

Unit 6 / Lesson 6.3 / Overview

Unit 6: The German Killers and Their Methods

Lesson 6.3: The *Einsatzgruppen*

Background:

Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, also known as Operation Barbarossa, on June 22, 1941, set the second phase of the war in motion. As German troops swept through Eastern Europe, more and more Jews fell under German control. It was no longer possible for the Nazis to solve the Jewish "problem" by forcing Jews to emigrate from areas of German control.

Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing squads) followed the Wehrmacht (the German army) into the newly occupied regions for the purpose of arresting and murdering Jews and political opponents. Between June 1941 and December 1941, hundreds of thousands of Jews died in mass executions near their homes at the hands of the *Einsatzgruppen* and – it is important to note – these perpetrators included not only Germans but former neighbors and countrymen of the Jewish victims. The Germans effectively exploited the existing antisemitism of the local populations to recruit individuals to help terrorize and ultimately murder their Jewish neighbors.

Video Running Time: 12:32

Goal:

Students will examine the *Einsatzgruppen*'s and Operation Barbarossa's roles and their effect on the evolution of the "Final Solution."

Essential Question:

How did the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the *Einsatzgruppen* help define the "Final Solution?"

Learning Goals:

- Examine the connection between the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the mass murder of Jews in Europe.
- Identify and define the role of the *Einsatzgruppen*.
- Explore how "ordinary" men (and women) became mass murderers.
- Explain how the "Holocaust by Bullets" influenced the development of the efficiency of concentration camps and the development of gas chambers.

Success Criteria:

- Students will articulate the role of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Operation Barbarossa against racial and ideological enemies of the Nazis.
- Students will examine the role of collaborators in the killing of Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen*.

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- Students will correlate the Holocaust by Bullets with the development of concentration camps and gas chambers.

Topic For Further Discussion

- Create and analyze the concentric circles of responsibility for this genocide. How many different groups of people participated? What did participation look like? Can we rank degrees of responsibility? What criteria would you use?

Recommended Background Reading from *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*

Unit 6 – Lessons 6.1; 6.2; 6.3

Chapter 6

- Introduction to **Chapter 6: The German Killers and Their Methods**
- “Deciding to Kill” from *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution* by Mark Roseman
- “Bringing Death to Jews” from *Masters of Death* by Richard Rhodes
- “Bringing Jews to Death” from *The Destruction of the European Jews* by Raul Hilberg
- “Political Soldiers” from *Hitler’s Police Battalions* by Edward B. Westermann

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Unit 6: The German Killers and Their Methods

Lesson 6.3: The *Einsatzgruppen*

Question	
What was Operation Barbarossa?	
What was the military objective of Operation Barbarossa?	
What were the three German army groups and what were their objectives?	
What were the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> ?	
What was the task of the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> ?	
What was the killing process of the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> ?	
The actions of the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> in the Soviet Union are known today as what?	

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How was the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> the beginning of the “Final Solution?”	
What were the results of Operation Barbarossa?	

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Answer Key

Question	Possible Answers
What was Operation Barbarossa?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surprise attack against the Soviet Union launched on June 22, 1941 • One of the largest military operations in history (Slide 3)
What was the military objective of Operation Barbarossa?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To conquer the East • To destroy the Soviet Union by military force • To eliminate the threat of communism to Germany • To seize territory, <i>Lebensraum</i> (living space) for German settlement • To conduct a war of annihilation against the Jewish and Slavic peoples (Slide 4)
What were the three German army groups and what were their objectives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North – objective was Leningrad and conquering the Baltic states and Belorussia • Center – destruction of Soviet military in Belorussia and to capture Moscow • South – capture of Soviet Ukraine and Kyiv (Slide 4)
What were the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile killing squads • Followed behind the three army groups • Mass shootings in daylight • Murdered some 2 million Jewish men, women, and children (Slide 5)
What was the task of the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To wage a war of annihilation against Germany's racial and ideological enemies – Jews, Communists, Roma/Sinti, and other Soviet civilians • Led to the annihilation of entire Jewish communities across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Slide 6, 8, 9)

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What was the killing process of the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> ?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jewish residents of a village would be rounded up • Taken to a nearby killing site – usually a pit or a ravine • Often the victims would be forced to dig the pits • Victims were forced to undress • Victims were shot • Belongings of the victims would be looted • Killing pits would be filled in by the local non-Jewish population to hide the bodies (Slide 10)
The actions of the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> in the Soviet Union are known today as what?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The “Holocaust by Bullets” due to the manner in which the victims were killed (Slide 11)
How was the <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> the beginning of the “Final Solution?”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was not cost-effective • The rate of killing of Jews and other minorities was not fast enough for the Germans • Led to concentration camps (fixed locations) and gas chambers • Psychologically traumatic on killers (Slide 11, 12)
What were the results of Operation Barbarossa?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operation failed • Led to the defeat of Nazi Germany • <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> killed 2 million Jewish men, women and children, and hundreds of thousands of Soviet POWs and civilians (Slide 12)

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Unit 6: The German Killers and Their Methods

Lesson 6.3: The *Einsatzgruppen*

Slide 1 – The *Einsatzgruppen*

Welcome to Lesson 6.3 of *How Was it Possible? A Holocaust Curriculum For and By Teachers™*, from The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. This presentation will give you an overview of the topic “*Einsatzgruppen*.” This lesson was prepared by Doug Cervi, who taught social studies and the Holocaust at Oakcrest High School in Mays Landing, New Jersey. He is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education, and an adjunct professor at Stockton University in New Jersey.

Slide 2 – The *Einsatzgruppen*

This presentation will look at the *Einsatzgruppen*, the mobile killing squads, and their role as part of Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union that began in June 1941.

The Germans, along with their allies and collaborators, carried out thousands of mass shooting actions in the territories they seized, and perpetrated the mass murder of Jewish men, women, and children on an unprecedented scale. These murders were part of the “Final Solution” to “The Jewish Question,” the mass murder of Europe’s Jews. The killings in the Soviet Union were also known as the “Holocaust by Bullets.” Almost one third of the Holocaust’s six million victims were murdered in mass shootings.

In this photograph, dated July 1941, a member of the Waffen-SS shoots a Jewish man sitting on the edge of a killing pit in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, while others stand around watching. In the initial months of the occupation, thousands of Jews from Vinnitsa and the surrounding areas were murdered in this way.

Slide 3 – Operation Barbarossa – June 22, 1941

Operation Barbarossa was a surprise attack against the Soviet Union launched by Nazi Germany on June 22, 1941.

In one of the largest military operations in history, the Germans and their allies massed over 3.5 million troops to overwhelm the Soviet forces using *Blitzkrieg*, or “lightning war,” tactics, in the same way the Germans had when they invaded Poland and the Western European countries.

In the photograph we see German tanks before deployment on June 22, 1941. In the background is the bombing of Slutsk, Belorussia (today Belarus).

Slide 4 – Operation Barbarossa

The German military objective was to conquer the East: to destroy the Soviet Union by military force, to permanently eliminate the perceived Communist threat to Germany, and to seize territory for *Lebensraum*, or living space, for German settlement and colonization. Hitler’s vision was a war of annihilation against the Jewish and Slavic peoples who lived there.

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Although Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact in August 1939, Germany violated that pact with its invasion.

As you can see on the map, German forces were divided into three army groups, which made four major thrusts into Soviet-controlled territories and the Soviet Union itself.

Army Group North's strategic objective was Leningrad, with the operational objectives of conquering the Baltic States and northern Belorussia.

Army Group Center was equipped with the most tanks and airpower. Its strategic objective was the destruction of the Soviet military in Belorussia, and the capture of Moscow, the Soviet capital.

Army Group South's strategic objective was the capture of Soviet Ukraine and its capital Kyiv. Divided into two sections, its objectives were the agricultural heartlands of Ukraine, the industrial Donbas region, and the oil-rich Caucasus.

Hitler expected these objectives to be achieved in less than three months. More than 3.5 million German and Axis soldiers participated in Operation Barbarossa, but it ultimately failed.

Slide 5 – The *Einsatzgruppen*

Following right behind the Wehrmacht's three army groups were four *Einsatzgruppen* divisions. These mobile killing squads would oversee the murder of about 2 million Jews in occupied Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Mass shooting actions were often conducted in broad daylight and in full view of local residents. The photograph shows a squad of *Einsatzgruppe* D shooting Jewish women in an open pit in Soviet Moldavia (today Moldova), on September 14, 1941.

Slide 6 – *Einsatzgruppen*

SS and police units followed the German army as it advanced deep into Soviet territory. The *Einsatzgruppen* were tasked with waging a 'war of annihilation' against Nazi Germany's declared racial and ideological enemies: Communists, Jews, Roma, and other Soviet civilians.

The *Einsatzgruppen* identified and eliminated citizens who might organize and carry out resistance to the German occupation forces, and located and targeted citizens who were considered potential threats to German rule.

There were four divisions, made up of 600 to 1,000 men each, for a total force of around 3,000 men. They were assisted by some in the local population, who either volunteered or were forced to participate. It has been said that you cannot have a genocide without collaborators.

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In the photograph, a young Jewish mother and her child are being murdered near Ivanhorod, Ukraine in 1942. This is an iconic image of the Holocaust.

Slide 7 – *Einsatzgruppen* Commanders

These four commanders would be responsible for implementing the policy of murdering some 2 million Jews over a period of three years, until the Soviet army was able to repel the German forces in 1944. Two of them would be held responsible for these crimes after the war.

Otto Ohlendorf, who commanded *Einsatzgruppe* D, and Otto Rasch, commander of *Einsatzgruppe* C, were tried at the *Einsatzgruppen* Trial, conducted by the United States, from September 10, 1947, until February 12, 1948. Ohlendorf was convicted and executed on June 7, 1951. Rasch was removed from the trial on February 5, 1948, due to medical reasons. He died in custody on November 1, 1948. Arthur Nebe, after commanding *Einsatzgruppe* B, was posted back to Berlin in late 1941. He was executed after the failed attempt to kill Hitler. Franz Stahlecker, who commanded *Einsatzgruppe* A, was fatally wounded by Soviet partisans on March 22, 1942.

Slide 8 – *Einsatzgruppen* Routes, 1941

As mentioned earlier, the *Einsatzgruppen* followed the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union. This map indicates the four main routes taken by the mobile killing squads. *Einsatzgruppen* A, B, and C were attached to Army Groups North, Center and South respectively, with *Einsatzgruppe* D attached to the 11th Army attacking Crimea.

Slide 9 – *Einsatzgruppen*

Initially, the killing was restricted to Soviet commissars and Jewish men of military age. The Commissar Order, issued by the German High Command on June 6, 1941, instructed Wehrmacht commanders to summarily execute captured Soviet political commissars, whose job was to be a liaison between the Communist Party and ordinary soldiers.

The Germans perceived commissars as enforcers of so-called “Judeo-Bolshevik ideology,” the lumping together of Jews and Communists. This was in line with Nazi ideology, despite the reality that relatively few Jews were political commissars. This order deliberately flouted international law and contradicted the lie of a “clean” Wehrmacht, the idea that the Wehrmacht was not involved in mass murder.

By July of 1941, the process of mass murder would pivot from men of military age and Soviet commissars to include all Jews, no matter their age or gender. This led to the annihilation of entire Jewish communities across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Roma/Sinti and non-Jewish Soviet civilians were murdered.

Slide 10 – *Einsatzgruppen* Killing Process

The killing was a step-by-step process: all the Jewish residents of a village would be rounded up and taken to the killing sites, such as ravines or large pits which the victims were often forced to dig themselves. They were forced to undress and would then be shot, and their belongings would

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be looted. The killing pits would be filled in by the local non-Jewish population to hide their neighbors' bodies.

Slide 11 – *Einsatzgruppen*

When World War II ended in May 1945, the total number of Jews killed by the *Einsatzgruppen* was not known. But based on continuing research, historians estimate that approximately 2 million Jews were murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen*. The actions of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union are known today as the “Holocaust by Bullets” due to the manner in which the victims were killed. This form of killing proved to be inefficient and difficult for the killers, resulting in the use of gas chambers for mass murder.

This was the beginning of the “Final Solution.”

The photograph is of the ravine at Babyn Yar (Babi Yar), where the Jews of Kyiv, Ukraine were murdered on September 29-30, 1941. 33,771 Jews were murdered by the Germans, making it one of the largest mass killings during World War II.

Slide 12 – Summary – The *Einsatzgruppen*

Operation Barbarossa marked a turning point in both the history of World War II and the Holocaust. The operation would fail and ultimately result in the defeat of Nazi Germany, but not before German military and civilian occupation policies implemented by mobile killing squads resulted in the murder of some 2 million Jewish men, women, and children, as well as hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, and civilians.

It is impossible to understand the Holocaust without recognizing the significance of the *Einsatzgruppen* massacres: these mass murders preceded the death camps and significantly influenced their development. The violence of the *Einsatzgruppen*, directed without provocation against unarmed victims, was ruthless in operation, and criminal in intent.

The nature of the *Einsatzgruppen* killings – individual, at close range, personal, and spread out over a large area – influenced the development of the much more efficient, and for the killers, much less psychologically traumatic, method of mass murder using gas chambers in fixed locations, such as concentration and death camps.

Thank you for joining us today as we learned about “The *Einsatzgruppen*.” Please continue your educational journey with us. This concludes our presentation of Lesson 6.3 from *How Was it Possible? A Holocaust Curriculum For and By Teachers™*. On behalf of The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, thank you.

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Name: _____

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Circle the correct answers below.

1. What was Operation Barbarossa?
 - a. Surprise attack against Poland
 - b. Surprise attack against the Soviet Union
 - c. A small military action against Hungary
 - d. A small military action against the Soviet Union
2. Which of the following is not an accurate aspect of the *Einsatzgruppen*?
 - a. The *Einsatzgruppen* were mobile and traveled along the Eastern Front
 - b. There were multiple *Einsatzgruppen* units spread across the Eastern Front
 - c. The *Einsatzgruppen* acted independently and separately from the regular army
 - d. The *Einsatzgruppen* used firearms as their means of killing Jews and other victims
3. Who collaborated with the *Einsatzgruppen*?
 - a. Soviet soldiers
 - b. The *Judenrat* Councils
 - c. Communist party leaders
 - d. Neighbors of the Jews being murdered
4. In what way did the *Einsatzgruppen* lead to the rise of concentration camps and killing centers?
 - a. The leaders of the *Einsatzgruppen* were tired of operating in the Eastern Front
 - b. German military officers thought it best to kill Jews one at a time by shooting
 - c. The operations and mental toll of the mobile killing squads were detrimental to the war effort
 - d. The leadership of the *Einsatzgruppen* did not believe it was feasible to continue into the Soviet Union
5. What was not a result of Operation Barbarossa?
 - a. The operation ultimately led to the defeat of Nazi Germany
 - b. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war and non-Jewish civilians were murdered
 - c. Germany captured major cities, including Stalingrad, in the Soviet Union
 - d. The *Einsatzgruppen* killed some 2 million Jewish men, women, and children

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Lesson Quiz with Answers Highlighted and Bolded

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Link to Google Form Quiz (Instructions Available in the Appendix)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Ax5pNr1fEEJDqpZwFsK0D_WAS2WDRMwVLCCZk28pWXU/copy

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Lesson 6.3: The Einsatzgruppen

Slide 1 - Yevgeny Khaldei via Getty Images

Slide 2 - "The Last Jew in Vinnitsa" (2016). *Bulmash Family Holocaust Collection*. 2012.1.397.
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/bulmash/1085>

Slide 3 - bpk Bildagentur / Herbert Hoffmann / Art Resource, NY

Slide 4 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Slide 5 - © IWM HU 86369, Imperial War Museum - Photographer Unknown

Slide 6 - bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY

Slide 7 (Left to Right 1) - Bundesarchiv, Bild183-J08517 / Fotograf(in): Schwarz,
<https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/en/search/?yearfrom=&yearto=&query=Bild+183-J08517>

Slide 7 (Left to Right 2) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Benjamin Ferencz

Slide 7 (Left to Right 3) - Bundesarchiv, Bild 101III-Alber-096-34 / Fotograf(in): Alber, Kurt,
<https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/en/search/?yearfrom=&yearto=&query=Bild+101III-Alber-096-34>

Slide 7 (Left to Right 4) - "File:Franz Walter Stahlecker01.jpg." *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*. 15 December 2014, at 19:51 UTC. 9 Aug 2021, 14:31
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franz_Walter_Stahlecker01.jpg>.

Slide 8 - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Slide 9 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD

Slide 10 (Top Left) - Archives of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research

Slide 10 (Top Right) - Archives of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research

Slide 10 (Bottom Left) - Archives of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research

Slide 10 (Bottom Right) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD

Slide 11 - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem