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"Von Nazi, Vox Mortis": The Worst Thing in the World

by Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

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 shootings 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 1941-45. 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 after World War I, the Stalinist Great Terror of 1937-38, 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 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 a war to the death between incompatible 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, in a ruined Berlin 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, supreme head of the Nazi 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 by the tyrant. Himmler in turn ordered his immediate deputy and heir apparent, Reinhard Heydrich, to arrange for Hitler's order to be carried out. Heydrich was chief of the Gestapo (the secret police), the Kripo (the criminal police), and the SD (the Nazi intelligence agency). He was as bad as Himmler, although his career was shorter. (Heydrich was assassinated in Czechoslovakia in 1942.) Heydrich proceeded to make the needed arrangements. 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

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June 22, 1941, Germany attacked Russia with armies totaling 3 million men.

Along the front 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. There were four of these units, called *Einsatzgruppen* (Operations Sections or Squads). The four units totaled less than 5,000 men. 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 shooting) 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 by force. They were marched to 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 bodies and then were shot; in almost all cases, the victims were shot in the head or neck from behind. The ghastly scenes were beyond description, and occurred against the backdrop of an orgy of looting, arson, destruction, and rapine. Truly, to the victims as well as to the killers, it must have seemed as though the world had become hell. At the trial of Adolf Eichmann one of the witnesses was Mrs. Rivka Yosselevska. 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, which was an unimaginable sight 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 the 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; some gas chambers at Auschwitz could hold 3,000 persons.)

The *Einsatzgruppen* continued their killing operations 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 half of existence, the *Einsatzgruppen* kept detailed records of numbers killed. A report of Dec. 1, 1941, by one subunit alone of *Einsatzgruppen A* lists over 130,000 people shot since July. *Einsatzgruppe D* shot over 90,000 people 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, one a man, one a woman. Along with another 170 Jewish men, 33 Jewish women, and 4 Lithuanian Communists, they were shot in Kovno on August 2, 1941. By what quick of fate did these two Americans fall into the clutches of the Nazi killers?

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 Allies. Accordingly, hordes of concentration camp inmates were forced to open the graves, ex-

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hume the bodies, and destroy 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 some were executed (by hanging).

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