



Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust

By Richard Rhodes

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In *Masters of Death*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rhodes gives full weight, for the first time, to the Einsatzgruppen's role in the Holocaust. These "special task forces," organized by Heinrich Himmler to follow the German army as it advanced into eastern Poland and Russia, were the agents of the first phase of the Final Solution. They murdered more than 1.5 million men, women, and children between 1941 and 1943, often by shooting them into killing pits, as at Babi Yar.

These massive crimes have been generally overlooked or underestimated by Holocaust historians, who have focused on the gas chambers. In this painstaking account, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Rhodes profiles the eastern campaign's architects as well as its "ordinary" soldiers and policemen, and helps us understand how such men were conditioned to carry out mass murder. Marshaling a vast array of documents and the testimony of perpetrators and survivors, this book is an essential contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust and World War II.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Masters of Death is Richard Rhodes's chronological account of the Third Reich's *Einsatzgruppen* (a hand-picked task force) and its death work--the executions of 1.5 million people, Jews and non-Jews--in Russia and Eastern Europe from 1941 through 1943. Rhodes sees these operations (the victims were, almost exclusively, shot) as a ghastly prelude to the subsequent (and much more written-about) horrors of the death camps. In chilling--and occasionally excessive--detail, Rhodes describes the killings and the reasons behind the Reich's cautious, rather than precipitous, escalation of the same: the military's "concern for German and world opinion"; the need to improve methodology; and finally, the need to "condition" the troops, thereby avoiding "disabling trauma." Rhodes makes good use of firsthand accounts and outlines the effects the larger war (Pearl Harbor; the failure to defeat Britain) had on Hitler's attempted obliteration of European Jewry. His chapters on the nature of evil seem hurried and not particularly fresh. --H. O'Billovich

From Publishers Weekly

This is not for the squeamish. Rhodes, a Pulitzer winner for *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, has pulled together a mountain of research on the mass murders of Jews perpetrated by the *Einsatzgruppen* special task forces organized by the SS commanders Himmler and Heydrich before the gruesome death camps industrialized the Final Solution. The catalogue of horrors, drawn not only from postwar memoirs and interrogations but also from the Nazi fanaticism for statistical detail, is profoundly appalling, even revolting: some of the malefic perpetrators were so sickened by the slaughter that Himmler set up mental hospitals and rest camps for the insufficiently sadistic. By January 1942, when the Wannsee Conference implicitly authorized the death camps, more than a million Jews crowded the killing pits, some of them later torched to conceal the massacres. Relatively few in the Nazi command structure would pay for their crimes. John J. McCloy, U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, Rhodes reminds us, reduced 10 of 14 death sentences in U.S. war-crimes trials, and by 1958 all surviving *Einsatzgruppen* defendants had been freed. German courts were also lenient. But he also suggests that genocide is new only as a word in the dictionary: "The Final Solution...was intended to be only the first phase of a vast, megalomaniacal project of privation, enslavement, mass murder and colonization modeled on the historic colonization of North and South America and on nineteenth-century imperialism but modernized with pseudoscientific theories of eugenic restoration." Thus Rhodes holds the mirror up. 16 pages of photos and six maps not seen by PW. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rhodes (*The Making of the Atomic Bomb*) provides a detailed examination of the organization, motivations, and activities of the SS-Einsatzgruppen, which killed thousands of Jews in the wake of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. He argues that Hitler made two separate decisions to annihilate European Jewry; the first, in summer 1941, was directed at the Jews of Eastern Europe, while the second, in December 1941, involved the rest of Europe. This is a controversial assertion, as is Rhodes's foray into psychological theory. He is certainly not the first to ask why some individuals willingly engaged in mass slaughter, but he still cannot provide an entirely satisfactory causal explanation. Rhodes claims to be offering a new thesis regarding the Holocaust, but unfortunately he eschews most of the major historiographical controversies in Holocaust studies and thus fails to place his thesis in context. The advantage is that he does not clutter his text with intentionalist vs. functionalist arguments that could daunt general readers. Instead, he produces a penetrating study of the *Einsatzgruppen* one of the best available and one of the few recent works to examine this corps in detail. Although Rhodes's thesis may be rejected by specialists, his careful expos,

will be welcomed by general readers. Recommended for all libraries. Frederic Krome, Jacob Rader Marcus
Ctr. of the American Jewish Archives
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Users Review

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