

# A Political Economy of Death Squads: Insights and Evidence from Hitler's *Einsatzgruppen*

Jacqueline H.R. DeMeritt  
Department of Political Science  
University of North Texas

## Abstract

*Why do death squads behave as they do? Why do some targets survive while others perish? Scholars have begun to relax the assumption that one-sided (government) killing is a unilateral decision. Despite recognition that implementation is not perfect and that death squads tasked with executing civilians do not comply uniformly, theoretical and empirical progress are limited by available data. Death squads do not broadcast their activities... or do they? Leveraging regular reports by Hitler's Einsatzgruppen and focusing on agents' incentives to kill, victims' incentives to hide and citizens' incentives to shelter, I inductively develop and test a theory of how and why death squad behavior varies, both over space and over time.*

## Bastards Do The Violence

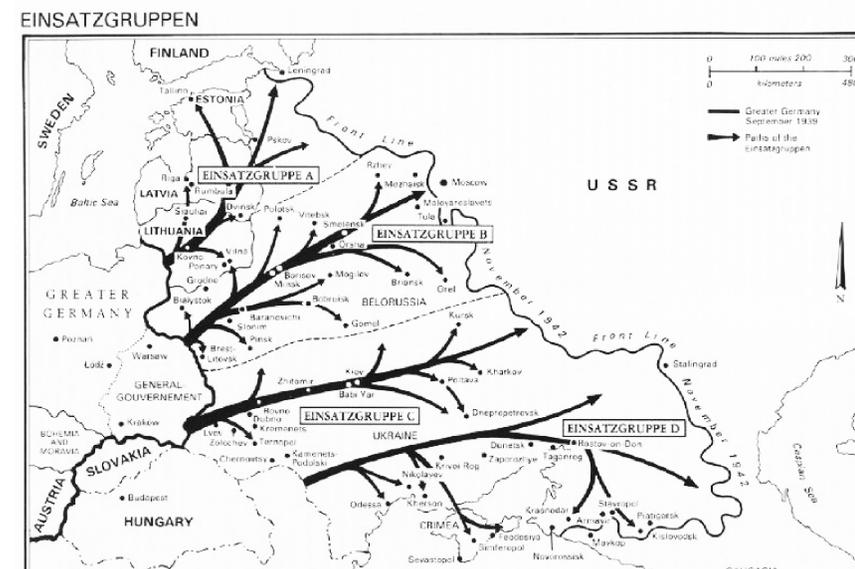
Leaders order killing in pursuit of critical political and/or military objectives. Their orders vary with a logic of appropriateness (norms), a logic of consequence (sanctions), and a logic of expectations (of perpetrator obedience). For more on this, see Dragu and Lupu's kickass working paper.

Yet **killing is a delegative process**; it occurs to the extent that perpetrators obey the leaders' order to kill. Obedience varies with the logics of appropriateness and consequences; agents follow norms and shy from sanctions – but what informs those logics? What focal mechanisms produce (non)compliance in individual perpetrators? I scour the *Einsatzgruppen Reports* to identify these mechanisms.

Also nota bene: **Victims are not passive**, and they are strategic. Given information and resources, they will seek survival in one of three ways: by leaving (forced migration), concealment without assistance (hiding), or concealment with external assistance (shielding).

## Why These Bastards?

The *Einsatzgruppen* were four paramilitary units of the Nazi Party's Schutzstaffel (SS). They were active in the Soviet Union, tasked to liquidate Russia's Jews, Romany, and officials of the Soviet state and Communist party. Between 1941 and 1944, they murdered approximately 1.5 million men, women, and children.



**Each Gruppe sent regular reports to Berlin recording its precise locations, activities, and conditions.** Many of these Operational Situation Reports survive, and are the primary source for this research.

The murderous principal is constant across Gruppens; variance in killing follows from variance in agent behavior. Studying the Einsatzgruppen Reports should **illuminate focal mechanisms that produce perpetrator (non)compliance**. Are there systematic differences between obedient compliers and disobedient noncompliers?

The Reports should also **illuminate forces that encourage forced migration, hiding, and shielding**. Are there systematic differences across the populations that survive and perish?

## Identifying Focal Mechanisms

- Characteristics of *Gruppens*
  - (Dis)similarities: region, language, socioeconomics
- Characteristics of victims
  - Group affiliations (religious, ethnic, political); socioeconomic status; health and welfare
- Timing
  - Effects on *Gruppens*:
    - \* trust; norms
  - Effects on victims :
    - \* diaspora; information flows
- Geography
  - Political geography (local complicity or opposition)
    - \* Political structures and institutions; ethnic structure(s); primary language(s); logistics (proximity to railways, major roads)
  - Physical geography
    - \* Terrain; weather

## Next Steps

1. Complete translation from German to English.
2. Code, code ... step away ... code.
3. Revise theory, derive final hypotheses.
4. Test hypotheses with appropriate methodologies and exogenous data?
5. Write, revise, revise, write.
6. See you at ISA 2017!