

RESOURCES ON THE GERMAN MILITARY AND THE HOLOCAUST

CASE STUDY: Army Group Center (Rear)

On June 22, 1941, three German Army Groups invaded the Soviet Union. Behind each Army Group's front-line combat zone, a special rear area headquarters, called the Army Group Rear Area, controlled a large area of occupied territory. Operating in the Army Group Rear Areas were special formations, including police battalions, security divisions, and Einsatzgruppen, which carried out mass killings of perceived racial, political, and military enemies. In Army Group Center (Rear) in eastern Belarus, these special formations and the German military established and liquidated 101 ghettos between June 1941 and spring 1942.

Partisans in Belarus

In past wars, the German Army had developed a profound, even inflated fear of partisans. During the Franco-Prussian War and World War I, its field officers, with full support of the commanding officers, responded brutally to any real or perceived disorder behind the lines. On July 3, 1941, Soviet leader Josef Stalin called upon Soviet citizens to rise up and fight the Germans, proclaiming:

Partisan units, mounted and on foot, must be formed in the area occupied by the enemy; diversionary groups must be activated to combat enemy forces, to foment partisan warfare everywhere, to blow up bridges and roads, to damage telephone and telegraph lines, and to set fire to forests, stores, and transport. Conditions in the occupied regions must be made unbearable for the enemy and all of his accomplices. They must be hounded and annihilated at every step, and all their measures must be frustrated.¹



Men suspected of partisan activity sit on the ground awaiting their execution by firing squad in the Soviet Union during September 1941. German army soldiers and officers are visible in the background.
Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-212-0221-04

On July 16, Hitler responded, “the Russians have now ordered partisan warfare behind our front. This partisan war again has some advantage for us; it enables us to eradicate everyone who opposes us.” Hitler explicitly called for “shooting anyone who even looks askance at us.”²

In reality, there was little partisan organization or activity in 1941. Large groups of dispersed or bypassed Red Army soldiers remained at large in the countryside and some formed armed

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¹ Quoted in Leonid D. Grenkevich and David M. Glantz, *The Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941–1944: A Critical Historiographical Analysis* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999), 75.

² Quoted in Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 60.

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CASE STUDY: Army Group Center (Rear) (continued)

groups to attack German infrastructure and units. No significant partisan movement developed in Belarus until 1942–43 when partisan activity emerged partly in response to the brutal German occupation policies. Nevertheless, German soldiers and SS-police killed tens of thousands of unarmed civilians and disarmed soldiers, justifying the slaughter by referring to an essentially invented partisan danger. From June 1941 until May 1942, Army Group Center (Rear) reported 80,000 “partisan” deaths and 1,094 German losses.

The Mogilev Conference: “The Jew is a partisan and the partisan is a Jew.”

This slogan was the main focus of the September 1941 Mogilev Conference on “combating partisans” initiated by General Max von Schenckendorff, commander of Army Group Center (Rear). Officers from various SS and police units, including the Einsatzgruppen, as well as Wehrmacht regimental commanders and an officer from each battalion participated in the conference. More than 50 percent of the participants were captains or lieutenants. The conference summary disseminated to the company level in all units of Army Group Center (Rear) contained the following statement:

The constant decision between life and death for partisans and suspicious persons is difficult even for the hardest soldier. It must be done. He acts correctly who fights ruthlessly and mercilessly with complete disregard for any personal surge of emotion.³

³ Quoted in Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 102–103.