

VOX NAZI, VOX MORTIS: THE WORST THING IN THE WORLD

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What is the worst thing that ever happened on earth? What an interesting question that is! I am speaking of man-made disasters; I exclude natural catastrophes, such as floods, earthquakes, storms, and plagues. I also exclude wars.

In my opinion, the worst thing to have ever occurred in the world was the campaign of mass shooting carried out by the Nazis in the Soviet Union in 1941 and 1942. Most of the victims were Jews, and so the killings were part of the Final Solution (as it was called when I was in college) or Holocaust (as it is called now) of 1941-1945. The Holocaust itself was but one of a number of massacres carried out in the 20th Century (including, for example, the Turkish slaughters of Armenians during and after World War I, the Stalinist Great Terror of 1937-1938, and the mass executions by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in the 1970's.) Still, I think what the German Nazis did in the 18 months after the invasion of Russia is the ne plus ultra of bad things that humans have done to one another. Here is why.

In the summer of 1940, after the defeat of France and immediately before the Battle of Britain, Adolf Hitler began planning to invade Russia. By the spring of 1941, Hitler had formulated a plan for the mass killing of Jews and Communists in areas of the Soviet Union seized by German armed forces. Although Hitler did not put his plan or orders in writing and some have questioned whether he personally ordered the Holocaust, there can be no doubt that in fact Hitler did order the Holocaust. In Hitler's view, the war between Russia and Germany was to be a war to the death between competing ideologies; and extreme ruthlessness and cruelty were, in his eyes, more than fair when dealing with "Jewish, Bolshevik subhumans." It is hardly surprising that in April 1945, having changed his views not at all, trapped underground in his cramped bunker, encircled by Soviet armies, Hitler uttered the Biggest Lie of All Time: "I have always been extremely fair to the Jews(!)."

Hitler verbally gave the order for the massacres in Russia to the sinister Heinrich Himmler, chief of police of Germany and the commander-in-chief of the Nazi secret police, the Nazi intelligence services, and the SS. It is

impossible to describe Himmler worse than he was. He was the typical minister of a tyrant: utterly ruthless and pitiless toward those defined as enemies or opponents of the tyrant. Himmler in turn ordered his immediate deputy and heir apparent, the human monster Reinhard Heydrich, to arrange for Hitler's orders to be carried out. Heydrich was chief of the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police), the Kripo (the criminal police), and the SD (the Nazi party's intelligence agency). Heydrich was as bad as Himmler, although his career was shorter. (Heydrich was assassinated in Czechoslovakia in 1942 by British-trained Czech commandos who threw a botulism toxin-laden bomb at his car.) Sometime in the spring of 1941, at a conference or meeting of police officials, Heydrich actually gave verbal orders for the killings to begin. Other orders were put in writing. On June 22, 1941 Germany attacked Russia with armies totaling 3 million men.

Along the military front, immediately behind the advancing German armies, proceeded four special heavily armed and motorized detachments organized by Heydrich and composed of criminal and secret policemen, intelligence agents, SS men, and soldiers. These four units, called Einsatzgruppen (operational groups or task forces) totaled less than 5,000 men. They were mobile killing units. Their mission: in areas behind the lines controlled by the Germans they were to round up as many Jews and Communists as possible and to kill them (by mass shootings) as fast as possible.

By early July 1941 the Einsatzgruppen were busy at work. They committed indescribable horrors. A city or village would be surrounded. The victims, men, women, children, and babies, were enticed from their homes by false pretenses or extracted by force. They were marched to pits, ditches or ravines, stripped naked, and shot. Sometimes one individual did all the shooting; other times the shooting was by groups. Sometimes the victims were shot with rifles; sometimes with machine guns or machine pistols. Sometimes the victims stood on the edge of the mass grave, were shot, and toppled into the grave; sometimes the victims were forced to descend into the pit and lie on the dead or quivering bodies and then shot; in almost all cases, the victims were shot in the head or neck from behind. The ghastly scenes were horrible beyond description, and occurred against the backdrop of an orgy of looting, arson, rapine, and destruction. Truly, to the victims as well as the killers, it must have seem as though the world had become hell.

At the trial of Adolf Eichmann one of the witnesses was Mr. Rivka Yosselevscka. She had lived in a village in the Pinsk district. Along with her father, mother, siblings, other relatives, friends, and villagers, she was shot, naked, in a pit. Incredibly, she alone survived, her bullet wounds being

superficial. After the Germans left, she literally crawled out of the grave, from which unimaginable sounds and smells and fountains of blood were erupting.

The horrors of scenes such as this, together with the effects they had on killers, induced the Nazis to search for a different method for mass killings whereunder the killers would not have to look upon the victims or the acts of killing. It was for this reason that gas wagons and later gas chambers were built. (More victims of the Holocaust ended up being gassed than shot; at Auschwitz some gas chambers could hold 2,000 persons.)

The Einsatzgruppen continued their open air killing operations in Russia until December 1941, when winter set in; in spring 1942 they resumed operations, ceasing only in late 1942 when the Germans began to lose the initiative on the Eastern Front. During their year and a half of existence, the Einsatzgruppen kept detailed records of numbers killed. A report of Dec. 1, 1941 by one subunit alone of Einsatzgruppe A lists over 130,000 people shot since July. Einsatzgruppe D shot over 90,000 people in the Ukraine in 1941. The total number of victims for the 18 month period probably exceeds one million persons. Those records also tell us that among the countless anonymous victims were at least two American Jews, a man and a woman. Along with another 170 Jewish men, 33 Jewish women, and 4 Lithuanian Communists, they were shot in Kovno on Aug. 2, 1941. By what quirk of fate did these two Americans fall into the clutches of the Nazi murderers?

In 1943, as German forces were retreating, Himmler ordered that the mass graves of the victims of the Einsatzgruppen be destroyed, lest they be discovered by the advancing Allies. Accordingly, hordes of concentration camp inmates were forced to open the graves, exhume the bodies, and burn the corpses and evidence. When the work was done, the inmates were themselves then killed.

After the end of World War II, some of the high-ranking Nazis involved in the actions of the Einsatzgruppen were tried and convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and executed. The commander of Einsatzgruppe D, Otto Ohlendorf, was hanged on June 8, 1951. He was one of the last of the Nazi mass murderers to be put to death. At his trial he had freely admitted his unit had murdered over 90,000 human beings.

Truly, when the voice of Nazis is heard in the land, it is the voice of death.