# Major General Walter Bruns's Description of the Execution of Jews outside Riga on December 1, 1941 (April 25, 1945)

## Abstract

The German attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, marked the beginning of a new phase of the war. Intent upon realizing all of its geopolitical and ideological goals—which included the conquest of additional "living space" [*Lebensraum*] for the German nation and the prosecution of a war of annihilation against the Jews—the Nazi regime ordered Reinhard Heydrich's so-called Special Operations Units [*Einsatzgruppen*] and numerous battalions of the Order Police [*Ordnungspolizei*] to follow the Wehrmacht as it advanced into newly conquered territories. The alleged task of these special units was to secure the conquered territories and eliminate dangerous political enemies. In reality, however, these troops were engaged in mass shootings of Jews. By the end of 1941, more than 700,000 Jewish civilians had been systematically murdered in a wave of massacres similar to the one described below.

The following document is the official English translation of a transcript of a surreptitiously taped conversation between German prisoners of war in a Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (C.S.D.I.C.), a British-run detention camp for staff officers. The British military hoped to learn military secrets by eavesdropping on prisoners of war. The conversation reproduced below focused on events that had taken place in Latvia in December 1941. The transcript includes Major General Walter Bruns's description of the mass execution of Jewish civilians outside Riga at the hands of Nazi occupiers. In 1948, Bruns testified as a witness to this crime in the trail against the High Command of the Wehrmacht.

## Source

Top Secret

C.S.D.I.C. (U.K.)

G.G. Report

S.R.G.G. 1158 (C)

The following conversation took place between:

CS/1952—Generalmajor BRUNS (Heeres-Waffenmeisterschule I, BERLIN), Capt'd GÖTTINGEN (8 Apr. '45) and other Senior Officer PW[s] whose voices could not be identified.

Information received: 25 Apr. '45

TRANSLATION:

BRUNS: As soon as I heard those Jews were to be shot on Friday I went to a 21-year-old boy and said that they had made themselves very useful in the area under my command, besides which the Army MT park had employed 1500 and the "Heeresgruppe" 800 women to make underclothes of the stores we captured in RIGA; besides which about 1200 women in the neighborhood of RIGA were turning millions of captured sheepskins into articles we urgently required: ear-protectors, fur caps, fur waistcoats, etc. Nothing had been provided, as of course the Russian campaign was known to have come to a victorious end in

October 1941. In short, all those women were employed in a useful capacity. I tried to save them. I told that fellow ALTENMEYER(?) whose name I shall always remember and who will be added to the list of war criminals: “Listen to me, they represent valuable man-power.” “Do you call Jews valuable human beings, sir?” I said: “Listen to me properly, I said ‘valuable man-power.’ I didn’t mention their value as human beings.” He said: “Well, they’re to be shot in accordance with the FÜHRER’s orders. I said: “FÜHRER’s orders?” “Yes,” whereupon he showed me his orders. This happened at SKIOTAWA(?), 8 km from RIGA, between SIAULAI and JELGAVA, where 5000 BERLIN Jews were suddenly taken off the train and shot. I didn’t see that myself, but what happened at SKIOTAWA(?)—to cut a long story short, I argued with the fellow and telephoned to the General at HQ, to JAKOBS and ABERGER(?), and to a Dr. SCHULTZ who was attached to the Engineer General, on behalf of these people; I told him: “Granting that the Jews have committed a crime against the other peoples of the world, at least let them do the drudgery; send them to throw earth on the roads to prevent our heavy lorries skidding.” “Then I’d have to feed them.” I said: “The little amount of food they receive, let’s assume 2 million Jews—they got 125 g of bread a day—if we can’t even manage that, the sooner we end the war the better.” Then I telephoned, thinking it would take some time. At any rate on Sunday morning I heard that they had already started on it. The Ghetto was cleared and they were told: “You’re being transferred; take along your most essential things.” Incidentally it was a happy release for those people, as their life in the Ghetto was a martyrdom. I wouldn’t believe it and drove there to have a look.

? [Unidentified P.O.W.]: Everyone abroad knew about it; only we Germans were kept in ignorance.

BRUNS: I’ll tell you something: some of the details may have been correct, but it was remarkable that the firing squad detailed that morning—six men with tommy-guns were posted at each pit; the pits were 24 m in length and 3 m in breadth—they had to lie down like sardines in a tin, with their heads in the centre. Above them were six men with tommy-guns who gave them the coup de grace. When I arrived those pits were so full that the living had to lie down on top of the dead; then they were shot and, in order to save room, they had to lie down neatly in layers. Before this, however, they were stripped of everything at one of the stations—here at the edge of the wood were the three pits they used that Sunday and here they stood in a queue 1½ km long which approached step by step—a queuing up for death. As they drew nearer they saw what was going on. About here they had to hand over their jewelry and suitcases. All good stuff was put into the suitcases and the remainder thrown on a heap. This was to serve as clothing for our suffering population—and then, a little further on they had to undress and, 500 m in front of the wood, strip completely; they were only permitted to keep on a chemise or knickers. They were all women and small two-year-old children. Then all those cynical remarks. If only I had seen those tommy-gunners, who were relieved every hour because of over-exertion, carry out their task with distaste, but no, nasty remarks like: “Here comes a Jewish beauty.” I can still see it all in my memory: a pretty woman in a flame-colored chemise. Talk about keeping the race pure: at RIGA they first slept with them and then shot them to prevent them from talking. Then I sent two officers out there, one of whom is still alive, because I wanted eye-witnesses. I didn't tell them what was going on, but said: “Go out to the forest of SKIOTAWA(?), see what’s up there and send me a report.” I added a memorandum to their report and took it to JAKOBS myself. He said: “I have already two complaints sent me by Engineer ‘Bataillone’ from the UKRAINE.” There they shot them on the brink of large crevices and let them fall down into them; they nearly had an epidemic of plague, at any rate a pestilential smell. They thought they could break off the edges with picks, thus burying them. That loess there was so hard that two Engineer ‘Bataillones’ were required to dynamite the edges; those ‘Bataillones’ complained. JAKOBS had received that complaint. He said: “We didn’t quite know how to tell the FÜHRER. We’d better do it through CANARIS.” CANARIS had the unsavory task of waiting for the favorable moment to give the FÜHRER certain gentle hints. A fortnight later I visited the “Oberbürgermeister” or whatever he was called then, concerning some other business. ALTENMEYER(?) triumphantly showed me: “Here is an order, just issued, prohibiting mass-shootings on that scale from taking place in future. They are to be carried out more discreetly.” From warnings given me recently I knew that I was receiving still more attention from spies.

[Unidentified P.O.W.]: A wonder you're still alive.

BRUNS: At GÖTTINGEN I expected to be arrested every day.

Source of English translation: Major General Walter Bruns's Description of the Execution of Jews outside Riga on December 1, 1941, Surreptitiously Taped Conversation (April 25, 1945), National Archives (UK), WO 208/4169, Report SRGG 1158.

Source of original German transcript: National Archives (UK), WO 208/4169, Report SRGG 1158.

Recommended Citation: Major General Walter Bruns's Description of the Execution of Jews outside Riga on December 1, 1941 (April 25, 1945), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-1531> [September 05, 2026].