

SS Untersturmführer Dr. August Becker to SS-Obersturmbannführer Walter Rauff on the Use of Gassing Vans (May 16, 1942)

Abstract

Dr. August Becker (1900–1967) was a German chemist in the Reich Main Security Office and a mid-ranking member of the Schutzstaffel (SS). In this letter, written to Walter Rauff, also a member of the Reich Main Security Office, Becker addresses the use of vans to administer lethal doses of gas to Jews and other prisoners on the Eastern Front. The methodical and technical specificity of the letter is striking given what the vans were being used for. The problems of weather, old equipment, and poor road conditions seem disturbingly mundane. These issues demonstrate the moral numbness that the Final Solution engendered in those tasked with its implementation. The two problems of seemingly greatest concern to these two men are that of maintaining secrecy and the mental health of their men. It is clear to them, as early as May 1942, that the mass murder of civilians, even through the use of mobile gas chambers, could not be adequately hidden from the public. Rumors and talk of what was happening did occur. As Becker notes, the effect of loading and unloading victims into these vans was taking its toll on the soldiers. These difficulties were then addressed as the regime sought more efficient methods for carrying out their increasingly focused genocidal plans.

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To: SS –Obersturmbannführer Rauff

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The overhauling of vans by groups D and C is finished. While the vans of the first series can also be put into action if the weather is not too bad, the vans of the second series (Saurer) stop completely in wet weather.

For instance even if it has been raining for half an hour, the van cannot be used because it simply skids away. It can only be used in absolutely dry weather.

The question then arises whether the van can only be used standing at the place of execution. First the van has to be brought to that place, which can only be possible in fine weather. The place of execution is usually 10-15 km away from the highways and is difficult to access because of its location: in damp or wet weather it is not accessible at all.

If the persons to be executed are driven or led to that place, then they realise immediately what is going on and get restless, which should be avoided at all costs. There is only one way left, to load them at the

collecting point and to drive them out there.

I ordered the vans of group D to be camouflaged as house-trailers by putting one set of window shutters on each side of the small van and two on each side of the larger vans, such as one often sees on farm-houses in the country.

The vans became so well-known that not only the authorities, but also the civilian population allude to it as the "death van" as soon as one of these vehicles appeared. In my opinion even with camouflage the van cannot be kept secret for any length of time.

The Saurer van which I transported from Simferopol to Taganrog suffered damage to the brakes on the way. The Security Command (SK) in Mariupol found the cuff of the combined oil-air brake broken at several points. By persuading and bribing the H.K.P. we managed to have a form machined, on which the cuffs were cast. When I came to Stalino and Gorlowka a few days later, the drivers of the vans complained about the same faults.

After having talked to the commandants of those commands I went once more to Mariupol to have some more cuffs made for those vans too. As agreed two cuffs will be made for each van, six cuffs will stay in Mariupol as replacements for group D and six cuffs will be sent to SS-Untersturmführer Ernst in Kiev for the vans of group C.

The cuffs for the groups B and A could be made available from Berlin, because transport from Mariupol to the north would be too complicated and would take too long. Smaller damages on the cars will be repaired by experts of the commands, that is, of course, the groups in their own shops.

Because of the rough terrain and the indescribable road and highway conditions the caulking and rivets loosen in the course of time. I was asked if in such cases the vans should be brought to Berlin for repair. Transportation to Berlin would be much too expensive and would demand too much fuel.

In order to save those expenses I ordered them to have smaller leaks soldered and if that should no longer be possible, to notify Berlin immediately by radio, that Pol. Nr ... is out of order. Besides that I ordered that during the gassing all the men were to be kept as far away from the vans as possible, so they should not suffer damage to their health by any escaping gases.

I should like to take this opportunity to bring the following to your attention: several commands have had the unloading after the application of gas done by their own men. I brought to the attention of the commanders of those S.K. concerned the immense psychological injuries and damages to their health which that work can have for those men, even if not immediately, at least later on.

The men complained to me about headaches which appeared after each unloading. Nevertheless they don't want to change the orders, because they are afraid prisoners called for that work, could use an opportune moment to escape. To protect the men from these damages, I request orders be issued accordingly.

The gassing usually is not undertaken correctly. In order to come to an end as fast as possible, the driver presses the accelerator to the fullest extent. By doing that the persons to be executed suffer death from suffocation and not death by dozing off as was planned.

My instructions now have proved that by correct adjustment of the levers death comes faster and the prisoners fall asleep peacefully. Distorted faces and excretions, such as could be seen before, are no longer to be seen.

Today I shall continue my journey to group B, where I can be reached with further news.

Signed: Dr Becker
SS Untersturmführer

Source of English translation: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/einsatz/rauff.html>

Source of German original text: Report from SS (Schutzstaffel) Lt. Dr. August Becker to SS Lt. Col. Walter Rauff; 5/16/1942; National Archives Collection of World War II War Crimes Records, Record Group 238. Available online at:
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