The "Final Solution": From Shooting to Gas

The mass extermination of the Jews of occupied Europe by Nazi Germany began with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Four special SS formations called Einsatzgruppen, which were subordinate to Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), advanced with the forward units of the German army. Their specific task was to murder Jews and officials of the Communist Party and political commissars in the Red Army. With the help of local collaborators, the Einsatzgruppen rounded up the Jews in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union—men, women, children, and the elderly—drove them from their homes to locations in the vicinity of their towns and villages, and shot them dead.

The locations selected for these killings were either natural ravines, antitank ditches, or pits specially dug for the purpose. The Jews were concentrated at assembly points and taken in groups to the killing sites. As a rule, the men were taken first, then the women, and finally the children. The victims were lined up either inside the ditch or at its edge; then they were shot. After one group had been killed, the next was brought over. In cities with a large Jewish population, the killing sometimes went on for days or even weeks.

The commander of Einsatzkommando 3, which carried out the murder operation of Jews in Lithuania, wrote in his report:

The implementation of such Aktionen was first of all an organizational problem. The decision to clear systematically each sub-district of Jews called for thorough preparation for each Aktion and the study of local conditions. The Jews had to be concentrated in one or more localities, and, in accordance with their numbers, a site had to be selected and pits dug. The marching distance from the concentration points to the pits averaged 4 to 5 kms. The Jews were brought to the place of execution in groups of 500, with a distance of at least 2 kms between groups. . . .
The Einsatzgruppen left behind over one million victims in mass-murder valleys in Ponar near Vilna, Fort IX at Kovno, Rumboli near Riga, Babi Yar at Kiev, Drobitski Valley near Kharkov, in the Crimea, and at numerous other sites in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union.

However, this method of mass murder—shooting the victims in the vicinity of their homes—raised problems for the Nazi authorities. The shooting of thousands of people was a slow process, and large numbers of SS men were required for each killing operation. The executions were carried out simultaneously in hundreds, even thousands of different locations, rendering it almost impossible to keep them secret from the local population and prospective victims. Instances of last-minute flight and even resistance were recorded by the Germans. It was also evident that what could be done in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and near the front lines could not be accomplished so openly in most other European countries, where negative reactions were to be expected from sections of the local population. Furthermore, the prolonged exposure of members of the Einsatzgruppen to the murder of women, children, and the elderly produced a cumulative psychological effect upon some of them and even caused mental breakdowns.

Himmler was aware of these difficulties. An eyewitness describes what happened during Himmler's visit to Minsk in late summer 1941, while watching the killing of a group of one hundred Jews:

As the firing started, Himmler became more and more nervous. At each volley, he looked down at the ground. . . . The other witness was Oberguppenführer von dem Bach-Zelewski. . . . Von dem Bach addressed Himmler: "Reichsführer, those were only a hundred. . . . Look at the eyes of the men in this commando, 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."2

As a result of these drawbacks, the SS authorities, who were in charge of the Nazi extermination machine, began looking for additional methods and improved technical means that would enable them to carry out the killings more efficiently, more quickly, and with less effort. Rudolf Höss, the commander of Auschwitz, wrote in his evidence:

In the summer of 1941, I cannot remember the exact date, I was suddenly summoned to the Reichsführer SS Himmler, who received me without his adjutant being present. Himmler said: "The Führer has ordered that the Jewish question be solved once and for all and that we, the SS, are to implement that order. The existing extermination centers in the East are not in a position to carry out the large Aktionen which are anticipated. . . ."

Shortly afterward, Eichmann came to Auschwitz and disclosed to me the plans for the operations as they affected the various countries concerned. We discussed ways and means of carrying out the extermination. It could be done only by gassing, as it would have been absolutely impossible to dispose, by shooting, of the large numbers of people that were expected, and it would have placed too heavy a burden on the SS men who had to carry it out, especially because of the women and children among the victims. . . .

The first time gas had been used in Nazi Germany for murdering people was for the "euthanasia program." Over seventy thousand mentally or otherwise "hopelessly" ill Germans—not Jews—were killed between September 1939 and late summer 1941.4 For this operation, Hitler had established a secret organization known as T4 (a reference to the organization's headquarters at 4 Tiergartenstrasse in Berlin) subordinate to Hitler's Chief of Chancellery, Reichsleiter Philipp Bouhler.

At the beginning of World War II, Hitler signed the following order: "Reichsleiter Bouhler and Dr. [Karl] Brandt [Hitler's personal physician] are charged with the responsibility for expanding the authority of individual physicians, with a view to enable them, after the most critical examination in the realm of human knowledge, to administer to incurably sick persons a mercy death."5

The man who was directly in charge of the euthanasia operation was Viktor Brack, a high official in the Chancellery of the Führer and subordinate to Bouhler. The T4 organization established several institutions throughout Germany. The mentally ill destined for elimination were placed in hermetically sealed rooms into which carbon monoxide was introduced; they died within a short time. Some victims were killed by injections of poison. All the bodies were cremated.

A request from Himmler to Bouhler in the summer of 1940 enlarged the euthanasia program to apply to sick concentration camp detainees from the camps inside Germany under SS supervision. Some of the detainees were Jews. They were removed from their camps to the euthanasia centers and were murdered there. The code name for this operation was 14F13. As a result of internal pressure within Nazi Germany, Hitler ordered the termination of the euthanasia program at the end of August 1941. However, sporadic killings of small groups of "incurable victims" continued in some euthanasia institutions after this date.6

On September 3, 1941, the gas Zyklon B was first used for extermination in Auschwitz on an experimental basis. Zyklon B was an alcohol acid preparation that had been used until then at Auschwitz for exterminating vermin. The group chosen for this first experiment consisted of Soviet prisoners of war. Further experiments followed shortly thereafter. Höss, the commander of Auschwitz, wrote in his testimony:

The gassing was carried out in the detention cells of Block 11. Protected by a gas mask, I watched the killing myself. In the crowded cells, death came instantaneously the moment the Zyklon B was thrown in. A short, almost smothered cry, and it was all over. . . .
I must even admit that this gassing set my mind at rest, for the mass extermination of the Jews was to start soon, and at that time neither Eichmann nor I was certain as to how these mass killings were to be carried out. It would be by gas, but we did not know which gas and how it was to be used. Now we had the gas, and we had established a procedure. . . .

Concurrent to these experiments in Auschwitz, the Einsatzgruppen looked for additional and simpler methods for mass killings. The new facility developed and supplied to the Einsatzgruppen was gas vans. The idea of the gas van originated with SS Brigadeführer Artur Nebe, commander of Einsatzgruppe B, which operated in territories close to the central front and which had carried out in Belorussia large-scale shooting actions of Jews, communists, and other "asocial elements." Nebe, as former leader of the Reich's Criminal Police Department (Kripo), was familiar with the euthanasia program and killing by gas.

In September 1941, Einsatzgruppe B was faced with the task of liquidating the patients of the lunatic asylums in the cities of Minsk and Mogilev. Nebe decided to find a simpler way for his men to kill the mentally diseased, other than by shooting them. He contacted Kripo headquarters and asked for their help in carrying out the killing of the insane with either explosives or poison gas. Dr. Widmann of the Criminal Police was sent to Nebe in Minsk, but before he left, Dr. Widmann discussed with the director of the Criminal Police Technological Institute, Dr. Heess, ways of using the carbon monoxide gas from automobile exhaust for killing operations in the East, based on the experience gained from the euthanasia program. Dr. Widmann took to Minsk 400 kgs of explosive material and the metal pipes required for the gassing installations.

Nebe and Dr. Widmann carried out an experimental killing using explosives. 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.

A few days later an experiment with poison gas was carried out by Nebe and Dr. Widmann in Mogilev. In the local lunatic asylum, a room with twenty to thirty of the insane was closed hermetically, and two pipes were driven into the wall. A car was parked outside, and one of the metal pipes that Dr. Widmann had brought connected the exhaust of the car to the pipe in the wall. The car engine was turned on and the carbon monoxide began seeping into the room. After eight minutes, the people in the room were still alive. A second car was connected to the other pipe in the wall. The two cars were operated simultaneously, and a few minutes later all those in the room were dead.

After these experimental executions, Nebe came up with the idea of constructing a car with a hermetically sealed cabin for killing purposes. The carbon monoxide from the car's exhaust would be channeled into the sealed cabin, in which the victims stood. Nebe discussed the technical aspects of the idea with Dr. Heess and together they brought the proposal before Heydrich, who adopted it.8

The Technical Department of the Reich Security Main Office, headed by SS Obersturmbannführer Walter Rauff, developed a special vehicle for killing purposes. This vehicle resembled an ambulance or refrigerator truck and contained a hermetically sealed rear cabin. The victims were placed in the cabin and carbon monoxide was introduced by means of a pipe. The gassing process took between fifteen and thirty minutes. During this time the van was driven from the loading site to prepared graves.

Two types of gas vans had been built: a larger one, 5.8 meters in length, and a smaller one, measuring 4.5 meters. Both were about 2.5 meters wide and 1.7 meters high. The bigger one could accommodate between 130 and 150 people, when densely packed inside, and the smaller one from 80 to 100.9

The first gas vans were supplied to the Einsatzgruppen and to the Chelmno death camps in November–December 1941. The killing in Chelmno began on December 8, 1941. By the middle of 1942, about thirty gas vans had been produced by a private car manufacturer, the Gabschatt Farenwerke GMBH, Will-Walter Strasse 32–38, Berlin.10

A few weeks before the first gas vans were supplied to the Einsatzgruppen, in late October 1941, Dr. Alfred Wetzell of the Ministry for the Eastern Occupied Territories wrote to the Reichskommissar for Ostland, Hinrich Lohse, of a proposal made by Viktor Brack to set up permanent gassing facilities in Ostland for mass extermination based on the experience and help of the euthanasia program. With the cessation of the euthanasia program in Germany, its personnel were available and looking for new tasks.11

The permanent gassing facilities were intended to lighten the task of Nazi authorities in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union in carrying out their killing operations. But the proposal of Dr. Wetzell and of Brack was not implemented in Ostland. The unemployed "euthanasia" personnel were assigned to another and bigger task—the erection of camps with gassing facilities, where the annihilation of the Jews in the Nazi-occupied territories of Poland would be carried out. The successful experiments in Auschwitz and the development of the gas vans had provided the solution of the technical problems involved.

The Wannsee Conference

At the same time that the extermination activities were being carried out by the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union and the technical experiments with gassing were being conducted, the governing authorities of the Third Reich were beginning to prepare for the implementation of the "final solution" of European Jewry.
On July 31, 1941, Heydrich was assigned by Reich Marshal Hermann Göring the task of preparing a plan for the “final solution of the Jewish question” within the realm of German rule and influence in Europe. The various components of the German governing apparatus—the SS; the Nazi party; the ministries, with their bureaucratic machinery; and the army—were to play specific roles in carrying out the “final solution.”

A conference was convened by Heydrich to inform the relevant authorities in Nazi Germany of the “final solution” as decided upon by Hitler and that the SS and he personally would be in charge of it. In addition, the conference was to discuss the different political and organizational aspects of the implementation of the “final solution” and the problem of the *mischlinge* (a person of mixed blood; specifically, a person with at least one Jewish grandparent).

Hans Frank, the Nazi Governor-General of the General Government, at a meeting of his top officials held in Cracow on December 16, 1941, spoke openly of the purposes of the forthcoming conference:

I want to say to you quite frankly that we shall have to finish with the Jews one way or another. The *Führer* once spoke these words: “If united Jewry should again succeed in causing another world war, the peoples who have been hounded into this war will not be the only ones to shed their blood; the Jew of Europe will also find his end. . . .”

About the Jews of Europe, I have only one point of view—the Jews have to disappear. They must go. I have begun negotiations to send them to the east. In January a big conference will be held in Berlin. Director-General Bühler will attend it. This conference will be held in the Reich Security Main Office and will be presided over by SS Oberführer Heydrich. A major migration is about to start. But what is to happen to the Jews? Do you think they will actually be resettled in Ostland villages? We were told in Berlin: Why all this trouble? We can’t use them either, liquidate them yourselves. . . .

After a postponement caused by the entrance of the United States into the war, the conference was held on January 20, 1942, at Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin. The participants of the Wannsee Conference included the director-generals (*Staatssekretär*) of the relevant ministries, senior representatives of the German ruling authorities in the occupied countries, and SS senior department heads.

Dr. Josef Bühler, *Staatssekretär* of the General Government (the areas of central Poland occupied by Germany), demanded at the conference that the “final solution” be applied first to the Jews of the General Government. The conference protocol states:

*Staatssekretär* Dr. Bühler announced that the General Government would welcome it if the final solution of this problem would begin in the General Government, as, on the one hand, the question of transport there played no major role and consideration of labor supply would not hinder the course of *Aktionen*. Jews must be removed as quickly as possible from the General Government, because it was there in particular that the Jew, as a carrier of epidemics, constituted a great danger, and, at the same time, caused constant disorder in the economic structure of the country by his continuous black-market dealings. Furthermore, of the approximately two and a half million Jews under consideration, the majority were in any case unfit for work.

*Staatssekretär* Dr. Bühler further stated that the solution of the Jewish question in the General Government was primarily the responsibility of the Chief of Security Police and the SD and that his work would have the support of the authorities of the General Government. He had only one request: that the Jewish question in this area be solved as quickly as possible.

Bühler’s request that the Jews of the General Government in Poland be destroyed first was in fact accepted.

The General Government included the districts of Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Lvov, and Radom, and its Jewish population was estimated by the German government at 2,284,000. The destruction of the Jews in the General Government would later be called “Operation Reinhard,” after Reinhard Heydrich, who was shot by members of the Czech Underground on May 27, 1942, near Prague, and died several days later.