 43, as cited in Kühne 2010, p. 91).
55. Arendt (1967, p. 67, as cited in Kühne 2010, p. 88).
56. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, p. 82).
57. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, p. 82).
58. Westermann (2005, p. 208).

59. See Kühl (2016).
60. See Valentino (2004, p. 62).
61. Breitman (2000, p. 51).
62. Quoted in Breitman (2000, p. 60).
63. Quoted in Arad et al. (1999, p. 415).
64. Matthäus (2007, p. 227).
65. Quoted in Matthäus (2007, p. 226).
66. Matthäus (2007, p. 226).
67. Matthäus (2007, p. 227).
68. Matthäus (2007, p. 233).
69. Padfield (1990, p. 342).
70. Hilberg (1961, p. 218).
71. Quoted in Padfield (1990, p. 342).
72. Rhodes (2002, p. 152).
73. SS-Brigadier General Erwin Schulz behaved similarly when he organized several shooters to aim at each civilian, "With a keen sense of delicacy, General Schulz would avert his head as the rifles were aimed. Then, after the volley had been fired, he would turn around and see that 'all persons were lying on the ground'" (Musmanno 1961, p. 177). The young Air Force cadets who were actually strong-armed into participating in Einsatzkommando Tilsit's early executions tried the same technique, with disastrous results. These young men were poor shooters because "trembling with anxiety" they tried "closing their eyes while shooting" (Kwiet 1998, p. 20).
74. Kwiet (1993, p. 88). According to Padfield (1990, p. 343), "Wolff watched Himmler jerk convulsively and pass his hand across his face and stagger. He went to him and drew him away from the edge. Himmler's face was almost green; he took out a handkerchief with trembling hands and wiped his cheek where a piece of brain had squirted up on to it. Then he vomited."
75. Rhodes (2002, p. 152). See also Hilberg (1961, p. 218).
76. Adam (1989, p. 139).
77. Quoted in Hilberg (1961, p. 218).
78. Quoted in Arendt (1984, pp. 88–89).
79. Hilberg (1961, pp. 218–219).
80. Breitman (2000, p. 48).
81. Kwiet (1998, p. 17).
82. Longerich (2008, pp. 543–558, as cited in Stone 2010, p. 104).
83. Quoted in Rhodes (2002, p. 154).
84. Quoted in Friedlander (1995, p. 141).
85. Quoted in Rhodes (2002, p. 154).
86. Hilberg (1961, p. 219).

87. See, for example, de Mildt (1996, p. 56) and Friedlander (1995, pp. 54–55, 86–87).
88. See Wytwycky (1980, pp. 32–33, as cited in Markusen and Kopf 1995, p. 128).
89. Arad (1987, p. 10).
90. Quoted in Rees (2005, p. 52). See also Breitman (1991, p. 201), Browning (1985, p. 60) and Friedlander (1995, p. 141).
91. Breitman (1991, p. 201).
92. See Horwitz (1990, pp. 55–58).
93. Horwitz (1990, p. 17). For a similar such device that ostensibly measured height, see Longerich (2010, p. 248).
94. de Mildt (1996, p. 90) and Horwitz (1990, p. 58).
95. Browning (2004, p. 355).
96. Arad (1987, p. 11). See also Adam (1989, p. 139).
97. Montague (2012, p. 200).
98. Browning (2004, p. 355).
99. Montague (2012, p. 201) and Hayes (2017, p. 122).
100. Montague (2012, p. 201). See also Breitman (1991, pp. 201–202) and Browning (2004, pp. 355–356).
101. Breitman (1991, p. 202) and Höss (2001, pp. 124, 146, 185).
102. Naumann (1966, pp. 167–168, 284).
103. Quoted in Berenbaum (1997, p. 184).
104. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, pp. 178–179).
105. Wellers (1993b, pp. 206–207).
106. Höss (2001, pp. 146–147).
107. Höss (2001, p. 146).
108. Hayes (2017, p. 123).
109. Höss (2001, p. 147).
110. Quoted in van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 293).
111. Barnard (1958, pp. 168–169).
112. Piper (1998, p. 158).
113. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 178).
114. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 209).
115. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 293).
116. Wellers (1993a, p. 146).
117. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 293).
118. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 189).
119. Most of Operation 14f13's 20,000 victims were gassed in the T4 facilities at Sonnenstein, Bernburg, and Hartheim (Hayes 2017, p. 120).
120. Adam (1989, p. 153).
121. Pingel (1993, p. 183).
122. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 198).

123. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 271).
124. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 177). During the fall of 1940 (therefore before Bischoff arrived at Auschwitz), a second incinerator had been ordered because of concerns over Auschwitz I's rising death rate (van Pelt and Dwork 1996, p. 177).
125. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 199) and van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 269).
126. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 199).
127. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 200).
128. Browning (1985, p. 37).
129. A premature decision (or even "Führer wish") to exterminate European Jewry could (and probably did) stimulate the search for a means that made such a goal possible. But until that means was found—*and it may never have been*—that decision or wish was and would remain impotent.
130. Breitman (2000, p. 75). See also Kwiet (1993, p. 88). It is important to note that some shooting squad leaders expressed an interest in saving the Jews, not because of the psychological difficulty associated with the killings, but because (much like the Nazi "productionists" in the ghettos) they believed that killing the Jews wasted a valuable source of slave labor (Longerich 2005, p. 211). Certain influential members of the Wehrmacht, and later the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, expressed similar concerns (Breitman 1991, pp. 216–217; Breitman 2000, pp. 81, 85; Lower 2002, pp. 8–9). Of course, this reasoning may have been relied on because it also offered an excuse to not undertake the mass shootings.
131. Quoted in Rhodes (2002, p. 227). See also Höss (2001, p. 208).
132. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, p. 60).
133. Naumann (1966, p. xxvii).
134. Quoted in Klee et al. (1988, p. 46).
135. This is according to the diary of Wehrmacht soldier Richard Heidenreich, dated 5 October 1941 (quoted in Heer 1997, p. 84). See also Longerich (2010, p. 225).
136. Kwiet (1998, p. 18).
137. Kwiet (1998, p. 17).
138. Streit (1994, p. 108).
139. Streit (1994, p. 108).
140. Headland (1989, pp. 401–412, as cited in Browning 1995, p. 100).
141. Gerlach (1998, p. 58, as cited in Matthäus 2004, p. 260).
142. As Alfred Filbert of Einsatzkommando 9 said, "in the first instance, without a doubt, the executions were limited generally to Jewish males" (quoted in Goldhagen 1996, pp. 149–150).
143. Streit (1994, p. 108).
144. Hilberg (1980, p. 93).

145. Friedländer (2007, p. 240).
146. Bloxham and Kushner (2005, p. 136).
147. Matthäus (2007, p. 224).
148. Musmanno (1961, p. 133). Then again, some Nazis like Eckmann and Ohlendorf said that they would have shot their parents if given a Führer order (Arendt 1984, p. 42; Musmanno 1961, p. 120). Interestingly, when Seibert answered the judge's question, Ohlendorf and the other defendants were furious with him: Even though he was being honest, he (presumably as they had) should have lied because his truthfulness had just undermined their only defense.

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