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Hitler's Death Squads:
An Historiographical and
Bibliographical Analysis of the Role of
the *Einsatzgruppen*

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2000

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the *Einsatzgruppen*.

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Contents

I

Acknowledgements	II
Introduction	1
Chapter One The International Military Tribunal's "Blue Set".....	4
Chapter Two Early Holocaust Literature, 1954 - 1975.....	17
Chapter Three Later Holocaust Literature, 1978 -1997.....	29
Chapter Four The Order Police Debate.....	41
Chapter Five The Revisionists.....	54
Conclusion	66
Bibliography	70

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Introduction

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler became German chancellor. Hitler and the Nazi party's (or *Nationalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei*) arrival in power ushered in a brutally repressive period in Germany history, especially for Jews. The Nazis began with the 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws which classified the population, according to a three tier system. "Aryans", who were ascribed full German citizenship and rights, were at the top. "Mischlinge", or persons of mixed descent who did not practice the Jewish faith, received limited rights and formed the middle tier. "Jews" formed the bottom tier and had three Jewish grandparents, or had two grandparents who practiced the Jewish faith. They formed the bottom tier. They were deprived of German citizenship on the basis that only persons of German blood could be citizens. Over the next four years, the state forced Jews out of various vocations and professions and a series of decrees in 1937 resulted in the forced "aryanisation" of many Jewish businesses. The *Kristallnacht* followed this in 1938 when thugs destroyed and looted Jewish synagogues and shops. German Jews were fined for the resulting damage which effectively stripped many of their remaining assets. By the end of 1940, Germany had conquered most of Europe and took advantage of this to forcibly move large numbers of Jews from both Germany and occupied countries to Poland. With a seemingly endless need for *Lebensraum*, Germany began its ill fated Operation *Barbarossa* in the summer of 1941. This is generally believed to have marked the beginning of the "Final Solution" or extermination phase.

The primitive part of the extermination phase is commonly accepted to have begun with special motorised units called *Einsatzgruppen*.. These units rounded up Jews, forced them to dig pits and then executed them with either single shots or automatic fire. Numbering approximately 3,000 personnel and divided into four units, they policed the Russian front from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The *Einsatzgruppen* were ad hoc groups which brought together personnel from different security organisations and the Waffen SS. The psychological difficulties experienced by *Einsatzgruppen* personnel in killing women and children resulted in the use of gas vans. These gas vans are widely believed to be the precursor to the Polish extermination camps and their gas chambers. Thus, the *Einsatzgruppen* play a pivotal role in the Holocaust. The difficulties they experienced resulted in the setting up of the infamous camps in Poland.

According to accepted opinion, these camps (which operated from 1941 to the end of 1944) used production line technology to both lessen the psychological strain on camp personnel, and to speed up the extermination of Jews. While these camps were in remote areas, they were easily accessible by rail. Upon their arrival, a small number of

Jews went to work and the rest went to the gas chambers, which were often disguised as showers. These chambers used either carbon monoxide or hydrogen cyanide (Zyklon B) to execute their victims. The bodies were then removed by *Sonderkommandos* who would remove any gold dental features before loading the bodies into the crematorium. After cremation ashes were spread over marshes and farms. The advancing Russian army stopped this extermination phase in 1944 and the SS took steps to remove all trace of the programme.

The purpose of this thesis is not to provide a definitive version of the intent and activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* but rather to examine the literature and explore the manner in which their perceived role and activities change or continue over time. The *Einsatzgruppen* are part of the Holocaust debate, and changes in the way they are perceived offers the reader insight into the general state of this debate which is in a constant state of evolution with seemingly solid conclusions being replaced as new evidence and methodologies appear.

To undertake this study, it is necessary to trace the evolution in Holocaust literature. The two central questions which drives the Holocaust debate are: the perceived role of Hitler in the Holocaust and, more particularly the "Final Solution", and secondly if there is a special quality about German culture which explains their perpetration of the Holocaust. This review begins with the International Military Tribunal "Blue Set". These 42 volumes include the evidence and transcripts from the Nuremberg trial of the leading Nazis. These hearings argued Hitler was at the centre of the Holocaust and that the Nazi party had led the German people astray. These trials attempted to explain the *Einsatzgruppen's* function and activities and brought them to public attention for the first time. The first group of works following these trials were then published between 1951 and 1976. These works emphasised cataloguing the atrocities and showing the bureaucratic nature of the "Final Solution". They continued to place Hitler at the centre of the Holocaust and spent much time establishing the *Einsatzgruppen* officers as either "cool efficient killers" or as human flotsam and jetsam who viewed their task as a chance to improve their lives. These works were followed by another group of Holocaust literature between 1978 to 1997. The debate between intentionalists and functionalists, dominates this period, which for the first time questioned Hitler's role in the "Final Solution". There was also a strong argument over whether the *Einsatzgruppen's* original intention was to kill Jews or whether this inadvertently occurred later. Following on was an examination of the Reserve Police Battalions and their role in the "Final Solution." The two works involved questioned the motivation of Holocaust perpetrators, in many ways the essence of the Holocaust debate. The final group to be examined is the Revisionist historians. While this writer considers the anti-

Semitic philosophy of many Revisionists to be wrong and distasteful, to exclude them would have resulted in an incomplete and narrow review.

The works utilised for this analysis were selected according to three criteria: their popularity, academic impact and their discussion of a particular viewpoint to help round out the thesis. A work could be selected on any one of the criteria this proved especially important when reviewing Revisionist works. If one considers Paul Rassinier's works, the scholarly impact of his work has been slight, but his popularity, particularly in non-English speaking countries, makes his work influential. By the same token, some popular works were excluded on the basis that the viewpoint expressed had already been covered by another work.

Obviously, when examining such a difficult topic objectivity is critical. The Holocaust debate is ridden with bias, prejudice and emotion, particularly now that Revisionists bring their own axes to grind. This writer attempts to weave a steady course through the literature without moral judgement. That is not to say no judgements are made, but they are done on the basis of scholarly historical methodology, that includes, questioning and examining the reliability of sources, their own methodological approach and if additional evidences supplements stated arguments, and the validity of conclusions. By examining the literature in such a manner this thesis will provide an incisive literature review.