

# Reinhard Heydrich and the Development of the *Einsatzgruppen*, 1938–1942

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## ABSTRACT

In his book *The Road*, Soviet writer and journalist Vasily Grossman described the Holocaust as two distinct but interrelated events: the Shoah by bullets and the Shoah by gas. This description reflects a historical understanding that the Holocaust began not with the industrialized killing centers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibor but rather with the mass shootings of Jewish men in the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, conducted primarily by the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) Task Forces known as the *Einsatzgruppen*. This paper focuses on the role of SS General Reinhard Heydrich in the organization, development, and initial use of the *Einsatzgruppen* as specialized killing units and the transition to the use of gas for mass killing from 1938 to 1942. I argue that Heydrich played a key role the evolution of the *Einsatzgruppen* from its initial use as an instrument of Nazi foreign intelligence gathering and the imposition of police state control during the *Anschluss* of Austria to its implementation as a mechanism for mass killing in Poland during Operation *Tannenberg* and ultimately to its final realization as the means of initiating the Holocaust in Central Europe. Heydrich, in his leadership role in the SS, also played a key role in the decision to shift from mass executions by shooting to the depersonalized use of gas in the Nazi attempt to annihilate European Jewry and other enemies of the Nazi state during World War II.

**Keywords:** Adolf Hitler, *Einsatzgruppen*, Heinrich Himmler, Holocaust, Lebensraum, Operation Anthropoid, Operation Barbarossa, Operation Tannenberg, Reinhard Heydrich, *Vernichtungskrieg*

# Reinhard Heydrich y el desarrollo de los *Einsatzgruppen*, 1938–1942

## RESUMEN

En su libro “El camino”, el escritor y periodista soviético Vasily Grossman describió el Holocausto como dos eventos distintos

pero interrelacionados: la Shoah con balas y la Shoah con gas. Esta descripción refleja una comprensión histórica de que el Holocausto comenzó no con los centros de exterminio industrializados de Auschwitz, Treblinka y Sobibor, sino con los tiroteos masivos de hombres judíos en la Unión Soviética en el verano de 1941, realizados principalmente por el Schutzstaffel (SS) Grupos de trabajo conocidos como Einsatzgruppen. Este documento se centra en el papel del general de las SS Reinhard Heydrich en la organización, desarrollo y uso inicial de Einsatzgruppen como unidades especializadas de asesinato y la transición al uso de gas para asesinatos en masa de 1938 a 1942. Sostengo que Heydrich jugó un papel clave Impulsar la evolución del Einsatzgruppen desde su uso inicial como instrumento de recopilación de inteligencia extranjera nazi y la imposición del control policial estatal durante el Anschluss de Austria hasta su implementación como mecanismo de asesinatos en masa en Polonia durante la Operación Tannenberg y, en última instancia, hasta su realización final. como el medio de iniciar el Holocausto en Europa Central. Heydrich, en su papel de liderazgo en las SS, también jugó un papel clave en la decisión de pasar de las ejecuciones masivas al disparar al uso despersonalizado de gas en el intento nazi de aniquilar a los judíos europeos y otros enemigos del estado nazi durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

**Palabras clave:** Adolf Hitler, *Einsatzgruppen*, Heinrich Himmler, Holocausto, *Lebensraum*, Operación Antropoide, Operación Barbarroja, Operación Tannenberg, Reinhard Heydrich, *Vernichtungskrieg*

## 莱因哈德·海德里希与特别行动队的发展（1938年至1942年）

### 摘要

在他的著作《道路》中，苏联作家兼记者瓦西里·格罗斯曼将大屠杀描述为两次独特却又相互联系的事件：子弹屠杀和煤气屠杀。这一描述反映了一个历史理解，即大屠杀的开端并不是特雷布林卡、贝尔赛克、索比堡等工业化杀戮营，而是1941年夏季在苏联境内大范围枪杀犹太人的行动，这一行动主要由被称为特别行动队（*Einsatzgruppen*）的党卫军别动队执行。本文聚焦于党卫军上将莱因哈德·海德里希在将特别行动队这一特别杀戮单位的组织、发展和最初使用，以及从1938年到1942年间过渡到使用煤气进行大范围屠杀一事中产

生的作用。我主张，海德里希在特别行动队演变过程中发挥了关键作用，包括从最初将行动队作为纳粹外国情报收集工具进行利用，和德奥合并期间用其强制执行警方国家控制，到坦能堡行动期间用其在波兰实施集体屠杀机制，到最后用其实现中欧大屠杀启动手段。海德里希在党卫军担任领袖的同时，还在“二战期间纳粹在尝试灭绝欧洲犹太种族和其他敌人时决定将枪击屠杀转变为非人类的煤气屠杀”一事中发挥了关键作用。

关键词：阿道夫·希特勒，特别行动队，海因里希·希姆莱，大屠杀，生存空间，类人猿行动，巴巴罗萨行动，坦能堡行动，莱因哈德·海德里希，灭绝战争

Shortly after 10:00 a.m. on May 15, 1942, three members of the Czech intelligence service stood waiting to kill their target on a street in the Prague suburb of Liben, armed with concealed submachine guns and grenades. Trained by the British Special Operations Executive and parachuted into Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, their mission, code-named Operation Anthropoid, was to assassinate *Schutzstaffel* (SS) General Reinhard Heydrich, the Acting Reich Protector of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and one of the chief architects of the Final Solution, which at that moment the Nazi government was implementing in Eastern Europe. The British believed that the operation to kill Heydrich, whom they characterized as the second-most dangerous man in Nazi-occupied territory after Adolf Hitler, would demonstrate both their ability to successfully attack the Nazi security apparatus inside occupied territory and Czech resolve to resist Nazi dom-

ination. Ultimately, the British hoped a successful operation would foment a large-scale Czech rebellion against Nazi rule in response to the anticipated Nazi reprisals.<sup>1</sup> At 10:20 a.m. Heydrich's car slowed down to make the turn, as the agents had anticipated. Former Czech army non-commissioned officer Josef Gabcik pointed his submachine gun at Heydrich and pulled the trigger but the gun jammed. Heydrich ordered his driver to stop the car and pulled his pistol out to shoot Gabcik, but then a second Czech intelligence agent, Jan Kubis, threw a hand grenade which exploded near Heydrich's vehicle. Heydrich ordered his driver to stop the car and they both got out, guns drawn, and began to approach the Czech agents. However, both Heydrich and his driver collapsed from injuries sustained in the explosion, enabling Gabcik, Kubis, and the third agent to flee. Local Czechs and Germans brought Heydrich to the Bulovka Hospital for treatment, and the Germans sealed off Prague search-

ing house to house for his attackers. Although Heydrich appeared to briefly recover from his wounds, infection set in and on June 4, Reinhard Heydrich died of his injuries.<sup>2</sup> In revenge for the death of Heydrich, Adolf Hitler ordered the destruction of the Czech village of Lidice in the northwest of Prague, which the Nazis mistakenly believed had supported the Czech intelligence agents. On June 9, the Nazis murdered 172 men between the ages of fourteen and eighty-four, shot in waves of ten on the farm of the Horak family. The Nazis deported the female residents to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and burned the village to the ground, blowing up or bulldozing the remnants of the homes and buildings. On June 18, the German authorities tracked Kubis, Gabcik, and six other Czech agents to the Orthodox Church of Saint Cyril and Methodius, where they succeeded in killing Kubis and capturing two other agents. Gabcik and four remaining agents committed suicide inside the church to prevent being captured and likely tortured and killed. In reprisals for Heydrich's killing, the Nazis murdered 1,327 Czechs and arrested and imprisoned up to 4,000 people in concentration camps or regular prisons over the summer.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of his death, Reinhard Heydrich was a central figure in the Nazi orchestration of the Holocaust, defined by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as the "systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators."<sup>4</sup> This paper focuses on the role of

SS General Reinhard Heydrich in the organization, development, and initial use of the SS Task Forces known as the *Einsatzgruppen* as specialized killing units and the transition to the use of gas for mass killing, from 1938 to 1942. The attempt to understand and explain the Holocaust has traditionally been split between two schools of related historiography. The first school, referred to as the "intentionalist" school, viewed the Holocaust as series of events driven primarily by decisions taken by Adolf Hitler and senior level Nazi officials. The second school, referred to as the "functionalist" school, saw the Holocaust as an event driven largely by the German perpetrators and their allies themselves, attempting to map out the interactions among the individuals, groups, and agencies involved and to explain individual and collective motivations in enacting the directives of the leadership. Modern Holocaust historiography has largely overcome the polarization in the intentionalist-functionalist debate through a process of synthesis in which these perspectives are, in the words of Peter Longerich, "not mutually exclusive but illuminate varying aspects of historical reality in complementary, even interdependent ways."<sup>5</sup> For Longerich, the key to understanding the Holocaust is as a complex interconnected process in which "those with political responsibility propelled forward, step by step, a highly complicated decision-making process in which a series of points where it was escalated can be identified."<sup>6</sup> It is here, then, that we can begin to identify Heydrich's significance in organizing and directing the



Reinhard Heydrich, 28 August 1940, photographer unknown, Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R98683 / CC BY-SA 3.0.

beginning of the mass murder of the Jews during the Holocaust. Heydrich played a central role in the evolution of the *Einsatzgruppen* from its initial use as an instrument of Nazi foreign intelligence gathering and the imposition of police state control during the *Anschluss* of Austria to its implementation as a mechanism for mass killing in Poland during Operation *Tannenberg*. Heydrich, in collaboration with SS chief Heinrich Himmler, became a primary driving force in the escalation of mass killing from the initial targets of only Jewish men to ultimately all Jewish men, women, and children in the Holocaust. Heydrich, in his leadership capacity in the SS, was also a key figure in

the decision to shift from mass executions by shooting to the depersonalized use of gas in the Nazi attempt to annihilate European Jewry and other enemies of the Nazi state during World War II.

At the beginning of September 1936, Reinhard Heydrich was one of the most powerful actors within the Nazi hierarchy in charge of the Nazi internal security apparatus in his dual capacity as head of the Nazi secret political police, the Gestapo, and also as chief of the SS intelligence agency, the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst* or SD). Heydrich's power increased further when, on June 17, 1936, Adolf Hitler appointed Heydrich's immediate superior, SS chief Heinrich Himmler, as head of the

German police, concentrating police state control through the mechanism of “protective custody” in Himmler’s hands. “Protective custody” was a legal device authorized by the February 28, 1933 emergency Reichstag Fire Decree, which suspended constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties within Germany and gave the Nazi state the legal power to enact extrajudicial detentions of suspected enemies of the state and their incarceration in the vast system of concentration camps established by the regime. As part of Himmler’s consolidation of power, on September 20, 1936, Heydrich assumed command of the new Nazi internal security agency, the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei* or Sipo), which established control over all German criminal police (*Kripo*), border police, state level political police, and the Gestapo.<sup>7</sup> Thus Heydrich was positioned as chief of the Nazi police state, subordinate only to Himmler and Hitler, in charge of the investigative and political police agencies as chief of the Security Police and head of the SS’s internal and external intelligence agency, the SD.

The Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938 was the first step in the development of Heydrich’s ability to extend this police state power outside the borders of Germany. In anticipation of the German invasion and annexation of Austria, in January 1938, Heydrich and Himmler prepared approximately 20,000 members of the Security Police and the Order Police, a separate agency subordinate to Himmler, to assist the German army in imposing Nazi control on Austria.<sup>8</sup> At 5:30 a.m. on March 12,

1938, German forces invaded Austria, and that evening Security Police officials arrested approximately 21,000 Austrians whom the Nazis considered a threat based on lists of political opponents, especially members of the Austrian Communist Party, gleaned from the Austrian government, whom Heydrich depicted as posing a threat of a violent uprising. Many of those arrested were transported to Germany to be imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp near Munich or the newly established Mauthausen camp near Linz.<sup>9</sup>

The expansion of Nazi power outside the borders of Germany in the *Anschluss* strengthened Heydrich’s role in Nazi Jewish policy. Heydrich’s Gestapo also launched a series of measures directed against Jews in Austria, including seizing valuable Jewish property, such as paintings and jewelry, forced expulsions of Jews to Hungary, and setting up mass arrests and deportations of Jews to Dachau.<sup>10</sup> On August 20, 1938, Heydrich established the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, designed to expedite Jewish emigration from Austria by using confiscated assets from wealthier Jews to finance the emigration of poorer Jews from the country. As a result of the success of this model of financing Jewish emigration, in January 1939 Hermann Goering appointed Heydrich chief of the Reich Central Office for Jewish Emigration, responsible for carrying out the accelerated expulsion of Jews from the Greater German Reich and giving Heydrich formal responsibility for a central role in Nazi Jewish policy.<sup>11</sup>

Heydrich's forces repeated the imposition of the Nazi police state apparatus using a similar formula of mass arrests and incarceration in the takeover of Czechoslovakia between 1938 and 1939. However, in contrast to the annexation of Austria, Heydrich and his staff developed a militarized organizational structure for the invading Security Police and SD units based on the possibility of war between Germany and Czechoslovakia. Heydrich and his staff created two Task Forces, or *Einsatzgruppen*, consisting of 863 Security Police and SD personnel organized into eleven smaller units or *Einsatzkommando*, whose mission would be to arrest potential enemies in the newly occupied territory. Heydrich was personally responsible for developing the organizational structure of these units. The Security Police developed arrest lists of Communists, Social Democrats, Jews, Catholic priests engaged in political activity, German emigrés, and anyone else deemed a threat to the establishment of the Nazi state. As the prospect of war ended after the British and French signed the Munich Agreement, on October 1, 1938, the German army moved in to annex the Sudetenland, quickly followed by Heydrich's *Einsatzgruppen*, which, over the next several weeks, proceeded to arrest between 10,000 to 20,000 perceived "enemies of the state." Heydrich's forces deported approximately 7,000 prisoners to concentration camps in German, notably Dachau.<sup>12</sup> On March 15, 1939, the Wehrmacht seized control of the remainder of Czech territory, as Czechoslovakia collapsed as a unified state and President Emil Hácha accepted German

protectorate status under threat of Nazi invasion. The *Einsatzgruppen* repeated the process of imposing police state control, as the two *Einsatzgruppen* used in the Sudetenland moved into Czech territory and implemented *Aktion Gitter*, or Operation Grid, in which the Nazis arrested approximately 6,000 political enemies, again primarily Communists and Social Democrats, sending an estimated 1,500 to concentration camps in the Greater German Reich.<sup>13</sup>

The Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939 served as a turning point for Heydrich in establishing a model for the initiation of the Final Solution, at that point still two years away. It was here that the SS in general, and Heydrich's *Einsatzgruppen* in particular, established the precedent for mass executions without trial of non-combatants, which in turn created a dynamic easily extended to Jews during Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia. Hitler, in a meeting with senior generals on August 22, 1939, announced that the war in Poland would be of an entirely different nature than that in Austria or Czechoslovakia and would be characterized by severe ruthlessness and brutality in order to secure *Lebensraum*, or living space, for the German people. Stating that Genghis Khan had massacred millions of women and children but was only remembered as the founder of a state, Hitler clarified that the purpose of the war was the physical annihilation of people and not simply reaching a territorial boundary. Poles would be eliminated and the territory would be resettled by Germans, Hitler declared.<sup>14</sup>

Heydrich's agencies began planning for the invasion after receiving orders from Hitler in May 1939, relayed through Himmler, that their mission was to "neutralize" centers of opposition and to destroy those elements of society that spread Polish nationalism. As they had done in Austria and Czechoslovakia, the SD developed arrest lists of approximately 61,000 leading members of society, such as politicians, members of the Communist Party, Jews, and high-level members of the Catholic clergy who were active in politics contradicting Nazi policies. However, in contrast to the operations in Austria and Czechoslovakia, in which arrestees were imprisoned, these members of Polish society were to be executed immediately<sup>15</sup> in an operation code named Tannenberg.<sup>16</sup> Using the model of Czechoslovakia, Heydrich and his senior leaders organized five *Einsatzgruppen*, later increased to seven, for operations in Poland. The *Einsatzgruppen* were staffed with officers from the Security Police and the Security Service, totaling over 3,000 soldiers. The majority of the senior leaders were highly educated, typical of those recruited by Heydrich; fifteen out of twenty-five leaders of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland had doctoral degrees, the majority in law or philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Heydrich met with his senior commanders in mid-August and informed them of the execution orders personally, telling them that he had received orders from an unspecified source that were "extraordinarily radical" and included a "liquidation order for various circles of the Polish leadership" affecting "thou-

sands." It was their mission, he stated, to "neutralize" the threat from partisans and the Polish intelligentsia, stating that "everything was allowed."<sup>18</sup>

Polish violence against ethnic Germans in Poland served as the pretext for executions and provided an opportunity to accelerate violence against Poles as part of an "anti-partisan" campaign. During the first week of fighting, Polish forces arrested and deported 10,000 to 15,000 ethnic Germans from the border with Germany. During the deportations, ethnic Germans were attacked by Polish civilians or members of the military, and approximately 2,000 were killed, including approximately 300 ethnic Germans killed during an uprising in Bromberg, Poland on September 3.<sup>19</sup> The day after the Bromberg attacks, Himmler authorized the creation of another *Einsatzgruppen* unit "for special purposes" and ordered that insurgents should be shot immediately without trial.<sup>20</sup> On September 10, Himmler ordered *Einsatzgruppen* IV to enter Bromberg and arrest 500 members of the local intelligentsia, including communists, and to shoot them immediately on signs of local resistance.<sup>21</sup> On September 11, the Army High Command notified General Adolf Strauss, commander of the Fourth Army in Bromberg, that Hitler had ordered the arrest of the hostages and that summary executions were to continue in the city until it was pacified; Strauss was not to interfere. *Einsatzgruppe* IV killed approximately 1,300 civilians in Bromberg between September 5 and 11, and another 5,000 in the surrounding area.<sup>22</sup> The *Einsatzgruppen* also targeted

Jews in addition to the Polish intelligentsia; between September 3 and 13, both Himmler and Heydrich went on an inspection tour of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Heydrich ordered local commanders to use the harshest possible methods and to “induce” Jews to flee into the eastern half of Poland. Subsequently, the *Einsatzgruppe* “for special purposes” increased their attacks against Jews, including massacring more than 500 Jews near Przemysl on September 20 and burning Jews alive inside a synagogue in Mielec.<sup>23</sup> The next day, Heydrich informed his senior staff that Hitler had decided, consistent with the goal of the forced expulsion of Jews, that Jews in Poland should be forced into urban ghettos to await later deportation, while an unspecified number should be immediately deported into Soviet occupied territory in Poland. At this point, forced expulsion of Jews from German-held territory remained the official Nazi policy, not mass killing.<sup>24</sup> By the end of September, the *Einsatzgruppen*, other SS units, the regular Germany army, and ethnic German militias had killed more than 40,000 Poles between September and December 1939.<sup>25</sup>

In a meeting with his staff on July 31, 1940, Hitler announced his decision to attack the Soviet Union, initially as part of the overall strategy to defeat Great Britain.<sup>26</sup> However, attacking the USSR to gain *Lebensraum* for the German people had long been one of Hitler’s primary goals, proclaiming its necessity in his autobiography *Mein Kampf*.<sup>27</sup> For Hitler, the Eastern territory constituted a vast potential “Garden of Eden” for the German people,

as he described it in a speech to senior Nazi leaders on July 16, 1941. To ensure this “Garden of Eden,” everything was permissible, including mass executions and resettlements.<sup>28</sup> The war in the east would be of a fundamentally different nature than that of the west, given the extraordinary danger represented by communism. The war against Bolshevism would be a *Vernichtungskrieg*, or war of annihilation.<sup>29</sup> To achieve this *Lebensraum* for the German people, the Nazis developed a genocidal “hunger plan” for the territory of the Soviet Union, which envisioned the murder of 20-30 million Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Jews through starvation. Hitler’s characterization of the exterminatory nature of the war in the East was a clear signal to subordinates as to how to proceed, even in the absence of specific orders. As Ian Kershaw argues, the Nazi leadership culture was one in which Hitler gave general pronouncements for policy without specifics and subordinates would compete in taking the initiative to anticipate and fulfill those policies in increasingly radical and extreme ways in an atmosphere of “working towards the Fuhrer.”<sup>30</sup> For Heydrich and the other commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen*, Hitler’s intention in the east was clear.

To prepare for the invasion of the Soviet Union, Himmler summoned senior SS leaders, including Heydrich, on June 11, 1941 at the Wewelsburg, a medieval castle in Westphalia that Himmler envisioned as a future SS headquarters. Here Himmler gave an overview of the genocidal war they would conduct in the East, also citing

the anticipated killing of 30 million Eastern Europeans. On June 17, Heydrich in turn met with his subordinates in Pretzsch, telling them that the upcoming war needed to be conducted with “unprecedented severity” and that communist officials and Jews were to be executed. The *Einsatzgruppen* had an analogous mission in Soviet territory to the one in Poland, which was to eliminate threats to Nazi occupation behind the lines of the invading German forces. To that end, Heydrich used the same organizational structure as he used in Poland, which had evolved from its earliest version in the *Anschluss*. He established four *Einsatzgruppen* that were to follow behind advancing German forces, comprising approximately 3,000 soldiers and drawn from the Security Police, the SD, various police forces, and the Waffen-SS. As in the invasion of Poland, the leaders of each individual *Einsatzgruppe* were highly educated. For example, of the seventeen leaders of *Einsatzgruppe A*, commanded by Dr. Franz Walter Stahlecker, eleven were lawyers and nine had doctoral degrees.<sup>31</sup> Heydrich also gave explicit written directives to his commanders to follow up on verbal instructions. On July 2, Heydrich wrote that all communist officials, in particular Jewish communists and government officials, and all “radical elements,” such as saboteurs, assassins, or snipers were to be executed. Heydrich also directed *Einsatzgruppen* commanders to encourage the massacre of Jews and communists by local forces to avoid German involvement.<sup>32</sup>

Heydrich, together with Himmler, personally toured units after the

invasion began and encouraged the escalation of mass executions of Jews. *Einsatzgruppen* units treated all Jewish men as communists or potential radical elements, killing them accordingly.<sup>33</sup> SS headquarters provided the *Einsatzgruppen* units with quotas of Jewish men to kill, and by the end of July, at least 5,000, and possibly up to 10,000, were killed by the Germans in Vilnius.<sup>34</sup> In his “Garden of Eden” speech, Hitler had authorized killing anyone necessary, stating that Germans were fortunate that Stalin had given an order for partisan operations behind German lines, because this allowed the Nazis to kill anyone hostile to them.<sup>35</sup> *Einsatzgruppen* killings of Jews accelerated after visits by Heydrich and Himmler. During a visit to Bialystok in early July, Heydrich and Himmler complained that the Jewish threat was not being dealt with sufficiently. The local *Einsatzgruppe* rapidly took approximately 1,000 military age Jewish men out of the city and shot them.<sup>36</sup> The *Einsatzgruppen* killings of Jewish men were also extended to include women and children over the course of the summer. In late July, *Einsatzkommando 9* in Belorussia, commanded by Alfred Filbert, began the systematic murder of women and children, apparently ordered by Heydrich.<sup>37</sup> The remaining *Einsatzgruppen* also expanded killing to include women and children between late July and early September.<sup>38</sup> By the end of 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* and their allies had killed between 500,000 and 800,000 Jewish men, women, and children, primarily through shooting.<sup>39</sup> Himmler and Heydrich had played key roles through the inspection tours in

accelerating the killing, expanding it to include women and children, and increasing the number of forces in those areas in order to conduct mass murder. Although there is no evidence of a single explicit order by Hitler, his overall pronouncements, including his exhortations to kill anyone necessary in his “Garden of Eden” speech, created an overall direction in policy of the mass murder of the Jews that Himmler, Heydrich, and other *Einsatzgruppen* and SS commanders fulfilled in “working towards the Fuhrer.”<sup>40</sup>

In addition to his capacity as commander of the *Einsatzgruppen*, Heydrich also played a role in the Holocaust by facilitating the change from the use of guns to the use of gas to kill Jews in Eastern Europe. Before the invasion of Poland, Hitler had announced in the German Parliament that if “international Jewry” provoked another war against the Aryan people, it would be the Jews, and not the Aryan race, who would be exterminated.<sup>41</sup> By the end of 1941, as German forces swept across the Soviet Union, senior Nazi officials announced that Hitler’s prophecy was coming true. On November 18, 1941, Alfred Rosenberg, Head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, stated that the Nazi goal was the “biological extermination” of all Jews in Europe. On December 30, 1941, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels announced that the annihilation of “World Jewry” was underway.<sup>42</sup> However, the process of mass shooting appeared to be an ineffective means for carrying out the genocide. In November 1941, one of the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders reported

that despite shooting 75,000 Jews, this would be an insufficient means to solve the “Jewish problem.”<sup>43</sup> Heydrich and Himmler also expressed concern over the psychological welfare of the soldiers conducting the killings; Heydrich had received reports of alcohol abuse and psychological breakdowns among *Einsatzgruppen* soldiers. Heydrich directed his chief of technical affairs, Walter Rauff, to investigate alternative ways to conduct mass murder that would be more “humane” for his *Einsatzgruppen* units. Rauff reported in October 1941 on the possibility of using carbon monoxide in gas vans, experiments for which were first conducted at Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin. In September, the Nazis also began experimenting with the use of a pesticide, Zyklon-B, to use for mass killing at Auschwitz.<sup>44</sup>

Heydrich’s final role in the Holocaust was to organize the overall coordination of all Nazi agencies involved in carrying out the Final Solution. In January, Heydrich summoned together fourteen senior Nazi leaders at a villa on the shores of Lake Wannsee in Berlin. Heydrich had been ordered by Hermann Goering to coordinate all Nazi agencies in organizing the Final Solution to the “Jewish question” in Europe. Although it was clear to the senior leaders assembled that the Nazis intended to kill all of the Jews in Europe, a total of 11 million, according to surviving conference documents, the exact method of killing was unknown at the time. The Nazis had started building stationary gassing facilities near ghettos in Eastern Europe to kill Jews “incapable

of working” starting in the fall of 1941, including Belzec, Chelmo, and Mogilev. The Nazis conducted the initial killings by gas to relieve overcrowding in the ghettos and to make room for deportations of Jews from the Reich.<sup>45</sup> Wannsee Conference documents indicate that the Nazis intended to kill Jewish people by working them to death in slave labor camps in the east under inhumane conditions. At the same time, during the conference, Hans Frank’s State Secretary in the General Government, Dr. Josef Buehler, recommended that the Final Solution begin in the General Government immediately, given that the Jews there were incapable of working, implying the expansion of the killing centers in Poland using gas, a proposal that Heydrich approved.<sup>46</sup> By January 1942, it was clear the Nazis intended to murder the Jews in Nazi-occupied territory, although the exact method to conduct the genocide—shooting, gassing, or exterminatory labor—was still under consideration.

Reinhard Heydrich played a decisive role in organizing and implementing the Final Solution, from organizing and staffing the structures of the *Einsatzgruppen* to establishing the precedent for their implementation sequentially, first in Austria, then in Czechoslovakia, and finally their fully developed use for the mass killing of civilians beginning in Poland. Heydrich, together with Himmler, directed the beginning of the mass murders of Jews in Eastern Europe, initially only targeting Jewish men and then, with their encouragement, extending the mass killing to Jewish women and chil-

dren. Heydrich also played a role in the development of gas as a means for mass murder, and served as the coordinator of all of the Nazi agencies that played a role in carrying out the Holocaust, earning him the title of Hitler’s “hangman,” as Thomas Mann described him.<sup>47</sup> Coming to grips with Heydrich’s role in the Holocaust is an essential element of understanding how and why it occurred. And as Hitler’s biographer Ian Kershaw states, “Only through history can we learn for the future. And no part of history is more important in that respect than the era dominated by Adolf Hitler.”<sup>48</sup>

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## Notes

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