

Diary Entry by Felix Landau, Member of a Mobile Killing Squad (July 12, 1941)

Abstract

The *Einsatzgruppen* were paramilitary death squads that followed the Wehrmacht and the SS as they advanced into enemy territory in Eastern Europe. They were first deployed in the invasion of Poland in August 1939 and during Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 as the German army advanced into the Soviet Union. A mobile killing squad's job was always clear: the unit would work to quell disorder among occupied populations in the East and carry out the ethnic cleansing of the new German territories by seeking out the intelligentsia, political opponents (mainly Communist party members and Social Democrats), and Jews and kill them. The majority of people who were murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen* were civilians, most of whom died by mass shooting.

The excerpt below, a diary entry from a volunteer member of an *Einsatzgruppe*, Felix Landau, recounts the process of carrying out the duties of the killing squad. As one of six men assigned to the twenty-three victims, Landau describes the surprisingly methodical process whereby he and his fellow perpetrators killed these men and women. Notable is his lack of remorse and his bewilderment at the behavior of the victims. His account resembles others found in perpetrator diaries and postwar trial proceedings insofar as it explains what motivated those who carried out the Final Solution in the East. Landau was arrested after the war, he but fled and lived in Germany under a false name before being unmasked and sentenced to life in prison in 1963.

Source

[...] Twenty-three have to be shot, including the women I mentioned before. They are remarkable. They even refuse to accept a glass of water from us. I was posted sentry and had to shoot anyone who escaped. We went along a country road for a kilometer, and then turned off right into a wood. Presently there were only six of us, and we looked for a suitable spot for the shooting and burial. After a while we found one. The condemned were given shovels in order to dig their own grave. Two of them were crying. The rest certainly had extraordinary courage. What must have been going on at that moment in their heads? I believe that each of them had a small hope that somehow they would not be shot. The condemned were deployed in three shifts because there were not enough shovels available. Curiously, absolutely nothing disturbed me. No pity, nothing [...]. Slowly the hole grew bigger; two wept incessantly. I let them go on digging, for then they would not think so much. In fact, they grew quieter while working. Their valuables, watches, and money were piled up together. After they had all been lined up together in a clearing, the two women were taken to the edge of the grave to be shot. Two men had already been shot in the bushes by our Criminal Police Commissar. I did not see this, as I had to watch over the rest. The women were seized and taken to the edge of the trench, where they turned around. Six of us had to shoot them, divided so that three of us aimed at the heart and three at the head. I took the heart. The bullets struck and brain mass burst through the air. Three to the skull are too much. They almost tear the head off. Almost all of them fell down silently together, although it did not work in two cases, where they screamed and whimpered for a long time. The revolver shots were no good. There was no failure on the part of the two of us who fired together. The penultimate group now had to throw those who had been shot into the mass grave, then they had to line up, and then fell of their own accord into the grave. The last two had to sit on the far edge of the grave so that they would fall in exactly. Then a few corpses were rearranged with a pick-axe, and we began the burial work. [...]

Source of English translation: Diary Entry by Felix Landau, Member of Mobile Killing Squad (July 12, 1941); reprinted in Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 100–01.

Source of original German text: Ernst Klee, Willi Dreßen, Volker Rieß, eds., “*Schöne Zeiten.*” *Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988, pp. 95–96.

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