A Summer of Mass Murder

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“Look at this man. He is a typical Jew that must be exterminated so that we Germans can live.” This was the concluding sentence of a rather theatrical speech given by one of the most notorious mass murderers of the Holocaust, SS General Friedrich Jeckeln. As one of the participating policemen recalled in his own trial twenty years later, Jeckeln spoke these words after the three-day slaughter that extinguished the lives of 23,600 people in Kamenets-Podolsk: “I still remember that about 6 Jews were kept back for the end of the shooting. These 6 Jews were ordered by Jeckeln to stand between two bomb craters. Then [eckeln] made a short speech to us. I remember, I believe, that during his speech he pointed specifically to one Jew, who was wearing a grey suit and who made a particularly respectable impression. In very dramatic manner he referred to this Jew by name.”

In finding a rationale for mass murder, perpetrators often resort to existentialist reasoning that borders on theatrical pathos. The executioners must, after all, find justification for a horrendous crime. The quote above constitutes an ideological summation for three days of carnage. The mass murder took place between August 27 and 29, 1941, during which four huge pits, craters from a series of ammunition explosions, were filled to the brim with murdered Hungarian, Romanian, and local Jews. This quote, allegedly by Jeckeln, Höhere SS und Polizeiführer (Higher SS and Police Leader, HSSPF) for southern Russia at the site of the slaughter, was his justification for genocide across the occupied territories against “inferior” races.

The message these words implied was a war in which the Jew as a cosmic enemy with diabolical power must be eradicated. They also faithfully reflected the world vision of Hitler, and that of the Nazi leadership, of a final cataclysmic struggle between National Socialism and Judeo-Boshevism. A revealing picture of smiling German soldiers with a large hand-painted sign is eerily reminiscent of Jeckeln’s pronouncement: “The Russians must die so that we can live.” It is dated October 2, 1941.
This massacre, the largest until that point in the history of the Holocaust, existed at the intersection of ideology, economics, and personal ambitions operating within the Holocaust. The Hungarian deportation itself cannot be viewed strictly within a Hungarian context—it must be looked at against parallel policies of expulsions sweeping across Europe. Neither can we see the mass murder of these expelled Jews and Christian family members as an isolated incident of genocidal politics. The Kamenets-Podolsk mass murder, taking place in a relatively insignificant town, is important not only as a horrifying historical episode, but also in what it says of the Nazi politics of genocide as it swept across a whole continent.

On June 30, 1941, the Hungarian forces designated as Kárpát-Csoport (Carpathian Corps) crossed the Soviet border and rapidly reached the Dniester River—a line crucial for the fate of many of the deported. By July 10, the Hungarian Rapid Deployment Force (Gyors Hadtest), embedded within the Carpathian Corps, reached Kamenets-Podolsk in Podolia Province. We can identify the commencement of the mass arrests, collection, and expulsion of the Hungarian Jews to around that date. The fulcrum of their eastward movement within Galicia was in Kolomea, where the headquarters of the Royal Hungarian Army was located. Many of those expelled were transported directly or through circuitous wanderings to Kamenets-Podolsk. Equal numbers were deposited arbitrarily across Galicia and then force-marched hundreds of miles on foot to reach the same destination.

Concentrated in the ghetto, located in the Old Town together with their Romanian and local coreligionists, they were murdered at the end of August 1941. Among the total number of murdered there were also two thousand Romanian Jews from Bukovina. They had either escaped originally with the Red Army or were forced across the Dniester River by Romanian forces, following the explicit order of the Romanian dictator, General Ion Antonescu. While the Germans were able to repulse a column of Jews expelled across the Dniester by the Romanians at Yampol, a second column, mainly from Bukovina, reached Kamenets-Podolsk around August 20, 1941. Kamenets-Podolsk, in the words of Christopher Browning, became “the destination of mass deportation by Romanian and Hungarian authorities, before the formal transfer of the city to the civil administration [i.e., German] on September 1.”

Although relatively small, the city had importance for the three allies—Germany, Hungary, and Romania. Kamenets-Podolsk enjoyed a strategic location as a Tsarist outpost of the Russian Empire, straddling the border between Galicia and Podolia. Allocated to the Russian Empire during the partition of Poland in 1793, the town had never benefited from the architectural and cultural influences of Habsburg Austria, like Lemberg-Lwów (Lviv), for example, which controlled the western half of Galicia for more than a hundred years. Like all towns in the region, it already had a sizeable Jewish population who lived alongside Polish, Ukrainian, and Armenian inhabitants. While
it might have been strategically placed, the city was a nondescript, drab former garrison town, with a massive fortress overlooking the Smotrych River. By the time of the transfer of power from military to German civilian control and owing to the influx of tens of thousands of expellees, Jews comprised close to 75 percent of the local population.

THE GHETTO

The decision by the military commandant of the city, Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant Colonel) Josef Meiler, to establish a large ghetto in Kamenets-Podolsk on August 9, 1941, was more out of necessity than a matter of official policy. Ghettoization did not commence in Galicia or Podolia until the latter part of the year. The drive was directly influenced by the large influx of Jews from Hungary. The official German estimate of Hungarian Jews deposited in Kamenets-Podolsk by mid-August hovered around 11,000 people. However, a more realistic appraisal, based on Hungarian and Galician sources, puts the number at around 16,000. Not surprisingly, so many “refugees” unbalanced the German military’s logistical and supply system by diverting scarce food supplies from the Wehrmacht to civilian consumption.

Two conflicting forces were at work that created this logistical quagmire. Hungarian authorities were determined to expel the maximum number of Jews, specifically to this Podolian shtetl. This came into direct conflict with German military interest in solidifying their grip on a region that teemed with the struggling remnants of the defeated Red Army as well as a sizeable local Jewish presence. The Hungarian deportees became an almost instantaneous irritant and pawn in Hungarian–German relations, something that can be seen in internal German military communications. The unregulated influx created sanitary as well as food supply problems for which the military authorities were not prepared.

The city came under German military administration on July 11, 1941. This was followed by the establishment of the first makeshift ghetto on an island in the Old Town on July 20, 1941, with corresponding and routine discriminatory policies—among them requiring the wearing of a distinctive white armband with a blue “Zionist star” in the middle, instituted by the Wehrmacht in every town and city. It also applied the Nuremberg Laws’ definition of “who is a Jew.”

The final removal of the entire Jewish population of Kamenets-Podolsk and surrounding environs into this designated jüdische Wohnviertel (ghetto) was to be accomplished, the Feldkommandant decreed, “by August 9, 1941 at 3:00 PM.” The announcement also specified that local Jews moving into the enclave “were limited to bring with them only fifty kilograms of luggage per person… and [to facilitate] the creation of a five-member Judenrat.” Finally, it forbade the residents “to leave the enclave without written official authorization.”
An ordnung

An die jüdische Bevölkerung des Kreises Kamenetz-Podolisk.

Alle Juden des Kreises, anamnestisch und solche die sich nur vorübergehend aufhalten, sind verpflichtet, vom 10. Lebensjahr an eines Armbandes mit in blauer Farbe aufgebrückten sechsmaligem Zionismus am rechten Oberarm deutlich sichtbar zu tragen.

Jude ist, oder als Jude gilt:
1. Wer von mindestens drei der Rasse nach, jüdischen Grundsätzen abstammt;
2. Wer zwei jüdische Großelternte hat und sich zum Judendom durch Religionsüberzeugung oder dort bekannt.

Diese Anordnung tritt innerhalb 24 Stunden nach ihrer öffentlichen Bekanntmachung in Kraft.

Wer dagegen verstoßen wird streng bestraft.

Der Feldkommandant.

Die Kreisverwaltung.

Fig 4.1 Decree by the military commander of Kamenetsk Podolsk: "All Jews over 10 years old to wear at all time a white armband with the 'Zionist-Star' on the right arm." July 24, 1941. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the State Archives of Khmelnyts’kyi Region, Ukraine.

Розпорядження

До жиўлівського населення Кам’янець-Подільської області.

Всі жиўлівці муж. віку та віку, незалежно від статі на і ті, які тиєю ж особою перебуває на терені жиўлівці, повинні в однаковому колішньому та пригодах, хоча у відомстві в 10-ти років віку жиўлівці, побудовано на правильному жівочні з жиўлівці за контингентною санітарною дією відповідно штату, зокрема тому, щоб кількість була навільною.

Це порядок має вступити в дію 9 вересня 1941 року.

Польовий Командант.

Повітова Управа.

Fig 4.2 Decree by the military commander of Kamenetsk Podolsk: "... from August 9, 1941, all Jews must move into the Old Town Ghetto." August 8, 1941. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the State Archives of Khmelnyts’kyi Region, Ukraine.
A report from Lieutenant Colonel Meiler, dated on August 13, 1941, was more specific. It detailed the necessary steps for segregating the Jews from the surrounding population. The report to the army headquarters was very specific, also, about Hungarian presence in the city. “In KP all Jews were requested recently to leave the new parts of the city and move into the old-town—as their future ghetto. They could take only 50 kg luggage per person. The old town was evacuated by the Ukrainian population. As it was reported, 3,000 recently deported Jews by the Hungarians are in the old city already. Their further treatment [return] has been requested, but no decision has yet been taken. The demand of these Jews on the food supply poses an unwanted burden on the city.”

The ghetto was not a hermetically enclosed entity with fences and guarded gates; it was accessible by one easily guarded bridge. In the early stages, the residents, including Hungarian refugees, could leave the zone in their quest for food in the neighboring villages. The ghetto was more of a designated area to which the rapidly expanding influx of refugees was funneled and local Jews relocated.

Upon arriving in the city, the Hungarian refugees, especially those from Budapest, made every effort to establish some semblance of a functioning civil society. The German military commandant (Feldkommandant Meiler) made a promise to supply the ghetto with adequate food. This was never done. On August 24, 1941, the Jews living in the ghetto were expressly forbidden, in German, Hungarian, and Ukrainian: “(1) to purchase food outside the ghetto; (2) Jews who buy food-stuff outside the ghetto (Altstadt) will be severely punished; and (3) all food-stuff will be confiscated, and the person will be punished.”

Neither the town nor the new ghetto was designed for the mass of destitute and brutalized people that moved there. Indeed, for the military authorities, this solution was only temporary. Unlike Poland and the Baltic, there had never been any desire in Ukraine to set up proper ghettos, but only temporary “storage facilities” for Jews waiting for the Final Solution.

Some of the local inhabitants, mainly the young men of military age, escaped from the city with the retreating Soviet Army, leaving behind the elderly, women, and children. Prior to the war, the Jewish inhabitants of the city ranged around 14,000—38 percent of the total population. It is estimated that the establishment of the ghetto, with the influx of large number of Jews from neighboring communities as well as those deported from Hungary in July and August, led to a total of 28,000 Jews being compressed into the Old City. More than half of them came from Hungary.

The town was impacted dramatically by fighting in which many houses were destroyed and the entire district made uninhabitable. A Hungarian officer described the scene upon entering the town on July 10: “the city is destroyed by the German air force . . . unburied corpses under the ruins . . . large segment of the population fled.”
Fig 4.3 The final decree by the military commander of Kamenets-Podolsk, before the mass murder: “From now on, selling food for Jews is forbidden; Jews are forbidden to purchase food outside of the Old-Town; The guilty will be severely punished.” August 24, 1941. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the State Archives of Khmel’nyts’kyi Region, Ukraine.
Later reports and letters by soldiers, victims, and survivors that reached the Hungarian capital paint a horrifying picture of a demographic and humanitarian nightmare. A survivor from Uzhgorod (Carpathian Ruthenia) remembered that “There was [were] no beds at all. In this time in Kamenets-Podolsk there was you can imagine as we lived—maybe six, ten, thirteen, fourteen people in one room and we all slept on the floor and there was no kitchen to cook . . . we lived, you know, like animals, like animals. We slept on the floor, we didn’t have beds, we had nothing.” 9

Although the conditions seemed dire upon arrival, a quest for some semblance of order was initiated by the new arrivals. They set up three committees: one for communication “with the German military command, the second with the Hungarian military command, and the third to look after local matters.”10 As the days went by, though, the situation deteriorated to the point that the German military became alarmed about a possible outbreak of widespread epidemic and infectious diseases. The specter of a typhus epidemic was especially threatening because of the polluted water supply. Their concerns were not unfounded; reports indicate that diarrheal infections were rampant among the refugees. Frantic German reports sent to Berlin underlined these conditions not only in Kamenets-Podolsk, but also in the Romanian sector. The daily log by a Hungarian artillery regiment on August 18 and 19, 1941, conveys in dramatic hues the desperation of the deportees and the German apprehension. The first report on August 18, 1941, noted that “There are many Jews here, especially women in rags, they ask for bread in Hungarian, wearing jewelry and with lips painted red. They would give any money for it. Some count their steps with the ultimate desperation shown on their faces, others are crawling on the road collapsed from exhaustion and hunger. Others bandage the wounds on their feet with rags from their clothes. Tiny children are crying, collapsing from hunger.” A second log was more general and included a description of the situation along the Dniester River: “The Jewish quarter of the city is full of deported Jews, among them many are from Budapest; they live in unspeakable squalor, they come and go in scanty attire, the streets stink, unburied dead bodies are lying in some houses. The water of the Dniester is infected, here and there corpses are washed up on the bank of the river. The crews are forbidden to leave the camp, drinking the water is forbidden, contact with the population is forbidden.”11

The threat of a full-blown epidemic explains why the German military authorities became alarmed by the seemingly intractable situation in the city as well as by the thousands of destitute refugees roaming the countryside. This quandary is reflected vividly in German military communications directly to the headquarters of General Karl von Roques,12 commander of the rear areas of Army Group South. They requested intercession with the Hungarian government to halt and reverse the deportation policies. On July 28, 1941, a message was sent to von Roques: “Hungarian Jews are delivered from Hungarian concentration camps [internment camp] by trucks to the regions of
Buczacz, Czortków, and Kamenets-Podolsk. Ukrainian population in turmoil. These Jews must forcibly return. Division 444/la requests that Hungarian authorities be given appropriate instructions."

Correspondingly, communication with Hungarian authorities was established by Major-General Kurt Himer, who served as the liaison officer for the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht—Supreme Command of the Armed Forces) in Budapest in 1941. He was informed by his Hungarian counterpart on July 30, also forwarded to von Roques, that "these Jews are not Hungarian citizens. They escaped to northeastern Hungary from the Soviets two years ago. They are returned now to their native land again." This was a patent lie.

The trail of communication did not end here. A characteristically terse note in Kozma’s diary informs us of a meeting as late as September 16, 1941, between General Himer and Kozma, presumably about Hungarian efforts to resume the deportation. A follow-up frantic communication by Security Division 444 to headquarters on July 31, 1941, was even more alarming: “the number of Jews increased by the influx of Jews expelled from Hungary, of which 3,000 have arrived in the last few days. Feeding them is proving a major challenge, danger of epidemic also exists. Immediate order for their evacuation is urgently requested.”

By the first week of August, thousands more joined the ranks of the expellees in the city. A deportee’s letter sent back to Hungary on August 4, 1941, indicates a surreal situation in which German authorities were making every effort to get rid of the Hungarian Jews while the Hungarian government had steadfastly rejected them. It also underscores the German dilemma: “After 5 days of terrible sufferings, we arrived [2000 people] to the city of Kamenets Podolski [Kamenets-Podolsk]. Near the Russian border. No sooner had they deposited us; the German commander informed us that we must leave the city by tomorrow morning. . . . It’s incomprehensible that the Hungarian authorities deport us here and the German authorities in turn expel us.”

Devoid of housing and logistical support capable of sustaining such a large number of people, setting up the ghetto was a German military-made humanitarian disaster. It became a slow death sentence to thousands of Hungarian expellees and local Jews. A report from the city two weeks later, sent by Feldcommandant Meiler, reiterates almost word for word this assessment with a warning about a looming likelihood of famine: “As it was reported, there are already 3,000 recently expelled Jews from Hungary reside in the Altstadt for whom a decision of removal has still not have been made. The feeding of these Jews poses a particularly unwanted burden for the city . . . the Jews are used by the mayor in work details for daily services [only cleanup], that are in the public interest.”

Compounding this crisis, the administration of the city within the general reorganization of the newly occupied territories was scheduled to be transferred from
German military to civilian control on September 1, 1941. This gave an additional level of urgency to finding a solution to the ghetto. These diverse factors leading up to the Kamenets-Podolsk mass murder reinforces the notion that the genocide doesn’t emerge in a vacuum.

**ORININ: THE ANTECHAMBER OF DEATH**

The sporadic and randomized execution of thousands of Hungarian Jews by German detachments commenced prior or very close to the destruction of the Kamenets-Podolsk ghetto. One example, almost unknown in the annals of the Holocaust, specifically singled out Hungarian Jews. It took place in Orinin (Orynyn in Ukrainian) on August 26, 1941. Based on the testimonies of Hungarian and Galician survivors, and supported by the findings of the Soviet State Commission investigating Nazi atrocities around Orinin, the number of Hungarian Jews killed was estimated to be over two thousand. At the time, local Jews were unharmed. The target of extermination was explicitly the Hungarians. It foreshadowed the mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk by a day.

Zvi (Hermann) Zelikovitch, a thirteen-year-old boy, recounted after the war a tortuous and dramatic journey across Galicia with a group of fellow Jews, mainly from Máramaros County in Carpathian Ruthenia. Upon arriving in Orinin they were housed in a large barn and with local Jewish families. On a sunny morning, this respite from the long wandering came to an abrupt halt. They were told to assemble next to a picturesque meadow with the promise that they would be repatriated to Hungary. In the recollection of this young boy, though, the elation of returning home soon evaporated:

Suddenly three or four trucks appeared. Some 60 or 70 German soldiers armed with pistols climbed out of the trucks. This was the first time I had ever seen German soldiers. These soldiers were part of the SS, but I learned this only later . . .

… three private automobiles stopped. We were standing in the field by the road not far from the cars. The soldiers immediately fell into formation while I watched them, not standing with my parents. I stood alone to see the soldiers and their formation. I remember well thinking that I liked the formation.

Then all of a sudden, I heard screaming. The soldiers leaped up onto the trucks, taking out machine guns and still I understood nothing of what was happening. Everything happened in seconds. I stood there and watched as they unloaded the machine guns. It just never occurred to me what was about to happen.
The horror began—the killing horror. The German soldiers began firing. I heard terrible screaming from all directions: “Shema Yisroel, Shema Yisroel” from thousands of Jews, exactly how many I cannot say.19

Four teenage boys, including Zelikovitch, were able escape into the cornfields. Thus, they would not witness the second and main phase of the mass murder. For that, we recount the testimony of sixteen-year-old Max Solomon (Mayer Slomovitz) from a small village in Carpathian Ruthenia. The goal of the initial gunfire was not the immediate extermination of the assembled Jews, for no ditches or mass graves were prepared in advance. It was only aimed to control the thousands of terrified people who were led, in groups of three hundred, from the scenic field to military fortifications that were blown up by the retreating Soviet forces several miles away. In describing the final hellish scene, the surviving Solomon didn’t need to resort to superlatives. The systematic killing of the refugees from ten o’clock in the morning until eight o’clock in the evening, as they were shot into a deep trench, filled with water from burst pipes, leaves little to the imagination. In the words of the survivor, “two Germans sitting by a large machine gun, one was feeding it, one was shooting . . . . There was a huge-huge piece of steel across that bunker.” As the killing unfolded, “people did not look like people . . . you see only shadows; people had no faces, you could see only shadows. They march approximately 50–100–150 people on the piece of steel [in succession]. Some of them been hit some of them not hit, some of them killed some of them wounded but everyone goes and you can just see that everyone is falling into the water . . . water, water, water.” His words, spilling out in staccato, convey a surreal scene of bodies filling up the watery grave. These words, like a string hanging in the air, have the force of poetry—the ars poetica of mass murder.

Two thousand Hungarian Jews were murdered within ten hours. As the evening and silence descended on the killing field, the dazed sixteen-year-old, wounded slightly in the head by a grazing bullet, stumbled on top of the dead and the wounded who by then completely filled the watery trench: “as he recalled, he was found and instructed by a Ukrainian woman, who gave him her blouse, to turn to the left and escape into the cornfield. The boy, stunned and disoriented, turned to the right, facing two hundred Ukrainian militiamen who silently parted as the boy escaped. They might have seen an apparition.”20

The most immediate question is how the massacre in Orinin was connected to and presaged the much more massive bloodletting in Kamenets-Podolsk. What was the rationale for this mass murder a day before that of Kamenets-Podolsk? Orinin, a small, nondescript Podolian shtetel, with a sizeable Jewish population, is located less than fifteen miles northeast from Kamenets-Podolsk. While no military records survived,
this mass murder might have been precipitated by a concern on the part of the German military command that the thousands of Jews would continue from Orinin to the already overcrowded quarters in Kamenets-Podolsk, which could complicate the planned extermination of the ghetto. Was it, then, a preemptive massacre before the main event in Kamenets-Podolsk? As we will see, the decision to eliminate the ghetto in Kamenets-Podolsk, on August 25, preceded the Orinin massacre by a day. Being in Berdichev at the time, Friedrich Jeckeln was not present at this event, but we know from testimonies that the perpetrators belonged to an SS detachment. In reviewing the situation reports of the 1st SS Brigade, under Jeckeln’s direct command, it seems likely that they were involved in this massacre.

There is, however, an information gap between the August 15 and 25, 1941. Jeckeln’s radio messages confirm that in this period the brigade was continuously shooting Jews in this geographic area. Thus the timing of the Orinin massacre on August 26 is by no means a coincidence. The systematic extermination of the Hungarian deportees by killing squads started prior or almost simultaneously with the mass murder at Kamenets-Podolsk. This preplanned massacre signaled a definite shift in Nazi policies as to how to resolve the Hungarian refugee question within the context of the general annihilation of Soviet Jewry. The common thread between the slaughters in Orinin and Kamenets-Podolsk, besides the close geographic proximity of the murder sites, were the Hungarian expellees, and, of course, the ubiquitous Friedrich Jeckeln.
DECISION AND RATIONALE FOR MASS MURDER

Three sets of direct documents, all connected to Jeckeln, stand as opening and closing statements to the massacre in Kamenets-Podolsk. The first contains the minutes of a meeting held on August 25, 1941, sent to Berlin two days later. This remains the only source that indicates a previously arranged agreement between the German military and civilian authorities, and the Wehrmacht’s complicity in—and endorsement of—a drastic solution (i.e., mass murder) to the refugee problem. The second set, containing three reports of the massacre’s daily toll, was sent by the perpetrator of the massacre, Jeckeln, directly to Heinrich Himmler. Finally, a short sentence at the end of a lengthy operational situation report, sent on September 11, 1941, and composed by the chief of the security police (Sicherheitsdienst or SD) from Einsatzgruppe C, alludes to the final outcome of the just-concluded genocide: “in the course of 3 days 23,600 Jews were shot in Kamenets-Podolsk by a Kommando of the Higher SS and Police Leader [“South”].”

This first document, the meeting minutes, marks a tragic turning point in the fate of the deportees crowded into the Old Town ghetto. It can be dated to a crucial meeting of high-level German officers and civilian administrators in Vinnitsa (Vinnytsia in Ukrainian) on August 25, 1941. Held in the headquarters of the OKH (Army Supreme Command), the gathering’s main agenda was the coordination of details for the impending transfer of the newly created area of Reich Commissariat Ukraine from military to civilian administration.

Based on the composition of the participants, which included officers from the top echelon of Rear Army Group South representing General Karl von Roques and high-level civilian administrators from the Ministry of Eastern Territories, headed by Erich Koch, the meeting was an important milestone in the war. Major Hans Georg Schmidt von Altenstadt (department head for War Administration, Office of the Quartermaster General) presided over the meeting. Additional participants included Colonel Ernst-Anton von Krosigk (chief of the General Staff of the Commander of the Southern Army Area Rear), Assistant Secretary Justus Danckwert (chief of the Administrative Branch within the Army Administrative Group), Paul Dargel (head of the Political Department in the Reich Commissariat Ukraine, and representative of the Reich Commissioner Erich Koch), two representatives of the Ministry of the Eastern Territories in the rank of councilor—Dr. Walter Labs and Captain Dr. Otto Brautigam—and a Major Wagner.

One of the most surprising facts emerging from this meeting was Meiler, the military commandant of Kamenets-Podolsk, was not invited. Indeed, he was kept in the dark about the decisions taken until the commencement of the actual murder. Among the discussion points on the agenda was a single paragraph succinctly addressing the
arrival of Hungarian transports, the looming humanitarian and health crisis they posed, and the proposed solution to this problem. The minutes of this meeting, transferred to Berlin on August 27, 1941, contained an ominous paragraph: “Major Wagner explained . . . near Kaimenez-Podolsk [sic], the Hungarians have pushed about 11,000 Jews over the border. In these negotiations, up to the present, it has not been possible to arrive at any measures for the return of these Jews. The Higher SS and Police Leader (SS-Obergruppenführer Jeckeln) hopes, however, to have completed the liquidation of these Jews by the 1.9.1941.”

This short paragraph unequivocally singled out the Hungarian deportees for “liquidation.” The minutes were highly confidential, presumably for the top echelon of the Nazi hierarchy, yet they dispensed with the euphemistic terms so characteristic to the Final Solution. They did not cloak their intent in bureaucratic euphemisms as “transfer,” “resettlement,” “removal,” or “special treatment” (Sonderbehandlung) to sanitize the act of murder. The word “liquidation” left little to the imagination. There was also none of the usual justification for the murder of civilians, such as eliminating the “Judeo-Bolshevik threat,” “Partisan activities against communication lines,” or “the inability to support refugees.” This signaled the end of the slow death in the confines of the ghetto—an untenable situation of squalor, pestilence, and hunger. It also conveyed an unmatched cynicism by the Wehrmacht officers for solving a problem that they themselves had created. We can understand the last sentence of this fateful document only if we put the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre within the context of the rapidly shifting Nazi policies—not as an end itself, but as part of an emerging trend of total annihilation. In other words, it was not an exception, but an essential part of a rapidly evolving policy of comprehensive and systematic extermination of the Jewish population in Ukraine.

The factors that led to this meeting and its tragic consequences are worth exploring. The only person who was not present in this meeting—though he is mentioned by name—and who promised to implement the ensuing mass murder, was Jeckeln. The matter-of-fact tone of the report implies that the decision to liquidate the ghetto had already been made prior to this meeting and cleared with all parties concerned. More importantly, it seems certain that this had to have been made in direct consultation with General Karl von Roques and perhaps with the office of quartermaster general of the army, Eduard Wagner. It was in line, as Timothy Snyder notes, with the fact that “By late August 1941, nine weeks into the war, the Wehrmacht had serious concerns about food supplies and the security of the rear. Murdering Jews would free up food.”

We can draw a direct line between Nazi policies and the extermination of the ghetto because this concern was prominently on the minds of both General Wagner and General von Roques, commander of the rear areas of Army Group South. General
von Roques agreed that the Jews should be exterminated as a “binding guiding principle.” He reiterated his full support for this process, short of Wehrmacht active participation in the killings, on September 1, 1941: “Executive measures against certain parts of the population (in particular against Jews) are expressly reserved to the forces of the Senior SS and Police Leader… The right to object does not exist for the subordinated headquarters with regard to measures carried out by the SD detachments.”

As for the impending massacre in Kamenets-Podolsk, he specifically instructed the commandant of the city, Meiler, not to get involved or assist the SS: “The Wehrmacht has nothing to do with the whole action.” In question of logistical support, the SS was “subordinate” to the army and coordinated their operations with army commanders in their area of responsibility. But this directive implied a subservient relationship between the Wehrmacht and the office of the SS police leader as far as the extermination of civilian populations were concerned.

This was not the only massacre in territories under von Roques’ control for which he was implicated after the war. But Wagner may have played an even more overarching role—economically rather than ideologically. Although he was not present at the fateful meeting in Vinnitsa, his drafting of regulations with Reinhard Heydrich in March 1941 fit well with that meeting’s resolutions. They ensured that the army and special murder attachments would cooperate in executing Soviet Jews. According to this agreement, the German Armed Forces High Command military agreed that “within the framework of the instructions and upon their own responsibility, the Sonderkommandos are entitled to carry out executive measures against civilian population.” This laid down the framework for mass annihilation in which various security agencies of the Third Reich, not just the Einsatzgruppen, and the Wehrmacht shared responsibilities for “pacification” in the newly occupied territories.

Because of the rapid northward advance of the German military, no units of Einsatzgruppe C functioned in southern Galicia. Instead, the mass murder was entrusted to a much more potent and capable murder mechanism—that of the office of the HSSPF, which was augmented by police battalions and local auxiliaries. Altogether the six battalions subordinated to HSSPF Russia South (led by Jeckeln) killed considerably more Ukrainian Jews than Einsatzgruppe C and Einsatzgruppe D combined. Wagner’s responsibility for the decimation of the civilian population, as well as millions of Russian POWs, lay in the fact that he bore the burden of securing a continuous supply of war matériel, including food, in a time of limited and over-stretched resources. In order to achieve this, he fully implemented the Hunger Plan (der Hungerplan), a system that ensured that German military was given priority in food supplies at the expense of the inhabitants of the German-occupied Soviet territories. The plan relied on the premise that the German Army would feed itself by living off the land in the territories it conquered in the eastern regions of the Soviet Union.
Wagner's directives to reduce food supplies for the civilian population and POWs resulted in the deaths of millions during the war. The reduction of food for Jews, who were prohibited from purchasing eggs, butter, milk, meat, or fruit, was the most severe. In this light, the earlier quoted announcement on August 24, 1941, forbidding the purchase of food by the ghetto residents in Kamenets-Podolsk, makes sense. It amounted, though, to a death sentence. This was a well-calculated design by the German authorities that aimed for the decimation of the population. Implementing mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk—in fact requesting it—was a noticeable escalation of the extermination process and an early example of Wehrmacht officers’ cooperation with the SS. It reflected the general understanding between Heinrich Himmler and the leadership of the Wehrmacht on how they would solve the “Jewish problem,” both from ideological and economic vantage points.

Himmler’s direct influence in the turn of events for the deported Jews was evident in his consultative meeting with the top military brass on July 20 in Lviv (Lwów). During this trip, he conferred with von Roques to hammer out a general policy laying down the framework for the respective roles in the extermination—specifically that of the 1st SS Brigade under Jeckeln’s command. This reflected an expansion of the extermination process in the occupied areas as they moved from sporadic killings of Jewish men and those who “abetted the Bolshevik system”—which amounted to same—to wholesale and indiscriminate executions of men, women, and children. While it is not known what they discussed that day, the Hungarian Jewish Question might have been raised by General von Roques.

By early August, Heinrich Himmler, as the Reichsführer SS, directly communicated with the three appointed Higher SS and Police Leaders, SS-Gruppenführer Hans-Adolf Prützmann (responsible for the Baltic states and northern Russia as HSSPF “Rußland-Nord”), SS-Gruppenführer Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski (in charge of Belorussia as HSSPF “Rußland-Mitte”), and SS-Obergruppenführer Friedrich Jeckeln (in control of southern Russia and Ukraine as HSSPF “Rußland-Süd”), about Hitler’s “wishes” for expediting and expanding the extermination process. There is still some disagreement among scholars on whether a written directive, a führrerbefehl, pertaining to this issue was ever issued by Hitler. We know, though, that all communications between Himmler and his trusted henchmen were limited to verbal instructions. During his Riga trial, Jeckeln testified that Himmler’s exact words were: “it is my order, which is also the Führer’s wish.” For Jeckeln and the other Nazi functionaries down the rungs of the annihilation mechanism, the führrerbefehl alleviated all “legal” or “moral” questions or qualms.

Jeckeln’s responsibility for the extermination of the ghetto is another piece of the puzzle that must be put into context. In a multilayered Nazi bureaucracy, with internecine rivalry among various security agencies, armed services, and personalities, he
served as personal representative of the Reichsführer SS in southern Ukraine and directly commanded a staff company (Kommandostab) with representatives from almost every branch of the SS. In times of need, he could also tap into the various branches of the security services, such as the Ordnungspolizei (ORPO, Order Police—often referred as Reserve Police), Gestapo (secret police), Sicherheitsdienst (SD, security service), Sicherheitspolizei (Sipo, security police), Schutzpolizei (Schupo, municipal police), and available SS combat unit (1st SS Brigade). SS combat units answered to their immediate chain of command and would only be requisitioned by the Higher SS and Police Leader in the event of an emergency. Supplementing these forces, Jeckeln, and many officers engaging in the mechanism of annihilation, relied on specifically recruited Volkdeutsche (ethnic German) units, Hilfspolizei and Schutzmann (Ukrainian militias and police officers), and even on the participation of the border guard units (Grenzpolizei), and the humble railway police (Bahnschutzpolizei).

In discussing the mechanism of annihilation, we cannot ignore the ease with which SS officers of every rank could co-opt not only these branches of the Nazi law enforcement apparatus, but also civilian departments of the local administration. The mainstay of Jeckeln’s genocidal activities, though, was Ordnung Polizeibataillon (Reserve Police Battalion) 320, one of the five police battalions that were subordinated to him,
with the aim of facilitating the repression and murders carried out under his command. The initial role for the members of the battalion was to collect those to be murdered and surround the murder site. This rapidly evolved into an active participation in the murder itself.

Until the Kamenets-Podolsk massacre, the pace of extermination in southern Galicia was below the rate of other regions. The fate of the Hungarian Jews in Galicia, and particularly the slaughter of those in Kamenets-Podolsk, cannot be separated, as Peter Longerich aptly stated, from the “general radicalization of German Judenpolitik in August and September 1941.” This sudden spike in the pace of extermination can be traced back to the competing dynamics of personalities, egos, and aspirations of the central characters in the unfolding drama, as well as the exigencies of conditions on the ground.

In a meeting on August 12, 1941, Himmler instructed Jeckeln that alongside Jewish men, women and children should be shot as well—thus breaching a psychological barrier for the executioners. More importantly, Himmler berated Jeckeln about falling behind in “productivity,” in the number of executions in comparison with fellow Higher SS Police Leaders, including Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski in the center and Hans-Adolf Prützmann in the Baltic states. Albert Hartl, who opted out of mass murder, observed after the war that some of the officers entrusted with mass exterminations “were very ambitious and they wanted to report the highest possible shooting figures to Berlin.” Not coincidentally, British intelligence analysts who had intercepted messages reporting daily killings came to the same conclusion: “the leaders of the three sectors [the three HSSPFs] stand somewhat in competition with each other as to their ‘scores.’” As we will see in the succeeding chapters, even lower ranking SS officers stationed in Galicia were competing ferociously with each other for the highest murder tally. Jeckeln possessed a cut-throat personality. He showed ambition and drive in planning extermination. During the four long years of the war, he became arguably the single most inventive mass murderer in the Eastern theater. As Mallmann persuasively suggested, since Himmler was not satisfied with Jeckeln’s progress when the HSSPF South reported to him on 12 August 1941, he might have offered the mass killing of Hungarian Jews as a solution.

This is only an assumption, but if true, it gives the Vinnitsa meeting new meaning. It might now be considered a crucial step in the escalation of genocide in Ukraine in which the Hungarian expellees were both immediate victims and pawns. As Christopher Browning surmised, it might have served as the “starting block” for the Final Solution. Following this conference, the unprecedented three-day massacre of the 16,000 Hungarians, several thousand Romanians, and approximately 4,000 to 5,000 local Jews commenced on Wednesday, August 27, 1941. Based on recollections of survivors, Hungarian military personnel, court testimonies by perpetrators, and Ukrainian witnesses, we can reconstruct the entire affair almost minute by minute.
THREE DAYS IN AUGUST: ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

Once the decision was made to eliminate the ghetto, the mass killing was primarily a matter of logistics. The massacre started with the collection of the Hungarian deportees who were to be murdered in the first two days. The day leading up to the blood-bath, August 26, gives a glimpse into the mindset of the perpetrators, as well as the perceptions of the victims.

The minor discrepancies in the recollections of the witnesses don’t detract from the fact that a well-tested Nazi misinformation ploy served as a prelude. A terse announcement was posted on August 25 in the Old Town stating that all Hungarian Jews should assemble in a certain location early on August 26 “for relocation to a more convenient place or even an imminent return to Hungary.” Deliberately deceptive and unrealistic rumors were also circulated about the possibility of removal to Palestine. Prior to their departure from the ghetto, the chief of the Ukrainian police demanded from the “Jews 40,000 pengő [a large amount of Hungarian money], which was to be collected by the morning of August 26.” The sum was promptly collected.

Eyewitnesses recorded the slowly moving procession on early Tuesday morning, August 26, 1941, to the train station in the new part of Kamenets-Podolsk:

they were given two hours to get ready for the journey. They were lined up in rows in military fashion and taken to the destroyed train station. Rabbis with Torah scrolls led [this procession], followed by mothers with their children, and ill and old people supported [by others]. All the people moved along with difficulty; most of them believed that they were going to be returned home. They were taken to demolished barracks [the former NKVD barracks] near the train station and were held there under guard . . . on the pretext that they were waiting for a train.

They were housed overnight in the barracks, where “they were locked in and no one was allowed to leave the building” under the threat of death. In fact, “a woman gave birth during the night” and one man from Kassa (Kosice) who dared to leave “the building for water was killed by the guards.” The next day, “at 5 AM two German soldiers went through each hall and ordered all [the Jews] to assemble outside but to leave all their belongings behind. Two other German soldiers ordered all the Jews who were German subjects to remain.”

The journey to the murder site started in the morning of August 27, 1941. It was a sunny Wednesday: “German soldiers armed with whips stood 10 steps apart and beat the Jews who ran past them.” The first day and a half was specifically dedicated to the
murder of the Hungarians. By late afternoon of the second day, the time had come to destroy the local Jewish community; the collection and murder of the Jewish population settled into a routine. There was no need to hide the truth. Of course, the recognition that the march would lead to death did not make it less terrifying for the victims. There were instances when the executioners could not “process” the number of those condemned to death and groups were sent back to the city. On the second day of the massacre, many local Jews were forced out to join the death march. A seventeen-year-old girl, a city resident, recounted her terror when she was marched to the massacre site, then taken back because there were too many candidates for murder. Several hours later, she was again returned to the execution site.

On August 28, 1941 at dawn, they started to drive the Jews out of their apartments, telling to take with them their most valuable possessions. We were driven out of our apartment to the square, where we were surrounded by Germans and Hungarians. Whoever of us carried bags on our shoulders was beaten and [our bags] were thrown aside. Later, we were lined up 6-8 in a row and told that the way was going to be difficult and long and, therefore, there was no point in taking many belongings with us. We were taken first in the direction of Polskie Folwark, (Polish Farm) [where] we were divided into two
groups. One group was taken through Polskie Folwark toward a pit while the other was stopped at a bridge near a rock and ordered to lie down. We sat down, while those who were tired lay down. In the meantime, the Germans set up machine guns. . . . Some “schutzmann” [Ukrainian auxiliary police] were there as well. After they had ordered all this to be done, the Germans surrounded us and started to take pictures of us. Then they took us back to the Old Town. . . .

At several minutes past noon, we were once again assembled in the center of the city. I asked the policemen “Where is that part of the people who were taken away? My parents were among them.” “You are going to be evicted from the city” he replied. . . . After the people were assembled, we were taken to Polskie Folwark. Those unable to walk were beaten. There were German trucks and those who had been beaten were lifted up, put into trucks, and driven to the shooting site. On the way, I understood that we were going to be shot and all those walking [with me] understood this as well.46

A fact that should not escape attention in this testimony is that this is the first instance that Hungarian military involvement, however peripheral it might have been, is mentioned relating to the Kamenets-Podolsk mass murder. The contemporary reports of Hungarian soldiers on leave, and testimonies of survivors taken by the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission between May 15 and 30, 1944, repeatedly placed Hungarian forces at the murder site in cordon duties. Yet we can assume with certainty that they had no idea about the final fate of the deportees. Just like the members of the Reserve Police Battalion 320 who became part of the genocide, they believed that the Hungarian and local Jews were to be relocated.47

By the second day of the massacre, however, it is hard to believe that anyone had any illusion about the fate of the assembled Jews. Supporting these testimonies is the only surviving collection of four photographs taken by Gyula Spitz, a Jewish driver in the Hungarian Army.48 These grainy pictures are genuinely horrifying in their simplicity and candor. They document the three stages of destruction: the collection, procession under German escort, and the final station before the slaughter. Judging by the attire of the marchers, these were Ukrainian Jews, which also indicates that they could have been taken in the second or third day of the slaughter. The looming presence of the German police troops in one of the pictures also reinforces the original descriptions. No gruesome brutality can be seen, and no luggage is carried; there is only a devastating and overwhelming sense of resignation. In testifying to the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission49 after the liberation of the city, a Ukrainian Christian “saw a neighbor who used to live in the same courtyard as I did, a certain Mrs. Shvartsman, her husband, their daughters Liza and Basya, and their relatives, who went arm-in-arm, silently,
without uttered a sound, their heads lowered toward the ground. Liza, who saw me, waved to me and shouted: ‘Senia, we are doomed.’

The final segment of the march to the murder site was accompanied by ferocity and violence to stamp out any inclination for resistance: “the old people who could not move and lagged behind were beaten to death by Germans, afterwards they were picked up by carts that followed, loading 20–30 people into each cart and transporting them, as I know, to the shooting site.” The victims were forced to run a gauntlet of policemen and to surrender their valuables and clothing in subsequent stations. Testimonies of the perpetrators, both German and Ukrainians, paint a clear picture of the process. A member of the Reserve Police Battalion 320, the unit that was intimately involved in the collection and the shooting, testified in the trial of the police officers on January 4, 1961:

I spoke to some Jews… The Jews asked me about the destination of their journey. The Jews were convinced they were going to be resettled. *At that time, I myself did not know that the Jews were going to be shot.* From talking to the Jews, I also thought that, indeed, this was going to be a resettlement. We took the Jews out of the city. We moved about one kilometer or a bit more out of the city. I cannot say today what direction it was. We were going through impassable territory. There we encountered our cordon. We saw from far away many
people standing in that area. From afar we also heard shooting from submachine guns. We took the Jews through the cordon formed by policemen. There were already several thousand Jews on the other side of the cordon. Thereafter, following orders, we reinforced the cordon. 52

In reality, there were two cordons. The outer perimeter, set up by the Ukrainian auxiliaries, was connected by a corridor, a so-called hosepipe, to the second cordon, manned by German Order Police. The recollection of one of the Schutzmänner (Ukrainian policemen) who participated in the roundup and guarding of the condemned provides a detailed picture: “The cordon around the shooting site consisted of two circles, the first of which, consisting mainly of Germans, was right at the graves and encompassed the place where people about to be shot were undressing, while the second, consisting of the schutzmänner from the 2nd company, surrounded the whole area and was located at a distance of 100–150 meters from the first circle.” 53

![Fig 4.8 In front of the mass graves: Hungarian Jews are waiting for their final fate. August 27–29, 1941. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives, courtesy of Ivan Sved.](image-url)
The location of the murder site, the final destination, was some distance from the train depot and the city itself, a moderately hilly area northeast of the city. The area was pockmarked by four huge craters, the remnants of colossal explosions of munitions depots by the retreating Soviet Army. These became mass graves, with “a diameter of about 20–30 meter and a depth of about 5–6 meter,” and were expanded and enlarged by slave labor prior to the executions. One of the most striking aspects of the atrocity was the fact, as eyewitnesses reported, that the killers were not discreet about their task and made no effort to conceal the mass murder from the local population. In any case, it would have been almost impossible to do so, because Ukrainian policemen were an integral part of the killing machine. Neighbors, familiar with some of the local victims and living in close proximity to the killing fields, could see and hear the terrifying sounds and view the spectacle from their homes. We also know that Hungarian soldiers were able to loiter around the killing pits unhindered. Or were they present in a military capacity? We don’t know. Because of the shocking magnitude of the carnage, the murders became common knowledge across Galicia almost immediately, and shortly thereafter in Budapest.

In this light, we might ponder the question as to how could a Hungarian corporal, a humble porter from Budapest, witness the ultimate fate of my two uncles? We know that he was also able to observe their final moments, but one should also pose the ultimate question: In what capacity? Was he merely a curious observer? A murder-tourist in contemporary parlance? Or was he ordered to collect the Jews, including Samu and Karczi, and lead them to slaughter? Or, perhaps he had to serve as a cordon personnel before the final act? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. About one thing we can be sure—he was in close proximity and served as an intimate eyewitness. He could see how Samu was murdered by a single bullet to the head, and how Karczi jumped into the pit after his brother alive. And the porter could recount this directly to my family. He could not answer, though, the rhetorical question if Karczi’s ultimate action was spurred, in this terrifying moment, by his desire to defy the executioner? Wanting to die on his own terms? Or perhaps only Karczi himself understood, to quote a German Nazi officer, that “Death is not so bad, the agony before is worse.”

Jeckeln flew to Kamienets-Podolsk from his headquarters in Berdichev (Berdychiv in Ukrainian) in his small Storch plane in late afternoon, August the 26, or the next morning to personally supervise the extermination. An experienced pilot, he often commuted between extermination sites and his command center.

Upon arriving, he lost no time in proceeding to the site of the impending mass murder and, simultaneously, setting up the teams of shooters comprised mainly of his own staff. He had ordered the Reserve Police Battalion 320, under the leadership of Major Kurt Dall, and Ukrainian policemen and auxiliaries (Schutzmannschaften), to serve as cordon personnel. Because of the short notice, only Company 1/320 and 2/320,
commanded by Captain Alfred Weber and Captain Hans Wiemer, respectively, were able to arrive in time from their base in Proskurov—some fifty miles away—to participate in the collection and escort of the Jews. Under the command of Captain Heinrich Scharwey, the third company (3/320) would reach the site of the slaughter midday on August 28, becoming embroiled in the killings almost immediately.

Reserve Police Battalion 320, consisting of approximately five hundred policemen, was set up in the Berlin–Spandau area in February 1941 and transferred to Galicia in the latter part of June. Unfortunately, no exhaustive research—such as Browning’s study of Reserve Police Battalion 101—has been conducted on the demographic composition, ideological orientation, and motivation of Battalion 320. Our limited information about the members of the battalion comes from their trial in the 1960s.

The battalion’s recruits and their motivation to join the police force was reflective of the majority of ORPO recruits across the spectrum. Most of these men were neither overtly political nor true believers in Nazi ideology. Nor did they harbor any deep hatred of Jews. Their participation in this and a string of subsequent massacres has clear implications for our understanding of the willingness of “ordinary Germans” to carry out killings. The initial execution team members were from a unit formed especially for this task by Jeckeln from among his personal bodyguards, a guard platoon from his Stabskompanie/HSSPF “Russland-Süd,” and his support staff. In times of “manpower shortage,” it was not uncommon for Jeckeln to try to persuade even his drivers to join a mass shooting. For many, this was their first occasion to participate, willingly or through coercion, in mass murder.

While there are some minor discrepancies in the testimonies as to when Reserve Police Battalion 320 became actively involved in the slaughter, we know that by the second day, members of the third company were also forced to participate in the shootings. At least twelve members of the battalion became part of the four-member execution squads. They were part of more than a quarter million German Order Police who operated in Eastern Europe during the war. The units that were subordinated to Jeckeln, as Dieter Pohl opined, “killed considerably more Ukrainian Jews than Einsatzgruppe C and Einsatzgruppe D combined.”

Considering the single-minded zeal with which the Nazis pursued the murder of the Jews, the extermination of 1.5 million victims in a relatively short time should not come as a surprise. Rather, the real surprise might be the fact of how little manpower was required to accomplish this. Browning remarked that “SS and Police Leader[s] (SSPF) were given the task but not the men to carry it out. They had to improvise by creating ad hoc ‘private armies.’” Not surprisingly, Jeckeln often had to face a shortage of willing executioners as he worked to recruit for the Erschiessungs-kommando—execution squad. The Kamenets-Podolsk massacre amply demonstrates that he was a ruthless master of improvisation. Yet without local Ukrainian police and auxiliary forces, perhaps
Hungarian troops as cordon personnel, and the active participation of the police battalion in the annihilation process, mass extermination could have not been as successful or even as feasible.

The mass murder in Kamenets-Podolsk was neither smooth nor tidy; it was not a “sanitized” affair. Mass murder never is. In contradiction to the testimonies of members of Reserve Police Battalion 320 in their postwar trial, there were many glitches and breakdowns with moments of chaos and internal conflict. The Sardinenpackung method of execution, invented later by Jeckeln, had not yet been “refined” or “perfected” for mass scale. It reached its full implementation in Babi Yar and the Rumbula Forest in Riga, where victims were ordered to lie down on the already murdered and were executed from close range.\(^6\)

So, when considering the number of victims and relatively limited available executioners, the three-day slaughter was chaotic and messy. “There were no doctors who could verify the victims’ death,” one of the executioners recalled during his trial. “I still remember how one Jew was shot not fatally and lost consciousness. When he recovered consciousness, he screamed that he had been shot. He then received the coup de grace. The execution lasted from 10 hours in the morning until 16 hours in the afternoon on the first day.” This witness was not a professional soldier, but the head of the motor pool of Jeckeln’s staff company.\(^6\)

Since this massacre happened in the early stages of the Holocaust and the Hungarian Jews were not as traumatized as they would later become, they went to the slaughter compliantly, despite the merciless beatings. As they arrived at the execution site, they were funneled through a corridor with blows raining down on them, ordered in stages to hand over their money and valuables, their shoes, and finally, to undress. They were taken in groups to the huge craters and brought down by submachine gun fire at the edge of the mass graves. Execution squads of four men for each grave worked in shifts, while police units cordoned off the site. A member of Jeckeln’s staff who personally participated in the slaughter recalled during his murder trial that the executioners “were armed with submachine guns, apparently Czech-made. The execution squads consisted of policemen and SS-men.” Other sources state that Russian-made weapons were the preferred tools of the murderers because of their large magazines, which held a clip of fifty rounds of ammunition and could be fired singly or automatically.\(^6\)

While some of the victims were killed outright, many were only wounded slightly, and some jumped or were thrown into the pits alive. Several eyewitnesses, both victims and perpetrators, described the terror. One of the survivors “saw a grave across which planks had been laid, and the Germans standing around. The people approaching the grave were forced by the Germans to run along the planks; they were beaten with sticks and rifle butts and fell alive into the grave.” Corroborating this account is a contemporary comment by a Hungarian military engineer who was a witness to the massacre:
“Platforms had been erected at the rims of the pits. The Jews were ordered to climb the platforms and face away from the pits. Machine guns were pointed at them. In this manner, the Jews met their demise.”

A Ukrainian woman who dared to sneak with a friend as close as possible to view the grim spectacle “could see how the children, women, and men were forced to undress and to jump into the grave in groups of 10. Some of them resisted since they did not want to undress. They were beaten with rifle butts, stabbed with bayonets and dragged by their legs and arms, were pulled to the grave. The babies were snatched away from their mothers and stabbed with bayonets.” To add an infernal hue to this scene, “[The site of the massacre] was full of smoke coming from the constant shooting. Many people were thrown into the grave while still alive, some of them having been wounded only slightly.”

Finally, interspersed with the monotone staccato of the submachine guns were the cries of the victims that were heard miles away: “I heard shots from automatic weapons and terrible, penetrating cries of the people that was like an inhuman roar.” Ukrainians, women, and children from the Kamenets-Podolsk train station area, who were living in a cellar about a kilometer from the murder site, reported horror of the groans and cries that they heard from far away. A Hungarian survivor, who was reprieved at the last minute, remembered this roar for the rest of his life: “People [were] screaming. You can imagine—15,000 people. Everybody was screaming.”

That the killing did not go smoothly can be gleaned from the fact that the killing squads at first were limited to Jeckeln’s own Stabskompanie and were severely short-handed. Without the infusion, under coercion, of members of the Reserve Police Battalion 320, especially on the second and third days, it would have been difficult to finish the grisly undertaking. This was a baptism in mass murder for the members of the battalion.

There was an element of psychology in the Nazis’ preparations for mass shooting that included, alongside a large supply of schnapps, the withholding of information until the last minute. Even SS men were rarely notified in advance about their imminent participation in an execution. For example, members of Jeckeln’s staff company were alerted only in the evening before “that [they] were going to an execution.” Policemen who were ordered to be part of an execution team were not informed about the impending mass murder until the last minute. Members of Reserve Police Battalion 320 “did not know that the Jews were going to be shot” even on the morning of the massacre, and some policemen were not aware that they were escorting the Jews to their gruesome and imminent demise.

A Ukrainian policeman described the dynamics of the extermination in his trial in 1944: the executioners “worked’ in shifts: when one of them got tired, he went to rest. . . . He was replaced by another [accomplice]. In this way, they changed shifts
throughout the shooting. The henchmen, and not only the henchmen, were strengthened by schnapps all the time . . . ate a sandwich, drank some schnapps, smoked a cigarette and then, went back to ‘work.’” 67

Since the shooting brought the executioners nearly eye-to-eye with their victims, even hardened SS men found it difficult. In ruminating on the moral complexities of mass murder, Michael Burleigh noted that “many of the shooters vomited, either because of the blood and the brains flying around or because they had consumed too much schnapps.” 68

The copious flow of alcohol became an integral ingredient for the killing process. Hermann K., a member of Jeckeln’s staff, shows the ambivalence that drove the shooters to alcohol: “Jews were constantly brought to it [the grave]. Some of them had to lie down, others we killed by a shot in the back of the head while they were standing. There were men, women, and children, but I only shot men. There were no breaks. I often moved away from the grave when my nerves could not stand it anymore and I tried to shirk this assignment.” 69 We should add that this SS man also augmented his resolve by drinking schnapps before returning to the firing line.

In order to convince the policemen to shoot unarmed civilians, a psychological and mental barrier had to be broken — a transformation had to take place. During their trials, these same policemen freely admitted that their participation was voluntary, yet a certain collective psychological coercion and pressure was needed to enter and remain in the killing field. 70

Among the members of the battalion, only one policeman from the third company voiced his objection to the impending murder. While the first two companies of Reserve Police Battalion 320 served as cordon personnel, augmented by Ukrainian auxiliaries, the third company, upon arrival, became part of the execution teams. This member of the battalion reported at a hearing in 1960 how First Lieutenant Heinrich Scharwey had given an anti-Semitic lecture to his men to justify the annihilation of the Jews: “I remember a speech by our company leader, Scharwey, before the assembled men that the entire battalion will be used in a Jewish action in Kamenets-Podolsk. From his speech, it was clear that the Jews were to be shot. . . . Anyway, he tried through his speech to convince us of the necessity of this shooting.” 71

At the same time, Scharwey also gave the option to refrain from the killing, the policeman remembers: “He could not give any of us individually the order to take part in the shooting.” The same policeman requested to be relieved from participating in mass murder, invoking the Hague Convention: “I called Scharwey’s attention to the Hague Convention pertaining to Land Warfare and invoked the provision[s] contained therein whereby it was not allowed to shoot at defenseless people, and also to my not being able to reconcile this with my conscience. I further called his attention to the fact that during my training in Eilenburg I had been instructed about The
Hague Convention. . . . I am not aware that other company members requested to be exempted themselves.”

Records consistently show that those who refused to engage in the killing process did not suffer negative consequences or punishment for their refusal. This raises the question, why didn’t more soldiers ask to be waived from participation? During their trials, all admitted that their participation in this massacre was wholly voluntary. In retrospect, it is impressive that Scharwey accepted this policeman’s reasoning and released him from the slaughter. Unfortunately, he was the only one who requested to be exempted by invoking individual conscience. The rest of the battalion of middle-aged reserve and active policemen, with no identifiable ideological or political motives, decided to participate and “continued to kill, week after week.”

For Jeckeln’s personnel, on the other hand, this was not an option. He coerced his staff company with various means, including outright threats and intimidation. In one sharp exchange, he snapped at a reluctant Einsatzgruppe commander: “I have thought and considered this very carefully, and if I catch somebody who objects to this [mass killing] or breaks down, then he will also be shot.”

Not surprisingly, at least twelve members of the battalion joined thirty SS and security police personnel from Jeckeln’s staff company as the core of the execution squads.

While Jeckeln could not force his will on the policemen in the battalion, his vociferous demand for more productive participation in the killing process sparked an angry exchange with Major Kurt Dall, the commander of the battalion. We do not know the outcome of this exchange. This argument, though, transcended the issue of individual policemen dodging or unable to continue the killing. It may have been about lines of authority. While assisting the Higher SS and Police Leaders, these police battalions were technically under the command of SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer and Generaloberst of the police (ranks equivalent to Colonel General) Kurt Daluege, chief of the national uniformed Ordnungspolizei (Order Police). Thus, Major Dall had full authority over the conduct of his subordinates.

Overall, though, Jeckeln himself held the ultimate authority, with all the arbitrariness and capriciousness fitting an SS general. The four mass graves were in the bend of a low hill that served as Jeckeln’s command post. From this vantage point, he could overlook the slaughter in the company of SS-Sturmbannführer (MAJOR) August Meier, the representative of Einsatzgruppe C, and Major Kurt Dall, commander of Reserve Police Battalion 320. Some reports also placed SS-Brigadeführer and Generalmajor der Polizei Gerret Korsemann with Jeckeln on the massacre site as he prepared for his role as the future HSSPF of the Caucasus. Finally, there were also several Wehrmacht officers from General von Roques’ staff who joined the spectacle out of sheer curiosity. The three company commanders, Captain Alfred Weber (1/320), Captain Hans Wiemer (2/320), and Captain Heinrich Scharwey (3/320) meanwhile supervised the extermination.
From his perch, he made the decision of life or death, who should be saved and who should be destroyed. An officer from his command company who was a member of the execution squad recalled in his trial that on the first day of the massacre “a young girl around the age of 20 years old and a small boy around the age of 12 appealed to Sturmbannführer Meyer [Meier] that they were not Jews and that he grants them life. Meyer then spoke with Jeckeln and the two were released. I still remember how the boy was overjoyed and jumped up because his life has been spared. Also, the girl was very happy.”

We can identify with certainty Sturmbannführer Meyer with Major August Meier, which adds an interesting dimension to this story. He was assigned to Jeckeln’s staff company as the representative of Einsatzgruppe C and was an authentic mass murderer in his own right. But even an SS major could not grant a reprieve from death without Jeckeln’s approval.

Albert Fein, a thirteen-year-old Hungarian boy from Uzhgorod (Ungvár in Hungarian) in Carpathian Ruthenia, recalled standing in front of Jeckeln, waiting on a life-or-death decision from “the General.” Amid the raging massacre all around him, his testimony is almost surreal. After his mother, a blond with Aryan features from Austria, speaking in perfect German, was able to convince one of the policemen that she was Christian and German, the family, with four children, were hauled to see Jeckeln. After hastily getting rid of his traditional Jewish undergarment (Tallit-katan), Fein reports “we left there. My two sisters, they were blonde, I was blonde, and my mom was blonde, and my father was dark haired, and my brother was dark haired. The general looked at us for profile, you know, from side to front, speaking to my mother. . . . I don’t know what he was thinking. He says, ‘Back. Take them back.’”

Indeed, it’s hard to fathom, even in retrospect, as what propelled Jeckeln to make a decision of life or death. What was both impressive and disturbing about him was his absolute emotional detachment. We can see in him a task-oriented person, a problem solver, who accomplished what needed to be done without bothering about the content. In his motivation to murder, it’s hard to discern an overarching philosophical foundation. Yet his split-second decision that non-Jews should not be executed was anchored in pure ideology—an ideology that was denuded of any moral, emotional, or human dimension.

After three days of murder, he accomplished what he had come to do. As the murder pits overflowed and even as people still moved under the mass of corpses, Jeckeln got into his small Storch plane and flew back to his headquarters in Berdichev. A somewhat disgruntled Ukrainian auxiliary policeman testified three years later that the German participants “took for themselves the possessions of the people who were shot.” One final point that escaped Jeckeln’s attention—or perhaps he did not want to be bothered by a mundane detail—was the covering and recovering of the mass graves. As a matter of policy, this was often left to Jews who might have dug the trenches themselves that now
held the bodies of their families. Subsequently, they were shot themselves. The journalist Adam Gopnik perceptively noted “that was the true image of the Holocaust, more so than the trains running in time to industrialized gassings and burnings.”

In this case, though, there were no Jews left alive. Peasants from neighboring villages, factory workers, and concentration camp inmates were hastily assembled by force for covering the scene of the crime. The work was genuinely traumatic, causing indelible psychological marks on the participants. A Ukrainian policeman remembered that “several days afterward, both day and night, frightful noises were heard from the graves. Then SS men forced peasants from the surrounding villages to cover the graves. The railway workers said that the earth was heaving for several days.”

For survivors and eyewitnesses, it was hard to convey in words the immediate aftermath of the carnage. An eight-year-old Ukrainian girl remembered that “the Germans brought in horses to tramp down the soil. At night, we heard the moans of the wounded who were buried alive . . . the earth quivered in tremors.” Returning Hungarian soldiers and Jews from the forced labor companies testified that the “earth moved up and down over the graves for days.”

**ORDNUNG MUSS SEIN!**

A preoccupation with German punctuality: “Order must prevail!” Based on Jeckeln’s final tally in his Operational Situation Report, sent directly to Heinrich Himmler from the killing fields, within three days a total of 23,600 Jews, among them an estimated 14,000 to 16,000 Hungarian Jews and their Christian family members deported from Hungary, were murdered. This final report was dated August 30, 1941. In fact, the meticulous SS-Obergruppenführer updated the Reichsführer daily about the progress of the extermination. Reading the previous three daily reports, dated August 27, 28, and 29, respectively, and comparing them for discrepancies with the final report, reveals much about the changing numbers, about Jeckeln’s vanity, and about the need for praise from Himmler. The daily telex and radio communications for reporting the murder tally lists 4,200 victims for August 27; 5,000 for August 28; and 7,000 for August 29. It concludes with “the total number of Jews liquidated in the Kamenets-Podolsk action is around 20,000.”

The three reports offer an interesting evolution in Jeckeln’s allocation of credit for the mass murder. The first dispatch lists both Reserve Police Battalion 320 and Jeckeln’s commando staff as the perpetrators. The next day he names Reserve Police Battalion 320 as solely responsible for the shooting. Finally, on the last day, he credits solely his staff company and his own leadership with completing the grisly task: “Staff Company Higher SS and Police Leader for Southern Russia under command of SS-Obergruppenführer Jeckeln completed Kamenets-Podolsk operation [...] Successes:
A SUMMER OF MASS MURDER

[...] Staff Company shot another 7,000 Jews, thus total number of Jews liquidated in Kamenets-Podolsk operation around 20 thousand. Amendment to activity reports of 26 and 27.8.41 instead of Reserve Police Battalion 320 insert Staff Company, in the report of 27.8 instead of 5 thousand 11 thousand. Reserve Police Battalion 320 was only used for cordonning [the site].

Fig 4.9 The Jeckeln reports sent to Heinrich Himmler: The sum of three days of murder. August 30, 1941 Courtesy of Military Central Archive, Military Historical Archive Prague fund Kommando stab "Reichsführer SS, 1941–1943."
A subsequent radio communication by Jeckeln on August 30, however, amends the earlier information. The battalion’s role is ignored completely, and the final number of Jews murdered is fixed at 23,600. A final note about the massacre, dated September 11, 1941, was drafted not by Jeckeln, but by the chief of the Security Police and SD from Einsatzgruppe C. This routine Operational Situation Report USSR No. 80 contained a curt summation: “in the course of 3 days 23,600 Jews were shot in Kamenets-Podolsk by a Kommando of the Higher SS and Police Leader [“South”].”

Holocaust scholars did not fail to notice the discrepancy between the original number of 20,000 victims and the hastily revised one that rounded up the figure to 23,600. One possible explanation is that Reserve Police Battalion 320 moved back to its headquarters in Proskurov (Кhmelnytskyi in Ukrainian) after the massacre. Before that, however, the battalion took a detour to the town of Minkovice (Minkovtsi in Ukrainian), thirty-seven miles northwest of Kamenets-Podolsk. Again, Jeckeln’s exceptional logistical and organizational abilities prevailed. On the morning of August 30, 1941, all of the Jews of Minkovice were assembled in the town square, led to three pre-dug pits a mile east of the town, and shot to death with the assistance of Ukrainian policemen in groups of ten to fifteen people. A follow-up radio message from Jeckeln on August 31, 1941, dutifully informed the SS-Reichsführer of this action by Reserve Police Battalion 320, which ended the lives of 2,200 Jews. On the following day members of the battalion shot approximately 700 Jews in Zwianczyk (Zhvanchik Velikiy in Ukrainian) and 380 in Sokolec, both located about eighteen miles northeast of Kamenets-Podolsk.

There is no information about the number of Hungarian deportees who might have been the victims in these corollary massacres. We must rely on German Operational Situation Reports, which only provides the number killed; however, based on the random dispersal of the killings across the region, we can assume that many could be included in the final tally. Did Jeckeln incorporate this number in his final report, augmenting the total number of those killed in the mass murder to 23,600? The proximity of these towns to Kamenets-Podolsk might give us a clue that Hungarian Jews were part of these massacres as well.

As for the police battalion, the first massacre in Kamenets-Podolsk was the opening round in their participation in a long string of mass executions across southern Galicia. After the baptism in mass murder, perhaps the second wave of massacres in Minkowice and elsewhere came more easily, signaling the inevitable descent of Reserve Police Battalion 320 into genocide. The exploits of the battalion did not end here, though. After several days, the group was called back to patrol the mass graves in Kamenets-Podolsk, searching for those who escaped from the murder pits. Compounding this ghastly task, they were asked to deal with plundering Ukrainians.
Almost simultaneously with the report sent to the desk of Heinrich Himmler, the British secret service successfully decoded Jeckeln’s missives and informed the government in London about the unprecedented scale of the slaughter in Kamenets-Podolsk. They were not alone, though, in their intimate knowledge of the atrocity. As it was mentioned earlier, a steady stream of detailed reports by horrified and traumatized Hungarian officers, common soldiers, and forced labor personnel provided evidence that the Royal Hungarian Army was eminently present during the carnage. The executioners performed their grisly task openly, and Hungarian military units moved unhindered across the entire area. Not surprisingly, German military dispatches to Berlin expressed a marked unease about the presence of allied military personnel across Galicia and their tendency for “murder tourism.” They took pictures and openly reported on war crimes committed by the German Army. 87

That raises the question of what was the extent of the participation of the Royal Hungarian Army in the carnage, either as bystanders or accomplices? We have already mentioned the role Hungarian units played in the collection of the Jews on August 28, in the Old Town. Other Soviet sources from regional archives support this and note that Hungarian soldiers served as cordon personnel and even participated in the killing process. 88 We know that Reserve Police Battalion 320 originated in Berlin. Dieter Pohl, a German historian, is the only one who specifically mentions the fact that “Police Battalion 320 was reinforced by an ORPO company of ethnic Germans from the Baltic region.” 89 The testimonies of the German participants during their trial emphasize that the murder squads consisted of four: three staff company members and one policeman per murder squad, all German. But the best source for refuting direct Hungarian participation in the slaughter comes directly from Jeckeln himself. During his trial in Riga, he was clear about not using non-German personnel, since such an undertaking needed the mental toughness and effectiveness of an SS man. 90

This reduces the question of Hungarian complicity, then, to a supporting role—specifically to cordon personnel—and not the killing itself. But one detail is undeniable: soldiers, officers, and, curiously enough, Jewish drivers attached to the military units were also present at the mass murder, personally witnessed it, and subsequently provided detailed reports back to affected families, Jewish organizations, and government officials. Gábor Mermelstein, a Jew who served as a truck driver in the Hungarian military, observed the mass murder in real time: “we saw hundreds of people undressing . . . we passed a row of maple trees—practically above the multitude of naked corpses . . . suddenly we noticed a square shaped pit where people were lined up. Hundreds of innocent people were machine-gunned down. I will never forget what I saw and felt: the frightened faces, the men, women, children marching into
their own graves without resistance. I was terrified, outraged, and overwhelmed by grief at the same time.”

The role of Jewish military drivers in channeling information about the atrocity was especially crucial. Their accounts, although somewhat sketchy, filtered into the intelligence reports of the Hungarian military: “according to drivers attached to the military, German soldiers and Ukrainian militiamen wanted to drive further large number of Jews who were removed from Hungary. The Jews resisted the military upon which they ‘shot several of them.’” A more detailed account by such a driver, Izidor Salzer, noted that “on August 27–29 the Ukrainian militia and Hungarian military units escorted the Jews out of the area under the idea of relocating them to a different region.” In describing the “defenseless, frantic, and horror-stricken crowd” streaming toward their doom, he did not need superlatives. His account corroborates testimonies of local Jewish and non-Jewish eyewitnesses.

Although its author is cloaked in anonymity, a brief but contemporaneous report, dated August 30, 1941, also presents the distinct likelihood that perhaps a representative of a Hungarian Jewish organization, was also “on the ground” and in the vicinity of the slaughter. The description itself ranges from the atrocities committed by Ukrainian paramilitaries along the Dniester River to the direct description of the three-day massacre in Kamenets-Podolsk. The report is the one that supplied the estimated number of deportees, between 14,000 and 16,000 who were murdered during these three days. The language, narrative, and painful details all testify to the fact that this author was present:

They chased them with rifle butts and whips to where they received the final redemption from further suffering in the form of a bullet by a German submachine gun. No one troubled to check if they were dead; as one fell into a pit, a moment later the next followed, and so on, until the pit filled up to the brim. When it was full, they covered the grave even if there were still many alive, and the same game continued, at the next pit. The popping sound of the machine gun is still on my mind after 3-4 days and I will perhaps never forget it as long as I live. The August 27-28 will be a Yahrzeit for the Jews because 15,000 innocent people have lost their lives in this city . . . among them many Hungarians. It is constantly on my mind. God be merciful to us all.

This and other reports were accurate both in the portrayal of the massacre and the number of victims. The world became almost instantaneously aware of the carnage that was taking place in Galicia and its Hungarian Jewish angle. Headlines such as “Jews Dragged from Hospitals in Hungary for Deportation to Nazi-held Galicia,” “Thousands of Jews Killed in Ukraine by Nazis; Bodies Floating in Dniester,” and others by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) left little to the imagination. Quoting
Hungarian officers, these dispatches informed the American public about the extent of the carnage: “Thousands of Jewish corpses are floating in the waters of the Dniester River, in the Nazi-occupied Ukraine, as a result of massacres of Jews carried out by German soldiers in cooperation with Ukrainian bands. . . . The officers, shocked by the horrible scenes, estimated that tens of thousands of Jews were massacred in the Kamenetz-Podolsk region. . . . Among the dead are at least 15,000 Hungarian Jews.” One of the officers “also estimated that among those killed in Kamenets-Podolsk region were 8,000 Galician Jews.”

This number accurately reflected the final total given by Jeckeln. In a letter dated October 20, 1943, and sent to Palestine, a writer reported similar statistics: “In this way, twenty-five thousand Jews were at that time in Kamenets-Podolsk executed.” The English-, Yiddish-, and Hungarian-language Jewish press in New York and London also picked up this news. During the trial of one of the main architects of the deportation, Ámon Pásztóy, a figure of 20,000 was mentioned. We can also glean from this testimony that through military reports and direct testimonies by KEOKH personnel, the office was also appraised on the continuous massacres and the final mass murder committed in Kamenets-Podolsk. The de-facto head of KEOKH, Dr. Sándor Siménfalvy, promptly reported this information to the minister of interior.

In reviewing the extant files of the US Department of State, it is clear that the American Embassy in Budapest, and especially Herbert C. Pell, the envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of the United States were privy to the situation in Galicia. Consequently, the US Department of State was also informed in detail. The Americans had reporters and diplomatic and military personnel in Budapest to collect information about Nazi atrocities, at least until early 1942. One of the quirks of Hungarian policy was the fact that the JDC, through which information reached Geneva, Lisbon, and Washington unhindered, could function undisturbed. The ever alert and watchful British secret service, on the other hand, relied on electronic means for gathering information about the monstrous deeds committed in Kamenets-Podolsk and elsewhere by Jeckeln and Reserve Police Battalion 320. As mentioned earlier, they were able to decode the communications between Jeckeln and Himmler, his direct superior, and apprised Churchill routinely on the magnitude of the exterminations. By October of the same year, the press in New York and London reported the carnage committed in Galicia in relatively precise details.

The Jewish communities across Galicia also became aware almost instantaneously of the mass murder as straggling survivors, some of them literally climbing out of the mass graves, and traumatized eyewitnesses reached cities, towns, and villages. The bloodbath was sobering and disturbing news to the Jews of Galicia and sent a shockwave through the communities. A note from Borshchiv reflects this apprehension: “We became aware of this [Kamenets-Podolsk] right away from the few who survived. The
shooting of these Jews was the first major action in our region, and it made a horrible impression.”¹⁰¹ Many of these communities harboring the refugees from Hungary had viewed the influx of the deportees as “insurance” against extermination. Hungarian troops often curbed Ukrainian excesses or stopped pogroms against Jewish communities in Galicia. The murders at Kamenets-Podolsk now sent a portentous message of tragic things to come. Some reports referred to a day of mourning declared by various Jewish communities across the region.

From the German military’s point of view, we must also ask how much detail filtered back to von Roques’ headquarters about Kamenets-Podolsk? An unexpected angle came to light during war crime trial of von Roques in Nuremberg that could address the question of how much he knew about the massacre. It is evident that he fully acquiesced to the role the security forces played in the euphemistically called “pacification” actions (i.e., extermination). The directive, dated September 1, 1941, provides clear proof of that. During the trial, though, the curious fact that Jeckeln “usually had his headquarters in the same locality as the defendant and frequently dined with him and his officers” did not escape the prosecutors’ attention. The prosecutors reminded von Roques that he had to have known intimately the details of the murder since “on 2 September [1941] von Roques’ chief of staff [Colonel Ernst-Anton von Krosigk] had a conference at the headquarters of Army Group South in which the figures ‘concerning the settlement of the Jewish Question in Kamenets-Podolsk’ were discussed.”¹⁰² Additional critical evidence about his knowledge of the extermination came through the military commandant of the city, Lieutenant Colonel Josef Meiler. He recalled during his interrogation in 1959 that the general was aware of the impending action. Given these documents, we can assume with a degree of certainty that von Roques was meticulously debriefed on the massacre taking place on his operational territory.¹⁰³

Kamenets-Podolsk unleashed a chain of events of calamity-defying description. It constitutes a milestone and stepping stone in turning sporadic episodes of mass killings into an organized genocide. It marked an irretrievable transition from the so-called Judenpolitik to Vernichtungspolitik, thanks also to the implicit collaboration—or rather to the non-opposition—of the leadership of the Wehrmacht. This signified a point of no return on the road to the Final Solution.

“SPECIALIST FÜR DIE ‘ENDLÖSUNG’ IM OSTEN”

As the title of an article about Jeckeln, Richard Breitman, well sums up a man who was dedicated to his mission: “The Specialist for the ‘Final Solution’ in the East.”¹⁰⁴ Jeckeln was not an ordinary murderer. By all accounts, he was a genuinely fanatical believer in
the Nazi doctrine of mass extermination. His career in the Nazi hierarchy contains some impressive milestones. His rise through the SS ranks was meteoric. But then, he knew Hitler personally, overseeing his security details on several occasions and dining with him. We also know that he was one of Himmler’s most trusted senior officers in implementing his policies in occupied Eastern Europe. Bennet’s characterization of him as one of “the principal ‘field managers’ of the Final Solution to the Jewish problem” is an apt one. It reflects his record as one of the most ruthless, ambitious, and prolific mass killers in the history of the Third Reich.

A powerfully built man with penetrating blue eyes, he was personally responsible for ordering and organizing the deaths of more than 100,000 people by bullets. Kamenets-Podolsk was only an inaugural salvo in his career. A summary situation report from September 25, 1941, stated that Jeckeln’s men executed a staggering number of Jews, specifically 44,125 people, within a four-week span between August and September. This was followed by larger massacres in Babi Yar, Rumbula Forest in Riga, and elsewhere. Yet, during his trial in Riga in 1946, he was not even called to account about his actions in Kamenets-Podolsk. The prosecutors did not realize at the time his central role in the extermination of Hungarian Jews in the summer of 1941. During the trial, Jeckeln showed no emotion at all. His answers were clear and precise—he admitted everything put to him. On February 3, 1946, he was hung for his crimes in Riga.

Evidence of Jeckeln’s thoughts, feelings, and moral questionings of his actions, an “ego document,” never surfaced during his interrogation in Riga in 1946. Beyond the
cold facts, the trial records reveal very little about the person. But in reading Bennett’s short biography, the recollections of his court-ordered translator in his trial in Riga, and the reflections of comrades in arms in 1965, one comes away with the notion that sentimentality was not part of his psychological makeup. He was totally dedicated to the task at hand: killing the “enemies of the Third Reich.” He managed atrocity denuded of emotions and devoid of moral standards. Fritz Blaschek, a fellow SS officer, intimated during his trial that “Jeckeln was not simply obeying orders—he was personally motivated in his campaign of murder against the Jews.” When he was asked why he felt that he had to be personally present at the exterminations, Jeckeln’s exact words were: “the shooting of thousands of people . . . is always a heavy burden for the men, and the Leader must be present.” Yet, as his translator noted in a documentary, “one sensed a certain charm . . . other than that, he was a totally cold-blooded man . . . a man who had ordered people to death.”

The medical officer of his staff company summed him up best in describing him as “a genuine psychopath.”

Like many of his contemporaries in the Nazi extermination machine, his impulses and aspirations were cloaked in utter mediocrity. Among the coterie of mass murderers in the Holocaust, Jeckeln was perhaps the least educated, with only one semester at university. In another time he might have been no more substantial than a grey apparatchik in a nondescript office, if not a total failure. Yet he assumed a role as the ultimate arbiter of life and death. The Nazi party provided him with a framework, and just as it was for many of his fellow mass murderers, the victims remained mere statistics. The enduring image, painted by Hanna Arendt specifically about Eichmann as an ordinary man, doesn’t fit Jeckeln. He was far from a thoughtless functionary simply performing his duty. He proceeded quite intentionally from a set of tenaciously held Nazi beliefs. His was a consciously wrought racial “ethics,” one that pitted as an ultimate value the survival of one’s own blood against that of the Jews.

Yet, Jeckeln had to deal with his own personal insecurities, pride, and ambition. His first wife, from whom he was bitterly divorced, was half-Jewish, with an Aryan mother and a Jewish father, which might explain his visceral anti-Semitism. Then he had three children from this marriage who were categorized as *mischlinge* — a Nazi derogatory definition of partially Jewish — and who also served in the Wehrmacht. He not only had to compete with his two fellow HSSPFs for the attention and approval of Himmler, but also with the rival agencies within the multilayered security and military establishment. While he was one of the flag-bearers for murder in the occupied Soviet Union, second-string SS personnel were equally lethal in their extermination drive, even if they could not equal his numbers and ferocity. One only needs to remember the words of the first Gestapo head, Rudolf Diel, who “confided” in Martha Dodd, the daughter of the American ambassador to Berlin, William Dodd, in the mid 1930s: “everyone in the Nazi hierarchy distrusted everyone else, how Göring and Goebbels loathed each other
and spied on each other . . . ‘a vast and complicated espionage, terror, sadism and hate, from which no one, official or private, could escape.’”

It is probable that, like that of many of his fellow SS men, Jeckeln’s relationship with Himmler featured utter and unconditional subservience, with a continual need for reassurance. The dictum of Peter Longerich that Himmler gathered around him a corps of dependent personal loyalists characterizes Jeckeln well. These were officers “who committed themselves to Himmler because he offered men limited gifts, of which only ruthlessness was indispensable, unique opportunities for advancement from relative humble circumstance.”

He may have craved Himmler’s approval much like Himmler craved Hitler’s. Felix Kersten, personal physician of the powerful Reichsführer, noted in his diary that “an unfavorable comment by Hitler on one of his [Himmler’s] measures were enough to upset him thoroughly and produce violent reactions which took the form of severe stomach pains.” He diagnosed him as a divided and cowardly man, completely subservient to Hitler.

So, too, did Jeckeln clamor for the respect and approbation of his superior officer. As we have seen, there was an instantaneous spike in mass exterminations as the tangible result of Jeckeln’s meeting on August 12, 1941, with Himmler who scolded him for not being energetic enough in the business of mass murder. The Reichsführer was obviously not satisfied with Jeckeln’s progress. His communication with Himmler about the final results of the slaughter in the last days of August, then, was to demonstrate that Jeckeln “was in charge and that his ‘commando unit’ carried out the action.”

Again, if we recount his behavior during his trial in Riga, we come away with a sense that he willingly admitted everything and took responsibility for everything. He did not present excuses; in the words of his interpreter, “he was a very clear thinking man, a competent man.” The final testimony of the same interpreter might provide an apt summation of Jeckeln: “A man can be cultured, which Jeckeln wasn’t, but he can be highly cultured and still behave this way. . . . But neither culture nor education nor artistic leanings can exclude it.”

CONCLUSION TO A MASSACRE

The original record of the critical Vinnitsa meeting on August 25, 1941, clearly implied that Jeckeln would “liquidate” 11,000 bothersome Hungarian Jews. Per the recollection of one of the participants in the mass murder, Captain Hans Wiemer, Jeckeln similarly reassured the officers of the battalion on the eve of the mass murder that specifically Hungarian Jews would be the explicit target of the impending extermination. He justified this by adding that those to be killed would be future partisans and, in any case, by killing them they would also eliminate international Jewry. True to his promise, the first two days were
fully dedicated to the extermination of the Jews from Hungary and Romania. It might be reasonable to assume that the killing of thousands of local Jews was a spur-of-the-moment decision, prompted by his desire to report and take credit for the highest number of killed. But then, he was not only a prolific but also an opportunistic killer.

In searching for answers to the human dimensions of the carnage, it should not boil down, as mass murders often do, to mere statistics. This stunning number of those killed and the magnitude of the massacre does not truly reflect the lives lost or the suffering endured. However, in looking for reassurance and testimonies of survival, there is precious little that can be found. The majority of those who were able to climb out of the murder pits under the cloak of darkness were hunted down by patrols of Reserve Police Battalion 320. But a few struggling survivors, among them a twelve-year-old boy, would tell their heartrending tales to local Jewish communities.

Friday, August 29, 1941, was the final day of the carnage. As the sun slowly set over the killing fields of Kamenets-Podolsk, thirty-two dazed survivors huddled together amid the eerie sounds and cries of the many who were still alive in the mass graves. Among those who survived by pretending to be Christians was twelve-year-old Albert Fein and his family. They were among the few who were saved by ingenuity, quick thinking, a quirk of fate, and a policeman from Reserve Police Battalion 320. The Fein family was pulled away from the mass grave after a brief, inconclusive inspection by Jeckeln himself, and their escape spoke to the notion that survival in the Holocaust was utterly unpredictable, and often due to sheer luck as much as to deft thinking. The policeman leading them through the cordon, after being ordered by Jeckeln to “take them back,” curtly deflected any challenge by claiming, “The General says to take them back.” He instructed the family to sit on the side of the field for the entire afternoon, without a reassurance of whether they would be spared or not. Soon they were joined by a dozen Jews from Gheorgheni (Gyergyószentmiklós) in northern Transylvania and others, all claiming to be Christians. As Albert Fein exclaimed in his interview about their escape, “miracles can happen.” “We were sitting there and waiting. There [were] people coming, you know, asking us, ‘What, you are sitting here? If this is the case, we are not Jews. We are not Jews either,’ and they sit, sit down beside us. This way we had thirty-two people. . . . They came from Gheorgheni . . . the General was on — there was a plane — a small plane — he left. So, the whole command was in this person, this soldier’s hand, and he says, ‘I will take you back to the barracks. . . . I will take you back to the barracks.’ And he took us back. First of all, we were all hungry like dogs. [We] didn’t eat the whole day, so he brought for us from the kitchen food. He brought food and he gave his name; his name was Josef Swintek. And he says he has been from Berlin.”

It is tempting to ask if Josef Swintek really believed that those thirty-two people were non-Jews. While it might seem almost inconceivable, we want to believe that he knew that these were Jews yet wanted to save them. In reading the Operational Situation
Report by Jeckeln, though, it was clear that the perpetrator of the massacre did not entertain such a question. One recurring scene in the eyewitness accounts is that of the victims jumping or the children being flung into the mass graves alive. By doing this, they may have been expressing a fear of death, but they also denied the murderer the right to kill. It allowed the victim to control his or her own fate. Again, one cannot escape the question as to what motivated my older uncle, Karczi, to jump into the mass grave alive. Was it fear or, perhaps, defiance of the executioner? After all, many exercised this last act. As we mentioned earlier, a Soviet forensic medical commission’s findings from 1944 support this based on a record from the village of Plebanowka in the Tarnopol region, not far from Kamenets-Podolsk. Upon opening the mass graves, it found that “thirty-five percent of the victims were shot dead on the spot. Fifty percent of the people were injured, and fifteen percent were buried alive.”

Upon recapturing Kamenets-Podolsk in the spring of 1944 and opening several mass graves from the 1941 and 1942 massacres, Soviet authorities conducted painstaking investigations with graphic reconstruction of the victims’ final moments. As we peruse the pages of testimonies of the simple Ukrainians who were forced by the Germans to cover and recover the mass graves in 1941, and the same individuals who were also present at the opening of the mass graves in 1944, it becomes obvious that the human imagination has limitations in comprehending mass extermination. Nikolai Tupenko, a Ukrainian Christian who was taken at gunpoint with his coworkers to one of the murder pits to bury the victims, described his experience in grisly yet touching details during his testimony to the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission on May 19, 1944:

In August 1941 executioners came to our brewery, where I was a worker, and selected 14 people, including me, to cover the graves. They took us at gunpoint. The people from Hungary were shot at the former Polish cemetery. They forced us into a ditch, where we were guarded until all the Hungarians [Hungarian Jews] were taken to the grave. I did not see the shooting... but only heard the sound of shots from automatic rifles. After the shooting was over, we were taken to the pit where the Hungarians were killed and ordered to bury them. I saw a terrible picture, which became permanently engraved in my memory—this was the work of the brutal fascists. Some people in the grave were still alive. The image of a Hungarian girl about 14 years old was especially imprinted [in my mind], she was lying in the grave although she was still alive. A middle-aged man, also still alive, was lying above her. We were told to take away some of the earth and to step aside. Germans from the killing unit dragged them [out of the grave], shot them, and threw them back into the grave. The middle-aged man was still able to raise his head; he begged to be killed and not be buried alive. I was not conscious of throwing earth on top of them. If any of us stopped out of
shock at what was happening, he was beaten with a rifle butt to hurry and cover the grave now filled with people. When we finished covering the grave, in some places the earth over the grave heaved. Apparently, there were people still alive, who were being suffocated or suffering death throes. After we were sent away, three [more] graves were filled solely with [the bodies] of Hungarians.\textsuperscript{121}

The eyewitness accounts of opening the same graves indicate the enormity of the suffering of the victims in their final moments. Standing in front of one of the murder sites of Hungarian Jews in 1944 for whom “there was nobody to cry,” a member of the investigative committee saw “a mother so tightly pressing her child against her breast, that they are not separated from each other even after the final moment. . . . Here the bodies of an entire family: father, mother, three children” and “the corpse of a little boy, buried alive, thrown alive into the pit with the dead. This can be seen by the pose as his little hands were cupping his head, his knees brought up to his chin, his back bent as he tried to lift the weight on top of him.”\textsuperscript{122}

One cannot find a better elegy for those who were murdered at Kamenets-Podolsk than the testimony of another Ukrainian who was forced, like Nikolai Tupenko, to come to the grave site in the middle of the carnage: “I, an old man, was taken with a shovel close to the pits where the Hungarians were being shot. I trembled when I realized that now I have to fill the hole. . . . I particularly remember a woman with a child in her arm, pressing the child close to her heart, afraid of parting with him. But a German came up to her and snatched the child, throwing him like a ball in a great arc into the pit. The woman, covering her face with her hands, jumped after the child alive.”\textsuperscript{123}

The recollection of this unwitting participant, and in some way a victim himself, might be a fitting commemoration of the 23,600 Jews killed in the summer of 1941. The carnage in Kamenets-Podolsk cannot be viewed as single atrocity with its own rationale, but as part of a far greater tragedy that would play out in the ensuing years. With the backdrop of war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, the specter of this massacre stands out as a landmark on the road to total annihilation. Perhaps the most eloquent yet concise summation of this event belongs to the German historian Dieter Pohl who named it the “turning point in the Final Solution.”\textsuperscript{124}

The influx of Hungarian Jews and their consequent murder was a defining moment on two levels: an integral component of the unfolding Holocaust and, simultaneously, a spark and catalyst for follow-up bloodbaths. This is not to say that it precipitated the wave of annihilation engulfing Eastern Europe. The plans and actions for that were already in motion in Berlin and, consequently, by the combined forces of the Wehrmacht and a multitude of killing units. Rather, it validated and intensified the process, showing that murder on a gigantic scale was feasible and, at the same time, pointing toward larger massacres and human tragedies to come in Galicia and the East.