

Introduction

Operation Barbarossa, the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, launched the most destructive military campaign in Europe since the Thirty Years' War. For Adolf Hitler and the Nazi leadership, the war “in the East” was not simply an epic land grab. The territory from the Baltic to the Black Sea that Germany and its allies conquered during 1941 and 1942 was singularly important to the Third Reich's plan to transform Europe and ultimately, perhaps the globe. Nazi war aims were twofold. First, Hitler believed that Germany could project hegemonic power only by conquering Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Where this expansion was to stop was unclear, even to the Nazis. Their mental map of *Lebensraum*, or “living space,” apparently ended at the Ural Mountains.

Second, Nazi planners believed that this territory would become an asset to Germany only if the region's millions of Slavs and Jews disappeared. Regarding Jews as the most pernicious of the area's many supposedly inferior peoples and as the Soviet regime's puppeteers, Nazi authorities targeted Soviet Jewry for mass killing from the very start of Operation Barbarossa. During the war, German authorities, their allies, and local collaborators murdered some two million Jews in conquered Soviet territory – more than a third of all Holocaust victims. Whereas German authorities in the Reich and Western Europe generally transported Jews to theoretically clandestine extermination centers in Poland, their counterparts in the occupied sections of the Soviet Union perpetrated a very public genocide. There, German forces and their helpers gunned down their victims in mass shootings.

Although Jews were the Nazis' preeminent racial enemies in the occupied Soviet Union, they were not alone. Nazi planners envisioned enslaving local Slavs once the war against the Soviet Union had been won, until German agricultural machinery made them obsolete. Then, they too would share

the Jews' grim fate. For the Nazis, the destruction of Soviet Jewry was a gambit in a planned long-term genocidal demographic revolution.¹

This study explores a complementary wartime Nazi project in the occupied Soviet Union that facilitated the Holocaust: the mobilization of local ethnic Germans, or *Volksdeutschen* (hereafter *Volksdeutsche*), to support Nazi rule. To replace the Jews and Slavs slated for eradication, German officials anticipated populating the region with militarized agricultural settlements inhabited by Germans. Without a surplus of Germans in the Reich or the wartime resources to relocate Germans to the conquered Soviet Union, the Nazis marshaled the territory's *Volksdeutsche* as the Third Reich's demographic vanguard.

Tens of thousands of German-speakers had relocated to the Russian Empire at the tsars' invitation by the early nineteenth century. They settled along the Volga and the Black Sea. The descendants of these "colonists" often clustered in homogenous communities, maintaining limited connections to Germany. The largest group of Soviet ethnic Germans to come under the Third Reich's control was the so-called Black Sea Germans (*Schwartzmeerdeutschen*), 130,000 *Volksdeutsche* located largely in southern Ukraine's Odessa oblast.²

During the Second World War, German occupiers targeted the Black Sea Germans for a violent Nazification program. When area German authorities resolved to murder Jewish deportees, the region's ethnic Germans became some of the most heavily involved Holocaust perpetrators. This study examines the Nazi *Volksdeutsche* enterprise in southern Ukraine and analyzes why so many local ethnic Germans participated in the Holocaust with apparent enthusiasm.

GERMAN VOLKSDEUTSCHE POLICY

Nazi planners were not the first to conceive of *Volksdeutsche* as a foundation for German territorial expansion "in the East." Before the First World War, Pan-German thinkers – many of them ethnic Germans – believed that the Russian Empire's *Volksdeutsche* could aid Germany's eastward expansion.³ At the First World War's twilight, the German military

1 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32–33.

2 German Police Decodes Nr 2 Traffic: 19.2.43, March 1, 1943, British National Archives [hereafter BNA], HW 16, Piece 37, Part 1, 5. Stabbefehl Nr. 101, April 10, 1943, Bundesarchiv Berlin [hereafter BB], R 59/67, 105.

3 Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Die Deutschen im Zarenreich: Zwei Jahrhunderte deutsche-russische Kulturgemeinschaft* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1986), 393.

advanced German influence in the crumbling Romanov Empire by succoring local Volksdeutsche.⁴ Germany's 1918 defeat increased the importance of German-speaking minorities in East Central and Eastern Europe in projecting German power. With the postwar reallocation of the German Empire's eastern periphery to Poland and the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire, German-speakers, formerly dominant members of Germanophone empires, became minorities in newly formed states. For Pan-Germans, Volksdeutsche abroad no longer supported future territorial expansion deep into the Russian steppe, but maintained a demographic claim to land that German nationalists regarded as rightly part of Germany. To this end, the Weimar Republic subvented these minorities financially and guarded their linguistic and cultural autonomy diplomatically.⁵

State assistance to ethnic Germans abroad intensified after the 1933 Nazi seizure of power. Like the governments of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime saw Volksdeutsche communities as an instrument to reverse Germany's territorial losses after the First World War. The Nazis centralized the diffuse efforts of the Weimar governments and placed ethnic German affairs under the supervision of the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle (Ethnic German Liaison Office) or VoMi. The VoMi coordinated the multitude of state and private actors working on behalf of Volksdeutsche and communicated a unified National Socialist message to ethnic Germans. During the mid-1930s, Heinrich Himmler's SS (Schutzstaffel, Protection Squadron) colonized the VoMi, ultimately co-opting it.⁶ Hitler's October 1939 appointment of Himmler as Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of Germandom (Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums) cemented Volksdeutsche affairs within the SS's domain.⁷

The Third Reich used Volksdeutsche to provoke war. During 1938, Hitler trumped up accusations of assaults against ethnic Germans as a pretext to annex the Sudetenland and an entrée to occupy rump Czechoslovakia. The following September, alleged mistreatment of ethnic Germans in

4 Ibid., 583–585.

5 John Hiden, "The Weimar Republic and the Problem of Auslandsdeutsche," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12, no. 2 (1977): 273–289.

6 Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 64–66.

7 On the Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums, see Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy, 1939–1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). Markus Leniger, *Nationalsozialistische "Volkstumsarbeit" und Umsiedlungspolitik 1933–1945: Von der Minderheitenbetreuung zur Siedlerauslese* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2006). See also Isabel Heinemann, "Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut: Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas" (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

Poland constituted a key Nazi justification for the invasion. Whereas Volksdeutsche minorities in Czechoslovakia and Poland facilitated Hitler's foreign policy aims, ethnic Germans elsewhere in Eastern Europe presented a diplomatic impediment, particularly in territory that, after the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, fell within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. To remove this source of friction, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact's secret protocols included provisions for population transfers. After the accord, Hitler ordered Himmler and the VoMi to relocate Volksdeutsche from the Baltic, Volhynia, Bessarabia, and northern Bukovina to German-occupied Poland. There, Eastern European Volksdeutsche could help "Germanize" occupied Poland.⁸

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis reversed their short-lived policy of relocating Volksdeutsche from Soviet territory. With Germany now at war with the Soviet Union and confident of victory, the VoMi took charge of the country's remaining Volksdeutsche, whom Soviet authorities had not permitted to relocate to German-controlled territory before the invasion. Himmler dispatched Sonderkommando R (Special Command R[ussia]), a special VoMi unit to mobilize ethnic Germans in conquered Soviet territory as the demographic seeds of future "Germanization." Removed from the VoMi's chain of command and subordinated directly to the Office of the Reichsführer-SS, Sonderkommando R functioned as Himmler's back-pocket Volksdeutsche affairs unit in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. It operated in both German-occupied Soviet territory and, significantly for the Black Sea Germans, in "Transnistria," the territory along the Black Sea that Germany had granted its Romanian allies.

ROMANIA AND THE HOLOCAUST

Romania's wartime alliance with Nazi Germany and participation in the Holocaust shaped Nazi efforts to marshal the Black Sea Germans. During 1941, Romania was an eager partner in Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and mass murder.⁹ Before Operation Barbarossa, Romania and

⁸ Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, 157–179. See also, Phillip T. Rutherford, *Prelude to the Final Solution: The Nazi Program for Deporting Ethnic Poles, 1939–1941* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Catherine Epstein, "Germanization in the Warthegau: Germans, Jews and Poles and the Making of a 'German' Gau," in *Heimat, Region, and Empire: Spatial Identities under National Socialism*, eds. Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann and Maiken Umbach (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 93–111.

⁹ Romania's alliance with the Third Reich and its involvement in the Holocaust has been the subject of considerable historical research. See Jean Ancel, *Transnistria, 1941–1942: The Romanian Mass Murder Campaigns*, trans. Karen Gold, 3 vol. (Tel Aviv: The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research

Germany shared a key ambition – Soviet defeat. Ironically, Nazi Germany's pre-1941 diplomatic machinations had permitted Romania's neighbors to claim Romanian territory. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact declared Bessarabia and northern Bukovina within the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet Union annexed those territories during June 1940.¹⁰ Sensing Romanian weakness, Hungary pressed its claims to Transylvania, a contested region in northern Romania. To secure Hungarian support, Germany and Italy brokered the Second Vienna Award, which granted Hungary northern Transylvania in August 1940.¹¹ The following month, Bulgaria, again with German and Italian backing, compelled Romania to sign the Treaty of Craiova, transferring the contested border region of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria.¹² Successive territorial losses forced King Carol II's abdication and brought Ion Antonescu to power. Otherwise unable to reverse its territorial losses, Romania accepted Nazi entreaties to join in the attack on the Soviet Union. Participation promised not only the return of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina but also the acquisition of territory between the Dniester and Bug Rivers, the region that Hitler dubbed Transnistria.¹³

Romania also had an established anti-Semitic tradition. It did not grant Jews civil equality until after the First World War, when the conflict's victors extracted this concession in exchange for territory.¹⁴ During the interwar period, preexisting Christian anti-Judaism, perpetuated by the Romanian Orthodox Church, reinforced economic anti-Semitism that grew from the disproportionately high representation of Jews in the Romanian middle class.¹⁵ Romania's territorial expansion after 1918 into previously Habsburg lands in Transylvania and northern Bukovina and the formerly Russian province of Bessarabia exacerbated anti-Semitism. Most Jews in

Center, 2003); Dennis Deletant, "Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 1 (2004): 1–26; Dennis Deletant, "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the 'Jewish Problem,'" in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, eds. Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008), 156–189; Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000). See also Mariana Hausleitner, et al., eds., *Rumänien und der Holocaust: Zu den Massenverbrechen in Transnistrien, 1941–1944* (Berlin: Metropol, 2001).

10 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 136.

11 *Ibid.*, 185.

12 *Ibid.*, 137.

13 As Alexander Dallin noted, Antonescu expressed interest in trading Transnistria for Hungarian-occupied Transylvania. Alexander Dallin, *Odessa, 1941–1944: A Case Study of Soviet Territory under Foreign Rule*, 2nd ed. (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998), 59–60.

14 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 12.

15 William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66–70, 238–248.

these territories were Yiddish-, Hungarian-, or Russian-speaking, which fueled Romanian fears that unassimilated ethnic minorities, above all Jews, were diluting the ethnic purity of the expanded Romanian state.¹⁶ Anti-Semitism was prominent in interwar Romanian political discourse and constituted a key platform for two political parties, the Christian National Defense League and the League of the Archangel Michael (later known as the Iron Guard). During the early 1940s, anti-Semitism became state policy.¹⁷ The Romanian government under King Carol II, taking its cue from Germany's Nuremberg Laws, enacted Law No. 2650, which circumscribed social interaction between Jews and gentiles and codified a definition of who was a Jew that was more expansive than the one employed in its German model.¹⁸ After Carol II's September 1940 abdication, Antonescu's new Legionary State copied Nazi anti-Semitic measures. During his first six months in office, Antonescu expropriated Jewish property, conscripted Jews for forced labor, and limited Jews' access to education and health care.¹⁹ Within a year, Romania erected a wall of anti-Semitic legislation comparable to the one the Nazi regime had taken nearly a decade to build. By early 1941, Romania had clearly signaled its willingness to collaborate in Nazi Germany's war upon the Jews.

Romanian anti-Jewish violence intensified after the attack on the Soviet Union. At Iași, on the border between the Regat and Bessarabia, which Soviet forces had occupied the previous year, Romanian forces unleashed a multiday pogrom during which thousands of Jews perished.²⁰ This pattern repeated itself as the Romanian military advanced into Bessarabia, Bukovina, and the Soviet Union's pre-1939 border territories. During July 1941, Romanian forces and their German counterparts systematically shot many of the Jewish residents of the city of Kishinev (Chișinău) and deported the survivors.²¹ Romanian anti-Jewish violence peaked a few months later. When a Soviet-planted bomb destroyed the Romanian military headquarters in Odessa in late October 1941, Romanian authorities blamed the city's Jews and launched a killing spree that claimed as many as 25,000 lives.²²

Despite what the Nazis regarded as auspicious anti-Semitic foundations, Romanian anti-Jewish policy differed from that of the Third Reich. Unlike their Nazi counterparts, Romanian authorities differentiated between assimilated Romanian Jews and those viewed as unassimilated foreign Jews residing in the newly (re)acquired territories. For Romania, the decisive

16 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 13–14.

18 *Ibid.*, 20.

20 *Ibid.*, 63–90.

22 *Ibid.*, 178–182.

17 *Ibid.*, 17–21.

19 *Ibid.*, 22–27.

21 *Ibid.*, 104.

factor was culture, not race. Although Romania pursued expropriatory and discriminatory measures against assimilated Jews in the Regat – the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in their 1859 borders – it did not target them for annihilation. By contrast, Romania’s leaders persecuted Jews in Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, whom they viewed as alien and therefore a threat. During the war, this distinction permitted the Romanian Jewish community’s leaders, including Dr. Wilhelm Filderman, to meet with high-level Romanian officials in Bucharest as Romanian military and police forces murdered thousands of Jews in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union – a situation that the Germans found unfathomable.²³

Although Romania and Germany pursued intense anti-Semitic campaigns during 1941, they differed on what the “Jewish problem” was and how it might be “solved.” If by summer 1941 it had not yet decided to kill all of Europe’s Jews, the Nazi regime anticipated the mass murder of Jews in captured Soviet territory. Before the invasion, German planners proposed killing Soviet Jews through an unspecified combination of starvation and exposure in Arctic Russia. As it became clear that this plan was infeasible, the Germans shifted to a policy of immediate and total mass killing by mobile shooting squads.²⁴ Romanian aims were more limited. To eliminate what they considered inassimilable ethnic minorities and to solidify control over newly reacquired Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, Romania’s leaders used ethnic cleansing to eliminate Jews and other allegedly troublesome minorities, including Roma.²⁵ Deportation deep into the Soviet Union and, according to Antonescu, preferably across the Urals, constituted the solution most attractive to the Romanian leadership.²⁶ Provided that Jews from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina disappeared, it mattered little to the Romanians whether they reached their destination or perished en route. Whereas the Germans planned in summer 1941 to murder Soviet Jews and viewed deportation and ghettoization as stopgap measures, the Romanians generally preferred deportation to mass shootings.

Romania’s enthusiasm for mass murder waned during late 1942 as prospects of total German victory dimmed. During fall 1942, for example, Antonescu postponed indefinitely the implementation of an agreement with Germany to deport Jews from the Regat to Operation Reinhard’s

23 Deletant, “Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944,” 7.

24 Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 103.

25 Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, trans. Richard Davies (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 163–188. Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

26 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 142.

killing centers in Poland. During 1943 and early 1944, Romanian authorities not only suspended deportations of Jews and Roma to Transnistria but even began to allow the deportees to return to Romania. The coordinated mass killing campaign that Transnistria's Romanian authorities pursued with German assistance during winter 1941–1942 marked the height of Romanian anti-Jewish violence that ebbed and flowed with Germany's military position.

SONDERKOMMANDO R IN TRANSNISTRIA

Offering Antonescu control of Transnistria was the price Germany had to pay for Romanian support in the invasion of the Soviet Union, but it had the tremendous drawback of placing the largest group of Soviet ethnic Germans in occupied territory under Romanian control. For Himmler and the VoMi, this situation was intolerable. They feared that the Black Sea Germans would languish under Romanian rule, and they also insisted that an ethnic German demographic bulwark in southern Ukraine was necessary to secure future German claims there after the war when a victorious Germany might wrest control of Transnistria from the Romanians.²⁷ The Romanians, junior partners in the alliance, permitted Sonderkommando R to operate in their occupation zone although they were well aware of the SS's designs on Transnistria.

In German-occupied territory, Himmler's subordinates were often challenged by other powerful German organizations, including the Wehrmacht and the civil administration. In Transnistria, by contrast, Sonderkommando R had to contend only with the Third Reich's Romanian allies. Owing to high-level agreements between the SS and the Romanians, which ceded ethnic German affairs to Sonderkommando R, and the willingness of area SS officers to run roughshod over Romanian occupation officials, the SS carved out unparalleled autonomy in Transnistria. Nowhere else in German-dominated Europe did the SS have such unfettered freedom to mobilize local German-speakers as a precursor to future German settlement. Examining Sonderkommando R's Volksdeutsche project in Transnistria provides an exceptional window into embryonic Nazi plans for the German-occupied Soviet Union.

²⁷ There was substantial debate among German authorities regarding Transnistria and its Volksdeutsche population. Some Nazi planners, including Dr. Georg Leibbrandt, Alfred Rosenberg's deputy for political affairs and himself an ethnic German from southern Ukraine, opposed granting Romania southern Ukraine. Dallin, *Odessa*, 57. As late as early 1942, however, some German planners continued to toy with relocating Volksdeutsche from Transnistria to occupied Poland on the model of earlier German "resettlements." Heinemann, "Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut," 420–421.

Spread thinly across Romanian-controlled southern Ukraine, Sonderkommando R's personnel faced daunting challenges in organizing local Volksdeutsche into militarized islands of Germanness. Soviet rule and months of combat had devastated southern Ukraine's once-fertile countryside, and area residents faced starvation with winter's rapid approach. Tensions between Sonderkommando R's personnel and local Romanian authorities also boiled over into violent confrontations.

To make matters worse from the SS's perspective, the VoMi found few sufficiently "ethnically German" area residents to include in the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the Nazi racial community. Despite extensive institutional experience identifying and relocating ethnic Germans across Eastern Europe before 1941, the VoMi had not operationalized a definition for a category as ambiguous as ethnic identity. Its personnel therefore resorted to highly subjective evaluations of cultural proximity to Germany, especially interwar National Socialist affiliations, to identify would-be ethnic Germans. In Transnistria, even these measures of "Germanness" proved useless. The Black Sea Germans' circumscribed historical contacts with Germany made them one of the most culturally distant groups of ethnic Germans that Nazi forces encountered. Transnistria's Volksdeutsche also had only rarely, if ever, engaged in National Socialist agitation before the war. That Transnistria's ethnic Germans had intermarried with Slavs and Jews, as the SS suspected, merely compounded the VoMi's concerns about the racial viability of the area's Volksdeutsche. Although tantalized by the demographic opportunities that the Black Sea Germans presented, Sonderkommando R's personnel were left to rule a population that they regarded as especially suspect in an especially remote and backward corner of Hitler's new empire.

Driven by a commitment to National Socialism and a desire to maintain the VoMi's outpost in occupied Ukraine, Sonderkommando R's leaders brushed aside these obstacles. Without knowing which local residents to include in the Nazi racial community, the VoMi ceded ethnic classification to supposedly reliable indigenous informants, permitting them to define the boundaries of Germanness. For these putative Volksdeutsche, the VoMi unfurled a muscular Germanization project that hinged on material rewards, ethnic cleansing, propaganda, and constant violence.

Notwithstanding the brutality of Nazi rule in rural Transnistria's ethnic German communities, local residents understood the benefits of inclusion in the *Volksgemeinschaft* and adeptly manipulated the Third Reich's racial categories. In insular communities, where family ties danced across Nazi racial boundaries, area inhabitants exploited their power over ethnic classification to benefit from German policies. Initially unpersuaded by Nazi

entreaties to identify all local Jews, many would-be Volksdeutsche communities conspired to hide their thoroughly integrated Jewish or “mixed” ancestry members from the Germans. Enticed by the scarce agricultural resources that the VoMi channeled to local Volksdeutsche, area residents charged with ethnic classification included their non-German relatives in the Volksgemeinschaft. By late 1941, unbeknownst to the SS, the Nazi Germanization project was foundering on local prevarication.

At the same time, unanticipated actions by Romania moved local VoMi commanders to enlist residents in mass murder. During fall 1941, the Antonescu regime deported Jews from territories that it had acquired during the invasion, sending them to camps and ghettos near Odessa and along the Bug River’s right bank. Fearing that these Jews could spread epidemic typhus to local SS-controlled communities, Sonderkommando R assisted the Romanians in murdering Jewish deportees near the Bug River during mid-December 1941. Without other personnel in the region, the SS deployed its ethnic German militia (Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz) – units that German authorities had used to contest Romanian rule in the countryside – to shoot tens of thousands of Jews. Initially, Sonderkommando R regarded mass murder as a detour from its central Germanization mission. The Romanians, however, recognized that, if pressed, Sonderkommando R and its local militiamen could assist in “solving” their “Jewish problem.” When German authorities in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine refused to permit the Romanians to deport Jews across the Bug River and into German-controlled territory, the Romanians capitalized on Sonderkommando R’s willingness to kill. Instead of sending Jews across the Bug River, they deported their Jewish prisoners to villages in northeastern Transnistria – the heart of the VoMi’s population project. Confronted by the threat of racial “contamination” and epidemic disease, Sonderkommando R sent ethnic German militiamen on killing operations that lasted until spring 1942, when German diplomatic pressure and the increasing scarcity of victims largely ended the unit’s participation in mass murder. By summer 1942, Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche militiamen had evolved into skilled *genocidaires*, who had mastered many of the techniques that German perpetrators were beginning to deploy at extermination centers in occupied Poland.

Sonderkommando R’s initially unanticipated participation in mass murder bolstered the unit’s once-tenuous Germanization project in Transnistria. Aware that they had sabotaged Nazi ethnic categories, area residents used genocide to demonstrate their Germanness to the SS. As local inhabitants correctly suspected, the SS regarded complicity in genocide as evidence of the National Socialist convictions that, in turn, demonstrated Germanness. Sonderkommando R’s transformation into a killing unit also

provided the VoMi with access to plunder, which it used to reward its local helpers. Few perpetrators enjoyed such impressive material rewards as did Transnistria's Volksdeutsche killers. Augmented by a propaganda and terror apparatus, Sonderkommando R enticed most of Transnistria's Volksdeutsche to the seductions of National Socialism and silenced the handful of dissenters. By early 1944, when Germany's military situation prompted Sonderkommando R to evacuate Transnistria's Volksdeutsche to German-occupied Poland, the VoMi succeeded, albeit briefly, in making Germans by creating killers.

SOURCES

This study would have been impossible but for the recent availability of wartime German and postwar investigative records. Sonderkommando R destroyed its operational records at the war's end to conceal its crimes,²⁸ leaving only fragmentary references to its activities in Transnistria in surviving SS records. Within the past twenty years, two new caches of Sonderkommando R's wartime records have become available. First, the recently declassified records of the British Radio Code and Cypher School contain decrypted wartime German police radio traffic that British intelligence had gathered.²⁹ These intercepts include the text of hundreds of messages that Sonderkommando R sent or received while in Transnistria. Second, records from the Odessa oblast' archive preserve much of the correspondence between Sonderkommando R and Transnistria's Romanian administrators.

Most importantly, scholars now may access the records of nearly a half century of Soviet and West German investigations into Sonderkommando R's crimes. As these investigative records form the core of this study, it is necessary to detail how these investigations interacted. Soviet probes into Sonderkommando R began immediately after the German retreat from southern Ukraine. During mid-1944, the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices (*Chrezvychainaia gosudarstvennaia komissiiia po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniiu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov*) interviewed local residents about Sonderkommando R's involvement in mass murder. Later that year, Soviet counterintelligence, or SMERSH (*Smert' Shpionam, Death to Spies*), interrogated some of the captured SS officers from Sonderkommando R. At

28 Aussage von V. S., April 14, 1965, Bundesarchiv-Außenstelle, Ludwigsburg [hereafter BAL], B162/2305. Aussage von G. B., December 13, 1966, BAL, B162/2307, 332.

29 On wartime British signals intelligence and the Holocaust, see Richard Breitman, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

the war's end, the Soviet secret police, or NKVD (Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), clandestinely tried former area residents, many of whom the Red Army had captured as members of the German military. Although some convicted ethnic Germans faced immediate execution, after 1956 Soviet authorities generally released suspected local perpetrators to live in special settlements, such as those around Karaganda in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.

During the early 1960s, West German prosecutors began to investigate Sonderkommando R's wartime operations in Transnistria. The inquiry was an inaugural case for the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes (Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen) in Ludwigsburg, West Germany's primary investigative office for Nazi-era crimes. The West German police ultimately conducted more than 200 interviews with surviving members of Sonderkommando R and their relatives and took some 500 statements from erstwhile residents of Transnistria. Initially focused on SS violence against local ethnic Germans in southern Ukraine, West German authorities eventually focused on Sonderkommando R's role in mass murder.

Shortly after the West German investigation began, the Soviet KGB (Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti, Committee for State Security), the NKVD's successor organization, reopened an inquiry into Sonderkommando R. Why the Soviets revisited the case is unclear. Definitive answers to this question may be found in the KGB's internal records, which are housed in the archives of the FSB (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, Federal'naia sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii) and could not be consulted for this study. That this second round of postwar Soviet investigations into Sonderkommando R paralleled West German probes suggests, however, that Soviet intelligence discovered new West German interest and reopened a cold case. Perhaps anticipating that their findings could shame or prod West Germany into a more thorough inquiry during the Cold War, Soviet authorities pursued detailed investigations into the crimes of local perpetrators who had served in Sonderkommando R's mass shooting campaigns. At the conclusion of their investigation, which resulted in a number of convictions and executions, Soviet authorities telegraphed their results to West German investigators by publishing newspaper articles about the trials in the Russian- and German-language Soviet press.³⁰

30 Izmenniki Rodini rasstrelyani, *Krasnaya Svesda*, August 28, 1966. E. Petrus, "Massenmörder am Pranger," *Neues Leben*, September 6, 1967. See also Brief von Dr. Hesse an den Justizministerium der UdSSR, October 16, 1967, BAL, B162/2308, 9.

By the time that West German prosecutors discovered complementary Soviet inquiries into Sonderkommando R and its local helpers, Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik permitted limited cooperation. Having engaged in diplomatic gymnastics, West German prosecutors obtained some key Soviet investigative records and vague promises of assistance. This cooperation became moot when, on the eve of indicting Sonderkommando R's surviving senior leaders, West German courts declared the suspects physically unfit for trial. The local prosecutor's office in Dortmund, which was responsible for pursuing Ludwigsburg's initial investigation, deemed further investigation fruitless and ended a decade-long inquiry into Sonderkommando R's crimes. It is unclear if the rumored past Nazi affiliations and continued sympathies of senior prosecutors in the office influenced their decision to end the probe.

Perhaps reflecting a generational shift in the Dortmund prosecutor's office, German state attorneys resurrected their investigation into Sonderkommando R during 1994, following an informational request from the Canadian Department of Justice.³¹ In the case's reincarnation, German investigators focused their inquiry on Transnistria's local residents, whom Sonderkommando R deployed to murder Jews. German prosecutors traveled to Ukraine, duplicated many Soviet investigative records, and interviewed surviving ethnic German residents from Transnistria then living in Germany. Although this second wave of postwar German investigations yielded new details about Sonderkommando R and its local collaborators' involvement in the Holocaust, prosecutors failed to develop evidence to demonstrate first-degree murder under German law. In 1999, prosecutors in Dortmund ended nearly four decades of investigations into Sonderkommando R.

Using testimony that Soviet authorities gathered constitutes a serious methodological challenge. The Soviet Union (and its satellite states) had a long history of politically motivated show trials in which coerced (and often tortured) defendants admitted imaginary crimes. Strong circumstantial evidence suggests that, during their investigations of Sonderkommando R, Soviet authorities deprived interviewees of sleep and physically abused them. Scholars must treat cautiously purportedly factual material that these testimonies contain, and they must question how Soviet political interests and the mindset and habits of the individual investigators shaped the information in these records.³²

31 Department of Justice Canada Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Section to the Zentralstelle Ludwigsburg, May 26, 1994, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Westfalen [hereafter LAV NRW W Q 234 StA Dortmund], Q 234 Staatsanwaltschaft Dortmund, Nr. 2809, 1. Verfügung, June 6, 1996, LAV NRW W Q 234 StA Dortmund, Nr. 2809, 72–77.

32 Aware of the methodological challenges that Soviet investigative material presents, a handful of scholars have begun to use these records to analyze previously under-studied dimensions of the

Jan Gross's path-breaking book *Neighbors* provides the most germane methodological discussion for using these sources. Gross uses testimonies that Polish security forces gathered during the late 1940s – the height of Stalinist rule – to study the Holocaust at the local level. Acknowledging the potential problems in using this material as an historical source, including the likely influence of torture on testimony, Gross nonetheless contends that the specific circumstances of the investigation make the historical information contained in its records reliable. Gross argues that because “the matter was handled as a routine case,” authorities did not manipulate the evidence to serve ulterior political motives.³³ He concludes that “for the very reason that this was by no means a political trial, materials produced during the investigation can serve us well in our reconstruction of what actually took place.”³⁴

As with the records that Gross used in *Neighbors*, there is no evidence that Soviet investigators fabricated information about Sonderkommando R. As most Soviet investigations into Sonderkommando R prior to the 1960s were secret, Soviet authorities had little reason to manipulate the results. Wartime materials, which SMERSH or the Extraordinary State Commission produced, remained secret because they had counterintelligence applications and threatened to expose the degree of local collaboration. Similarly, the records of clandestine NKVD trials during the 1940s remained sealed because public evidence of massive local complicity in German-led crimes was embarrassing to the Soviets. During the 1960s, when the KGB apparently responded to an ongoing West German inquiry by reopening an old case, a different dynamic seems to have been at play. Perhaps cognizant that their findings would be shared with West German authorities, Soviet investigators gathered meticulous evidence. The inquiry was massive. During a months-long investigation, the KGB transported witnesses from Central Asia to southern Ukraine, interviewed key suspects dozens of times, recorded thousands of pages of testimony, and conducted onsite forensic analysis. Investigators also recorded many defendants' absurdly implausible claims of ignorance about wartime events. Had the KGB simply wanted a

Holocaust in the Soviet Union. As this type of inquiry remains in its infancy, historians who use these materials have focused on studying Soviet judicial proceedings, rather than reflecting on how these records can be used to study wartime events. Tanja Penner, “Collaboration on Trial: New Source Material on Soviet Postwar Trials against Collaborators,” *Slavic Review* 64, no. 4 (2005): 782–790; Alexander Victor Prusin, “‘Fascist Criminals to the Gallows!': The Holocaust and Soviet War Crimes Trials, December 1945–February 1946,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 1–30.

33 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 13.

34 *Ibid.*, 14.

signed confession to make quick political hay, there would have been no reason to concoct such an elaborate investigation. A careful analysis of available testimony strongly suggests that the Soviet security apparatus recorded evidence that it judged to capture historical reality. Although, like all sources, Soviet investigative records concerning Sonderkommando R and its local helpers should be read critically for information that appears inaccurate, it would be an error simply to disqualify these sources from consideration.

The scale and diversity of sources available to reconstruct Sonderkommando R's mission to Transnistria and area Volksdeutsche complicity in the Holocaust present a unique methodological opportunity to use Soviet testimony as historical evidence. Not only is there a large, if fragmentary, body of wartime records that can be used to corroborate postwar statements, but the West German investigation provides an exceptional parallel set of records. In few if any other instances did German investigators possess the language skills or unfettered access to former local residents to investigate the Holocaust in the occupied portions of the Soviet Union at the grass-roots level. Postwar inquiries into Sonderkommando R constitute a rare instance in which two very different states probed the same microhistorical events and one in which historians can compare the results. That interviews recorded decades apart in different countries provide remarkably consistent historical information speaks to the empirical weight of these testimonies.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

This book's first five chapters are organized chronologically. Its final chapter is topical. Chapter 1 outlines the history of Germans in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, focusing on southern Ukraine's Black Sea German communities from the early nineteenth century until the fall 1941 arrival of German forces. A once-privileged minority, the Black Sea Germans suffered decline under Soviet rule before summer 1941, when the retreating Red Army deported local men and advancing German and Romanian forces targeted the region's Volksdeutsche communities for harsh but selective violence. Although the new Nazi order initially appeared to be an improvement over Soviet rule, local ethnic Germans understood that they would need to navigate the SS's expectations or face potentially lethal consequences.

Chapter 2 analyzes Sonderkommando R's staff, which enjoyed unique independence in setting Volksdeutsche policy in Transnistria. A highly eclectic unit, it tapped professional *völkisch* activists, recently "resettled"

Volksdeutsche, Nazi party “old fighters,” members of the National Socialist Motor Corps (Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahrkorps), and German Red Cross nurses. Despite its diversity, much of Sonderkommando R was committed to the Nazi Volksdeutsche project and primed to attack obstacles that it encountered.

Chapter 3 explores Sonderkommando R’s initial efforts to transform Transnistria in line with the Nazis’ vision of territorial expansion. Having forcibly secured an area of influence in Romanian-occupied territory where it could operate autonomously, Sonderkommando R used ethnic cleansing to create homogenous Volksdeutsche communities where none had existed previously. To secure lasting German control of Transnistria, Sonderkommando R channeled the area’s scarce agricultural resources to area Volksdeutsche – a move that encouraged local residents to manipulate the SS’s ethnic categories for their own benefit.

Chapter 4 traces the involvement of Sonderkommando R and its local Volksdeutsche helpers in the Holocaust during winter 1941–1942. It examines how, during a shoving match between Romanian and German authorities over who was responsible for murdering the region’s Jews, Transnistria’s Romanian administrators used the SS’s fear of epidemic disease to enlist Sonderkommando R’s assistance. The chapter probes how Sonderkommando R deployed local Volksdeutsche militiamen in killings that not only expanded in scale and complexity but also anticipated techniques that German extermination centers later employed in occupied Poland.

Chapter 5 reconstructs Sonderkommando R’s Germanization project in Transnistria after the end of the unit’s involvement in mass killing in the region during spring 1942. Heartened by area Volksdeutsche participation in genocide, Sonderkommando R expanded its militias and gave stolen Jewish property to local ethnic Germans. To bind Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche to National Socialism, it suppressed the Catholic and Protestant churches and unfurled an ambitious propaganda initiative. During Sonderkommando R’s Germanization efforts, renewed denunciations of Jews and “communists” shattered the unit’s newfound faith in local residents. Frustrated by the VoMi’s poor progress, Sonderkommando R subjected area residents to indiscriminate violence that the unit’s leaders reigned in only by constructing a concentration camp.

Chapter 6 explores why so many of Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche participated in mass murder. It reconstructs a collective biography of some of the most heavily implicated Volksdeutsche militiamen. A historically marginalized population, these killers were vehemently anti-Soviet long before the Second World War. The chapter examines why local ethnic Germans began

to kill during December 1941 and why they continued to do so during early 1942. When German authorities first mustered area Volksdeutsche to murder Jewish deportees during late 1941, situational and social psychological factors were more important than anti-Semitism in moving local ethnic Germans to murder Jews. As mass murder became routine, two additional factors increased in importance. First, area Volksdeutsche reaped the material rewards of genocide. They not only robbed their victims, but, more importantly, they used participation in the Holocaust to clarify, at least temporarily, their previously suspect ethnic identity in the SS's eyes. As members of the Volksgemeinschaft, area ethnic Germans benefited from the Third Reich's largesse as no other perpetrator group could. And second, amid unbridled cupidity and deep-seated anti-Soviet sentiment, the VoMi's propaganda, which blamed Jews for the Soviet regime's evils, gained traction. Eager to avenge themselves against their Soviet tormentors and to justify their own avarice, Transnistria's ethnic German perpetrators became committed anti-Semites.

TERMS, PLACES, AND PERSONAL NAMES

Studying Nazi Germany presents the problem of deciding what terminology to use. The Nazis assigned individuals, particularly in the conquered Soviet Union, to rigid, supposedly scientifically delineated categories. This classification schema is repugnant not only for its bigotry but also for its racist and gendered distortion of reality. Nevertheless, Nazi categories were very real for German occupiers and had powerful consequences for the people that they ruled. For this reason, scholars are loath to part with these troubling terms.

The term "Volksdeutsche" is no exception. Although it predated the Nazis, it is now seldom used because of its association with Germany's murderous wartime population policies. Nevertheless, during the Nazi period, inclusion and exclusion from this category had important implications for Hitler's subjects. Despite its historical baggage, this book uses the terms "Volksdeutsche" and "ethnic German" interchangeably to describe individuals whom German authorities identified as ethnically German or who presented themselves as such to the Nazis.

For scholars of Eastern European and Soviet history, place names are similarly problematic. Given the region's ethnic and linguistic multiplicity, most places have several names. Choosing one name over another inevitably threatens to insert researchers into historic interethnic territorial struggles. Except for places that have common English spellings, such as Odessa, all

place names are given using the names that local German-speakers and later the SS assigned to them. This is done to recreate and convey the wartime historical landscape. During the war, violent German population schemas remade the region's demography. The SS's removal of local Volksdeutsche and the Soviet regime's refusal to permit German-speakers to return to post-war southern Ukraine meant that many of these Germanized settlements existed only briefly. Using wartime names reflects this historical reality. For the reader's convenience and geographical precision, if possible the contemporary Ukrainian-language place name is given in the first instance.

This study renders all personal names as they appeared during the war, except for names that appear exclusively in archival collections accessed in the Federal Republic of Germany. According to the conditions of access that German law imposes on scholarly users, the personal details, including names of possibly living private individuals, may not be published. Personal names that do not appear elsewhere in the public record are anonymized.