CREATING KILLERS: THE NAZIFICATION OF THE BLACK SEA GERMANS AND THE HOLOCAUST IN SOUTHERN UKRAINE, 1941-1944

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During the Second World War, German authorities and their local helpers killed some two million Jews in the occupied Soviet Union. The large swath of Soviet territory that Germany and its allies occupied from the Baltic to the Black Sea was not simply the crucible of the Holocaust, it was also a region of singular importance to Nazi ambitions. Guided by the belief that territorial expansion in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was the only way to provide the agricultural base needed to secure the Third Reich’s global dominance, the Nazi regime attempted to remove supposedly racially undesirable Jews and Slavs and to gain permanent control of the region by settling it with Germans. Wartime German authorities regarded Soviet Jewry as the most inferior of the region’s numerous allegedly inferior peoples and as the Soviet state’s puppeteers. They were therefore the first group that the Nazis targeted. Future German designs, however, were far more expansive. After winning the war against the Soviet Union, Nazi planners envisioned settling their new empire’s breadbasket with Germans, whose militarized, agricultural settlements would dot the countryside and cement lasting economic autarky. In this brave new National Socialist world, local Slavs would remain as laborers until German industry could supplant them with agricultural machinery. Then, they too would share the grim fate of their Jewish neighbors. For the Nazis, the destruction of Soviet Jewry was the opening gambit in a broader planned genocidal demographic revolution in conquered Soviet territory.

Over the course of the Second World War, the Nazi leadership had to content itself with a more modest pilot program of population engineering. Absent the excess population in the Reich or the resources to begin settling Germans in the conquered Soviet Union — particularly after the conflict expanded into a global war against the United States in December 1941 — the Nazis sought to develop a German demographic bulwark in the area to secure lasting claims to Soviet territory. In lieu of more grandiose plans, the Third Reich would marshal indigenous ethnic Germans or Volksdeutsche as the

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1 All views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

2 This figure reflects the number of victims in the pre-1939 borders of the Soviet Union and territories that it annexed between 1939 and 1941. Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln, 2009), 525.

basis for permanent control of the region. The largest population of Soviet ethnic Germans to come under the control of the Third Reich was the so-called Black Sea Germans (Schwarzmeerdeutsche), 130,000 Volksdeutsche in southern Ukraine’s Odessa oblast (region). Between the arrival of German forces in the fall of 1941 and the German evacuation of all Volksdeutsche from the region in early 1944, this group became the focus of Nazi efforts to organize Volksdeutsche as a demographic toehold on conquered Soviet territory. Although limited by scarce resources and operating in Romanian-occupied territory, local German administrators targeted area Volksdeutsche for an intense and brutal Nazification program. When unanticipated situational factors moved area German authorities to enlist the help of local Volksdeutsche in the mass shooting of Jews, the region’s ethnic Germans responded by fielding some of the most heavily implicated Holocaust perpetrators. My dissertation explores Nazi Volksdeutsche policy in southern Ukraine and analyzes why the area’s large ethnic German population embraced the Nazi project and especially the Holocaust.

I.

During the past twenty years, research on the Holocaust “in the East” has bloomed, thanks to access to previously closed Soviet archival holdings and an increased scholarly sensitivity to the importance of the Holocaust within the history of the Second World War. Owing in part to the scale of the Holocaust in the Ukraine and its ongoing significance in the formation of Ukraine’s post-Soviet national identity, many historians have focused on the topic. Research by scholars including Andrej Angrick, Omer Bartov, Karel Berkhoff, Kate Brown, Martin Dean, John-Paul Himka, Wendy Lower, Dieter Pohl, and Thomas Sandkühler, has yielded a rich understanding of an array of topics related to Nazi rule and the Holocaust in Ukraine, including the history of everyday life, the policies and practices of German administrators, and the mass murder of Jews, to name but a few. Despite this prodigious scholarly output, historians have largely overlooked Nazi policy toward the Black Sea Germans and the group’s key role in the Holocaust in southern Ukraine.

There are a number of reasons why scholars have not focused on this episode of the war and the Holocaust. First, specialized studies on southern Ukraine during the conflict have concentrated on Romanian authorities, who administered most of the area during the war and played a central role in orchestrating the
Holocaust. German and Volksdeutsche activities, insofar as scholars have probed them, appeared peripheral to Romanian involvement. Second, although historians have devoted substantial attention to Ukraine’s German occupiers, only relatively recently have they begun to examine the role of the area’s indigenous helpers, who propelled the Holocaust at the grassroots level. Concentrating on the important work of recovering the history of local collaboration, scholars have only partially dissected the motivations of these essential participants in the occupation regime and the Holocaust. In contrast to the monumental research and debates over why Germans took part in the Holocaust, scholarship on the motivations of non-German collaborators in the occupied Soviet Union remains in its infancy. This is especially true of research and debates over why Germans took part in the Holocaust. A final, albeit key reason why the Nazi Volksdeutsche project and the Holocaust in southern Ukraine remain under-studied is that sources available to probe the subject have become accessible to scholars only very recently. Intentional and unintentional document


7 Scholars who address Soviet ethnic German perpetrators, such as Jean Ancel, Andrej Angrick, and Wendy Lower, note the prominent part that Volksdeutsche played in the Final Solution, but focus their studies on Reich German or Romanian occupation officials, rather than on ethnic Germans themselves. Ancel, Transnistria, 1941-42. Angrick, Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord. Lower, Nazi Empire-Building.

8 Focusing on the complicity of the predominantly Slavic local police in Belarus and Ukraine, for example, Bernhard Chiar, Martin Dean, and Dieter Pohl have examined the crucial contribution of non-German Holocaust perpetrators in the Soviet Union. Chiar, Alltag hinter der Front. Dean, Collaboration in the Holocaust. Dieter Pohl, “Ukrainische Hilfskräfte beim Mord an den Juden,” in Die Täter der Shoah: fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?, ed. Gerhard Paul (Göttingen, 2002), 205-24.

9 In examining Eastern European Holocaust perpetrators, historians have sketched two preliminary explanations for the involvement of Eastern Europeans. First, as Karel Berkhoff and Amir Weiner note, the region’s indigenous anti-Semitism was a crucial engine for driving the Holocaust at the grassroots level. See Berkhoff, Harvest of Despair; Amir Weiner, Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution (Princeton, 2001). Similarly, in his case study of the Holocaust in Jedwabne, Poland, Jan Gross points to the primary importance of local anti-Semitism in the decisions of Poles to murder their Jewish neighbors. See Jan T. Gross, Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (Princeton, 2001). Second, as historians, such as Chiar, Dean, Diekmann, and Ioanid...
destruction during the war’s final months erased most wartime German records related to the Third Reich’s activities in southern Ukraine and local Volksdeutsche participation in the Holocaust. Within the past decade, however, wartime and postwar record collections that permit a comprehensive study of the subject have become available. Two newly accessible sources provide valuable caches of relevant wartime materials. The recently declassified records of the British Radio Code and Cypher School contain decrypted wartime German police radio traffic that British signals intelligence gathered during the Second World War. These intercepts include the text of more than 1,000 messages that area German officials sent or received during the conflict. Records from the Odessa oblast archive also house substantial, albeit fragmentary, wartime German and Romanian correspondence, which complements previously available German archival sources.

Most importantly, the recently released records of postwar Soviet and German inquiries into Nazi population policy and the Holocaust in southern Ukraine permit a detailed reconstruction of this often ignored episode of the war. Beginning just after the Red Army wrested control of southern Ukraine from Romanian and German forces in 1944, the Soviet secret police began investigating the crimes of local German speakers and their Nazi overlords and recorded testimonies taken from area residents and from captured suspected German and Volksdeutsche perpetrators. Starting in the early 1960s, West German investigators at the newly founded Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes (Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen) in Ludwigsburg launched a parallel investigation into the same events, interviewing hundreds of former German officials who served in Odessa oblast’ during the war as well as former local ethnic Germans who had relocated to Germany after 1945. By the time that German investigators concluded their inquiry in 1999, these dueling and occasionally cooperating inquiries yielded nearly a thousand testimonies related to the Third Reich’s Volksdeutsche policy and the Holocaust in southern Ukraine.

Although these newly available testimonies provide detailed information about wartime events, using them to recover the occupation’s local dynamics and the Holocaust is methodologically challenging. Historians continue to wrestle with how to glean useful historical information from statements that erstwhile participants

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14 With the exception of places, such as Odessa, which have common English spellings, 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 historical landscape as it existed at that time. For the reader’s convenience and geographical precision, if possible the contemporary Ukrainian-language place name is given in the first instance.
in the Holocaust provided years after the fact in circumstances that undoubtedly shaped their accounts. This problem is particularly acute for police statements. Fearing criminal liability, interviewees often adapted their testimony to deflect suspicion. That the Soviet security apparatus recorded many of these statements raises further methodological issues. The Soviet secret police’s lack of due process, probable coercion of witnesses, and history of staging politically motivated show trials during the 1930s raises valid concerns about the veracity of information contained in postwar Soviet testimony about the war.

While this body of evidence presents significant methodological challenges, the scale and diversity of sources available to reconstruct Nazi Volksdeutsche policy and the Holocaust in southern Ukraine provides an exceptional opportunity to assess the quality of historical information in Soviet testimony. 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 produced an exceptional parallel set of testimonies. In few if any other instances did German investigators possess the language skills or unfettered access to former area residents to conduct a detailed investigation into the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet Union at the local level. Postwar investigations into this subject constitute a rare instance in which two very different states probed the same microhistorical events and one in which historians can compare the content of each record group to distinguish between consistent, historically useful and inconsistent, likely implausible information. That interview transcripts recorded decades and thousands of kilometers apart provide remarkably uniform historical information speaks to the empirical weight of these testimonies.

II.

The precise contours of German occupation policy in southern Ukraine were a product of Germany and Romania’s cooperation in the invasion of the Soviet Union and, at least initially, in the Holocaust. To cement Romania’s assistance in Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union and to compensate the country for the reallocation of Transylvania to Hungary, Adolf Hitler promised Romania’s dictator, Ion Antonescu, Soviet territory outside of Romania’s historical borders between the Dniester and Bug Rivers, dubbing the region Transnistria. While this move enticed Romania to support Operation Barbarossa, it

15 Although a number of historians have used postwar testimony to reconstruct wartime events related to the Holocaust, perhaps no scholar has employed them as systematically in historical research on this period as Christopher R. Browning. See Christopher R. Browning, Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp (New York, 2010).
also placed the Black Sea Germans under foreign control. For Heinrich Himmler, who, as the Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of Germany (Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums), was responsible for the Third Reich’s relationship with Germanophone minorities abroad, this situation proved intolerable. Fearing that what he regarded as the valuable biological building blocks of Nazi rule in the Soviet Union would languish under Romanian authority, Himmler ordered the SS-run Ethnic German Liaison Office (Volksdeutsche Mitteilstelle) or VoMi to deploy to Romanian-controlled Transnistria. The SS devoted substantial elements of Sonderkommando R, the VoMi unit charged with implementing the Nazi regime’s Volksdeutsche policy in the occupied Soviet Union, to the area. Transnistria’s new Romanian rulers grudgingly granted the unit extraterritorial authority over local ethnic Germans.16 Under the leadership of Horst Hoffmeier, the architect of the VoMi’s ethnic German “resettlement” operations in the Baltic and southeastern Europe, Sonderkommando R’s forces in Transnistria were not subject to the VoMi’s chain of command and reported directly to Himmler — making it his personal ethnic German affairs unit in the occupied Soviet Union.17

When Sonderkommando R’s forces arrived in Transnistria in early September 1941, they encountered local ethnic German communities embattled by decades of Soviet rule and traumatized by the war’s opening months. The Black Sea Germans descended from German-speaking settlers who had relocated to the area at the invitation of the tsarist regime at the beginning of the nineteenth century and inhabited some two hundred multi-ethnic villages and hamlets that dotted the Ukrainian countryside outside of Odessa. As the beneficiaries of legal privileges, including reduced taxation, under the ancien régime, the Black Sea Germans supported the tsarist autocracy until the First World War, when it took repressive measures against German and Yiddish-speaking residents along the empire’s western borderlands.18 During the Kaiserreich’s brief occupation of southern Ukraine during the First World War, area Germanophone residents anticipated lasting German dominance in the region and supported the German military until its hasty retreat. Siding with White forces during the Russian Civil War as the only viable alternative to the Bolsheviks, local German speakers suffered mightily during the first years of Soviet power as vanquished political opponents.19 During the late 1920s...
and early 1930s, local Soviet officials disproportionately identified southern Ukraine’s German speakers as “kulaks,” or wealthy peasants, and targeted them for arrest, expropriation, and deportation.\textsuperscript{20} Soviet authorities also shuttered ethnic German churches and with them a key way in which the region’s predominantly Catholic and Protestant Volksdeutsche differentiated themselves from their non-German neighbors. The degree of linguistic autonomy that the Soviet regime had granted local German speakers ended abruptly during the late 1930s, as Soviet authorities pursued increasingly repressive measures against ethnic minorities on the country’s periphery.\textsuperscript{21} The Red Army’s brutal retreat from southern Ukraine ahead of advancing German and Romanian forces during the late summer of 1941 exacerbated the Black Sea Germans’ generation and a half of cultural, religious, and socio-economic decline. Withdrawing Red Army units attempted to deport ethnic German men — who were already in short supply owing to prewar arrests — to the Soviet interior. While advancing Wehrmacht forces overran many of these deportation transports, the experience signaled to remaining Volksdeutsche that a return of Soviet rule would likely precipitate their wholesale expulsion and the destruction of their communities.\textsuperscript{22}

Although local German speakers welcomed the Germans as an alternative to the Soviets, they remained initially ambivalent about the Nazi agenda. In contrast to local residents of western Ukraine, area ethnic Germans did not carry out autonomous anti-Semitic violence during the interregnum between Soviet and German power. After Einsatzgruppe D swept through the communities on the Wehrmacht’s heels in August 1941, the unit’s personnel reported that area Volksdeutsche regarded local Jews as “harmless and innocuous.”\textsuperscript{23} This was something of an exaggeration. Local residents gleefully denounced alleged Volksdeutsche “communists” and the “bad Jews,” whom area Volksdeutsche deemed complicit in the evils of the Soviet regime, to Einsatzgruppe D for murder.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, initially unbeknownst to the Germans, Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche communities conspired to hide a substantial number of indigenous Jews who had intermarried with local ethnic Germans.\textsuperscript{25} Despite their suffering under the Soviets, Transnistria’s ethnic Germans were initially ambivalent toward National Socialism’s genocidal plans.

\textsuperscript{20} Buchsweiler, Volksdeutsche in der Ukraine, 122. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian

\textsuperscript{21} Brown, A Biography of No Place, 160; Terry

\textsuperscript{22} According to the conditions of access that German law imposes on scholarly users, personal details, including names of living private individuals, may not be published. Personal names that do not appear elsewhere in the public record are anonymized.


During the late summer and fall of 1941, Sonderkommando R’s personnel trickled into Romanian-occupied Transnistria overland via Rowno (Rivne) and Kiev.26 After establishing the unit’s regional headquarters in Landau (Shyrokanivka), one of the region’s sizable ethnic German communities, the unit’s personnel divided into eighteen Bereichkommandos or Regional Commands and set up station in Odessa and major ethnic German settlements in the Transnistrian countryside. Sonderkommando R’s Bereichkommandos varied in size and composition, but typically included an SS-Hauptsturmführer (roughly equivalent to Captain) as commander, an SS non-commissioned officer as his subordinate, and a member of the National Socialist Motor Corps, seconded to the VoMi for wartime service, to maintain and operate the unit’s vehicles.27 Eventually, the German Red Cross and the NS-Frauenwerk, the Nazi women’s organization, contributed a substantial number of nurses, teachers, and National Socialist organizers to these rural VoMi outposts.28 By 1942, Sonderkommando R’s hodgepodge composition and gender diversity made it one of the most eclectic German formations of the war.

With only skeletal instructions from their VoMi superiors, Sonderkommando R’s personnel began marshaling Transnistria’s ethnic Germans as a bulwark of Germandom in conquered Ukraine. The unit’s first measure was to expand local Volksdeutsche militia or Selbstschutz forces that Einsatzgruppe D had created.29 Reminiscent of homegrown self-defense forces that local German speakers had
fielded during the Russian Civil War, these militias were ostensibly an anti-partisan force. As Sonderkommando R quickly discovered, with the notable exception of Odessa’s catacombs, southern Ukraine’s countryside was inhospitable to partisans. It therefore redirected these untrained, poorly equipped, and abysmally armed militias against a more immediate threat: the Romanians. Although Romania’s leaders had acquiesced to German pressure and permitted the VoMi to operate in Transnistria, local Romanian military and civilian leaders understood quite correctly that Sonderkommando R’s Volksdeutsche project permitted the SS to unfurl its tentacles into Romanian-occupied territory. Area Romanian authorities therefore countered Sonderkommando R’s presence in a running conflict that escalated to kidnappings, carjackings, and shootouts between the Romanian military and local ethnic German militiamen. Although Sonderkommando R eventually deployed its ethnic German militia forces as a manpower pool for mass murder, the VoMi initially used these units to contest Romanian control of the Transnistrian countryside.

To secure Germany’s demographic claim to conquered Soviet territory, Sonderkommando R bolstered local German speakers through a twin policy of ethnic cleansing and material enrichment. While most of the region’s ethnic Germans lived in predominantly German-speaking enclaves, these communities were far from homogeneous. For decades, local Ukrainians and Jews had lived among and forged close bonds with their ethnic German neighbors. Sonderkommando R undid this rich multiethnic heritage by creating exclusively Germanophone settlements, where none had existed previously. Sonderkommando R murdered the handful of easily identifiable local Jews within weeks of establishing command posts in rural Transnistria. Unaware that many ethnic German communities continued to hide some thoroughly integrated local Jews and believing Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche settlements to be jüdisch, Sonderkommando R turned its attention to local Slavs. In towns and hamlets that the VoMi designated as ethnically German, Sonderkommando R’s staff evicted local Ukrainians and Russians, redistributing their homes to area Volksdeutsche. In communities where so few German speakers lived that even the SS could not delude itself into identifying these settlements as ethnically German, the SS pressured local German speakers to relocate to Germanophone strongholds. The VoMi’s brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing in rural Transnistria presaged, at least in embryo, the type of militarized, German-speaking settlements with which Nazi planners aimed to remake conquered Soviet territory after the war.
Sonderkommando R also sought to establish lasting ethnic German dominance in the area by creating a superior material position for local residents who remained in communities that Sonderkommando R deemed to be ethnically German. The SS forged structural economic advantages for local Volksdeutsche by granting them privileged access to Transnistria’s scarce economic resources. In a bid to bolster Transnistria’s ethnic Germans and to expand the SS’s Lilliputian empire in the area, much to the annoyance of local Romanian officials, Sonderkommando R declared rural enterprises, including wineries and mills, to be “ethnically German” and thus within its purview.35 More importantly, Sonderkommando R dismantled collective agriculture in Transnistria’s ethnic German settlements — an exceptional move in the occupied Soviet Union.36 The unit reallocated rural Ukraine’s primary agricultural resources, including farmland, tractors, and livestock, which the Soviet state had previously owned and made available to all local residents, exclusively to denizens of Sonderkommando R’s Volksdeutsche settlements.

Despite Sonderkommando R’s ambitious plans to marshal local ethnic Germans as a demographic claim to conquered Soviet territory, the unit’s staff had surprisingly little idea which area inhabitants belonged in the Nazi racial community. The core of Hoffmeier’s staff in Transnistria had participated in the VoMi’s earlier ethnic German “resettlement” operations.37 A substantial number of Sonderkommando R’s officers were themselves ethnic Germans who had relocated from the Baltic or Southeastern Europe to occupied Poland with the VoMi’s assistance and received SS commissions.38 The unit’s leaders rapidly concluded that local residents, particularly in rural Transnistria, bore little resemblance to ethnic Germans with whom the VoMi had interacted before the invasion of the Soviet Union. Not only had the Black Sea Germans maintained more circumscribed cultural and economic connections to Germany than other groups of German speakers that the VoMi had encountered, but, more importantly, decades of Soviet rule had prevented Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche from engaging in the prewar National Socialist agitation that denoted real “Germanness” for the SS. Unwilling to apply the classification criteria that the SS had used elsewhere in East Central and Eastern Europe, Sonderkommando R decided against assigning formal ethnic classifications during the fall of 1941.39 Rather, the unit permitted local men to self-identify

36 Sonderkommando R policy on the dissolution of collective farms vacillated. Nevertheless, local residents later recounted the end of collective agriculture as typical. See, for example, Zeugenschaftliche Vernehmung von J. F., January 17, 1962, BAL, B162/2290, 168. Aussage von R. B., October 31, 1962, BAL, B162/2301, 4.
37 Both of Hoffmeier’s subordinates in Transnistria, for example, had served in previous VoMi “resettlement” operations. See SS Offizier Akte Klaus Siebert, United States National Archives and Records Administration [hereafter NARA], RG 242, A3343, SSO-135B, 483. Aussage von K. S., October 30, 1963, Staatsarchiv Münster, Nr. 2690, 73. SS Offizier Akte Erwin Müller, NARA, RG 242, A3343 SSO-328A, 1105A, 1164.
as ethnic Germans by joining the SS’s militias, and thereby to secure Volksdeutsche status for their families.\textsuperscript{40}

Granting Transnistria’s denizens the power to classify themselves provisionally as Volksdeutsche was predictably corrosive to the category’s poorly defined boundaries. Local residents had powerful incentives to identify themselves as ethnic Germans regardless of whether or not they or others would have done so before the war. Einsatzgruppe D and Sonderkommando R’s violent campaign to murder local Jews and to expel area Slavs from rural Transnistrian communities illustrated to area residents the possible dangers that awaited non-Germans under Nazi rule. Schooled in the brutal politics of Stalinist agricultural production, which had precipitated a famine less than a generation earlier, local denizens also grasped the dire long-term consequences of exclusion from the land, livestock, and equipment necessary to farm.\textsuperscript{41} As area residents understood, non-Germans would starve to fatten area ethnic Germans.

To secure their material position and to enrich themselves through the largesse that the Third Reich offered to Volksdeutsche, area men — ethnic Germans and non-Germans alike — flooded to militia service that the SS required of all male Volksdeutsche.\textsuperscript{42} Just as ethnic German settlements had conspired to hide a selective number of highly integrated Jews from Nazi violence, so too did these communities field ostensibly “ethnically German” militia forces that included many non-Germans. As residents of highly incestuous enclaves, Transnistria’s inhabitants identified most of their neighbors as fellow

\textsuperscript{40} Protokol doprosa / Ionusa Aleksandra, April 6, 1967, USHMM, RG-31.018M, Reel 17, 8454.

\textsuperscript{41} On the distribution of livestock to militia members, for example, see Protokol, April 26, 1967, USHMM, RG-31.018M, Reel 17, 8902. Protokol doprosa / Kokha Floriana Frantsevicha, March >>

members of extended clans. Rather than exclude their non-German neighbors and relatives from the material bounty that the Third Reich offered, area German speakers charged with militia recruitment included relatives, whom even they identified as non-Germans, in this auxiliary force. Local sabotage of the SS’s fly-by-night efforts to separate ethnic Germans from non-Germans in rural Transnistria would have profound consequences as the Holocaust intensified in southern Ukraine during the winter of 1941-1942.

III.

A region that might otherwise have remained a focus of brutal Nazi demographic experimentation became an epicenter of the Holocaust during December 1941 because of a collision between Romanian and German anti-Jewish policies. While the Antonescu regime murdered hundreds of thousands of Jews during the Second World War, Romania remained concerned primarily with removing Jews from its border regions and recently acquired territory. It therefore frequently sought to deport Jews to German-occupied areas, where they were to be murdered by the Germans. Germany, which sought to eradicate Jews across Europe and eventually the globe, by contrast, pressured Romanian authorities to kill Jews within territory that they administered. Although initially united in their struggle against the Soviet Union and partners in the Holocaust, Romania and Germany differed on where and by whom Europe’s Jews were to be killed.

During winter 1941, the tension between these conflicting policies became acute when Romanian occupation officials began deporting tens of thousands of Jews from territories that they had acquired during the invasion of the Soviet Union to a series of camps and ghettos near Odessa and along the Bug River’s right bank. When occupation officials in German-occupied Ukraine refused to permit their Romanian counterparts to deport Jews across the Bug River and into German-controlled territory, the Romanian government resolved to send its Jewish prisoners to villages at the heart of Sonderkommando R’s Volksdeutsche population project in rural Transnistria. This development in Romanian anti-Jewish policy surprised Sonderkommando R’s personnel. While the unit had murdered a selective group of easily identifiable local Jews and suspected communists, Sonderkommando R was neither designed nor prepared to initiate a mass killing operation. The SS had assigned much of the unit’s German staff to Transnistria because its members were unfit for frontline service.
Moreover, the only personnel at Sonderkommando R’s disposal capable of mass killing were local militias of dubious ethnic origin and certain martial incompetence.

Although acutely aware of these limitations, the VoMi leadership in Transnistria also feared that the appalling sanitary conditions in which Romanian authorities housed their Jewish captives threatened to precipitate a typhus epidemic that could spread to local Volksdeutsche communities.\(^49\) While Hoffmeier consulted with Berlin and Bucharest and unsuccessfully explored the possibility of receiving assistance from other German forces, energetic local commanders began deploying their Selbstschutz units against the Jewish deportees.\(^50\) With little warning, Sonderkommando R mustered militia units and ordered them to gun down men, women, and children in the countryside surrounding established ethnic German settlements and at shooting sites that Romanian authorities designated.\(^51\) There is neither evidence that Sonderkommando R permitted any of its militiamen to stand aside, nor is there indication that any Selbstschutz members refused to shoot.

Sonderkommando R’s militiamen were initially amateurish mass murderers. Under the close, albeit oft en incompetent, tutelage of Sonderkommando R’s German staff, local men used captured Soviet small arms that the SS had scrounged together to shoot their victims at close range.\(^52\) Poor marksmen, the killers merely wounded some Jews, whom the perpetrators then chased down and murdered.\(^53\) While the unit predicated its involvement in the Holocaust as a disease prevention measure, its officers permitted local residents to steal their victims’ clothing, facilitating the spread of typhus to area killers and their families — the precise consequence that the SS had hoped to avoid.\(^54\)

Despite the Selbstschutz’s inept inauguration into genocide, their performance convinced local commanders to improve and expand the training, armament, and scope of the militiamen’s murderous responsibilities. With surprising rapidity, Sonderkommando R’s militiamen developed into highly skilled *genocidaires*, who, in anticipation of techniques that the SS would develop at the extermination camps only just opening in occupied Poland, destroyed their victims’ corpses through cremation and tapped Jewish slave labor to assist in body disposal.\(^55\) By the time German diplomatic pressure and an increasing scarcity of potential victims ended Sonderkommando

\(^{49}\) On Sonderkommando R’s fear of typhus see Rundanweisung Nr. 31. April 7, 1942, BB, R 59/66, 103. German Police Decodes Nr 2 31. April 7, 1942, BNA, HW 165, Piece 6, 3.


\(^{52}\) Protokol doprosa / Kokha Floriana Frantsevicha, March 7, 1967, USHMM, RG-31.018M, Reel 17, 8831.

\(^{53}\) German Police Activities in the Soviet Union, Summary Covering the Period of 16th December - 15th January 1942, February 14, 1942, BNA, HW 165, Piece 6, 3.


R’s consistent involvement in mass killing operations during the spring of 1942, local SS-controlled militias were no longer waiting for Romanian authorities to deport Jews to their hometowns, but were traveling away from their settlements in search of targets.56 A year later, these militias, complete with a string of VoMi-run training academies through rural Transnistria, had become sufficiently potent that the Waffen-SS began inducting their younger members into its ranks for frontline service.57 Initially clumsy groups of perpetrators, southern Ukraine’s VoMi militias evolved into elite killing units.

IV.

Why did many residents of Transnistria’s SS-administered ethnic German settlements succumb to the Nazi project’s seductions and participate in the Holocaust? The answer is particularly bedeviling because many of the explanations that scholars have developed to understand perpetrator behavior fail to explain the actions of VoMi militiamen in Transnistria. Preexisting indigenous anti-Semitism, although undoubtedly present in Transnistria’s VoMi-administered communities, for example, appears not to have been a major factor. In contrast to other residents of rural Ukraine, there is no evidence of autonomous Volkdeutsche violence against Jews in Transnistria during the summer and early fall of 1941. While area residents denounced some Jews, whom they regarded as outsiders, to Einsatzgruppe D and Sonderkommando R for murder, many area communities hid a selective group of thoroughly integrated local Jews from the SS, even in the midst of murdering Jewish deportees. Had historic anti-Semitism been the central reason why local residents participated in the Holocaust during the winter of 1941-1942, then surely it would have manifested itself before the SS asked local residents to kill in a hastily organized mass shooting operation.

More so than indigenous anti-Semitism, local residents responded positively to Nazi genocidal policies because of situational factors, many though not all of which VoMi policy in Transnistria created. To understand why individuals choose to take part in mass murder, scholars have developed myriad universally applicable social psychological explanations, many of which shaped the decisions of Transnistria’s militiamen to participate in the Holocaust.58 Local dynamics ensured that two such factors, the propensity to obey authority and to conform to group behavior, acted particularly powerfully on area residents. Decades of Soviet rule had conditioned...
area residents to comply with state authority. Analysis of wartime biographical information about known militiamen indicates that Soviet authorities had targeted virtually all of them or one of their immediate family members for expropriation, arrest, and deportation. The Nazi regime’s brutal campaign to root out local Jews and suspected ethnic German “communists” during the summer and early fall of 1941 underscored to local residents that the area’s new German rulers were no less brutal. By the winter of 1941, little in the collective experiences of Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche militiamen inclined them to resist state authority, particularly in a crisis, such as the one that Sonderkommando R’s leaders saw in the unanticipated influx of Jewish deportees.

The way in which the VoMi organized local militias also created a particular impetus for militiamen to conform to group behavior. Scholars have long pointed to pressure to conform to explain why genocidal killers participate in mass murder. Most of the Holocaust perpetrators whom scholars have examined operated as military, police, or auxiliary units — groups that served together for the war’s duration. Transnistria’s Selbstschutz units, by contrast, had longer lasting and deeper affiliations. Organized by villages, in which most residents were related by blood or marriage, Selbstschutz members perpetrated the Holocaust within the context of extended families. Militiamen not only had deep prewar relationships with their comrades but undoubtedly anticipated having to navigate postwar ties with them as well. If German perpetrators, with much weaker existing interpersonal relationships, felt substantial pressure to conform to group behavior, then it stands to reason that this tendency would have been accentuated within these family groups.

While local circumstances intensified some universal social psychological motivations for Transnistria’s militiamen to participate in mass murder, Sonderkommando R’s policies created strong — and perhaps uniquely potent — material incentives for local residents to take part in the Holocaust. Most immediately, Sonderkommando R permitted local residents to rob their victims of the often few remaining items that Romanian forces and their local collaborators had not already taken. Contrary to the articulated aspirations of senior Nazi leaders, including Himmler, Sonderkommando R’s forces stole in virtually every recorded mass killing operation. The distribution of purloined Jewish property duplicated the Nazi racial hierarchy in

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59 Without surviving personnel files for Selbstschutz members, recovering biographical information about the suspected militiamen constitutes a challenge. Nevertheless, immigration records that the SS-run Einwandererezente (EWZ) generated in occupied Poland during 1944 for ethnic Germans who had fled Transnistria with Sonderkommando R can be used to identify militiamen implicated in postwar statements. These naturalization records are included in the Berlin Document Center collection at the United States National Archives and Records Administration.

60 Christopher R. Browning, Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland, 2nd ed. (New York, 1998), 185.
miniature. Sonderkommando R’s officers amassed small fortunes in stolen jewelry, coins, and dental gold, much of which they shipped to relatives in Germany. The unit’s militiamen received the most desirable clothing and whatever personal items from their victims that Sonderkommando R’s German personnel had not snapped up. Area Ukrainians, who often assisted the unit in body disposal, claimed any remaining property.

Beyond improving the often dire material circumstances of area Volksdeutsche, for Transnistria’s ethnic German killers the theft of Jewish property was doubly significant. On the one hand, it remedied what local ethnic Germans perceived to be a generation and a half of socio-economic decline. Receiving purloined Jewish property in the course of SS-led killing operations enabled local ethnic Germans to reacquire a privileged material position vis-à-vis their neighbors and thus to turn back the clock to an imagined Golden Age before 1914. On the other hand, it fed the Third Reich’s propaganda narrative about the allegedly pernicious “Judeo-Bolshevik” enemy. When German military and police forces had swept through Transnistria in August 1941, many Volksdeutsche communities were unwilling to accept the purported Nazi connection between Jews and Soviet power and conspired to hide thoroughly integrated local Jews from the Nazi security apparatus. The VoMi’s concerted efforts to link Jews with the Soviet regime’s evils remained largely ineffective until the beginning of Sonderkommando R’s mass shooting operations. In the course of these killing deployments, local ethnic Germans came into contact with Jewish victims who fit a key Nazi stereotype: they were substantially wealthier than their Volksdeutsche killers. A primarily urban population, this group of victims was richer than their rural killers, even after Romanian military and police authorities and their local Ukrainian auxiliaries had robbed them en route to Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche settlements. To many local residents, the wealth that they perceived their Jewish victims to possess provided a compelling explanation for what had happened to the property that the Soviet state had confiscated from area ethnic Germans during the preceding two and a half decades. Encountering Jews who, in Volksdeutsche eyes, typified the greedy architects of Soviet power that Nazi propagandists depicted, suggested to many local German speakers that Jews were indeed the Soviet regime’s prime movers. That, in early 1942, area Volksdeutsche began divulging the identities of their Jewish neighbors and even relatives to German authorities speaks, at least in part, to their acceptance...
of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda.\textsuperscript{66} Robbing their Jewish victims became, for Transnistria’s ethnic German killers, not simply an important source of personal enrichment, but a way to exact retribution against the “Judeo-Bolshevik” enemies whom the area’s new Nazi overlords identified as the perpetrators of past Soviet violence.

Beyond acquiring stolen Jewish property, participating in the Holocaust permitted local residents to clarify their uncertain ethnic identity in the VoMi’s eyes and to gain access to the material rewards that membership in the \textit{Volksgemeinschaft} afforded. Sonderkommando R’s militiamen were acutely aware that the VoMi remained suspicious of the “Germanness” of area residents and had, in an act of desperation, relied on supposedly reliable local Volksdeutsche to identify area ethnic Germans by including them on the militia’s roster. Having packed the militia with their non-German relatives, they also knew that Sonderkommando R’s anxieties were well-founded. When mustered to murder Jewish deportees, area denizens correctly recognized that killing constituted a key way in which they could demonstrate their Nazi credentials and thus “Germanness” to the SS. Any militiaman who stood aside could not hope to receive SS recognition as an ethnic German after the conclusion of the mass murder campaign and would be excluded from the Third Reich’s material largesse. Moreover, individual recalcitrance risked closer SS scrutiny of the unit’s commitment to the Nazi agenda and, from the SS’s perspective, its “Germanness.” Keenly aware of the comparatively impressive material incentives that the Third Reich proffered to members of the Nazi racial community, most if not all would-be ethnic Germans that the SS deployed participated in the Holocaust. The structural rewards that the SS offered to cooperative area denizens who had underscored their “Germanness” by taking part in the Holocaust thus constituted a potent situational pressure that encouraged Transnistria’s ethnically German residents to carry out mass murder.

Recovering the SS’s Volksdeutsche enterprise and local collaboration in the Holocaust in Transnistria has three broader implications. First, and most basically, it reconstructs a previously under-studied episode of the Nazi genocidal project in conquered Soviet territory and adds an important chapter to the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Second, probing the role and particularly motivations of local collaborators provides new information about the Holocaust at the grassroots level in the occupied Soviet Union. It

\textsuperscript{66} Testimony that both Soviet and West German investigators collected captures the denunciation of local, previously hidden Jews in the ethnic German settlement of Selz during April 1942. See, for example, Akt No. 40, October 17, 1944, RG-22.002M, Reel 6, Fond 7021, Opis 69, Delo 75, 62. Aussage von D. P., April 26, 1967, BAL, B162/2307, 524.
brings into sharp relief the Third Reich’s struggle to layer its policies over a multiplicity of preexisting interethnic relationships in a region scarred by decades of conflict. It also highlights the ways in which local residents navigated and often exploited opportunities that the new Nazi system created. And last, but perhaps most importantly, it contributes to the mature, yet ongoing conversation about the motivations of Holocaust perpetrators. By tying the comparatively tremendous material inducements that the Third Reich offered to members of the Nazi racial community to participating in the Holocaust, the SS was able to gain exceptional and perhaps unique leverage over Transnistria’s ethnic Germans to encourage them to take part in genocide. This finding suggests that in examining why perpetrators took part in the Holocaust, scholars would be well served to explore the Nazi regime’s capacity to generate circumstances in which some individuals chose to become killers.