

June 22, 1941: Invasion of Russia, Start of the Holocaust

On this day 77 years ago, June 22, 1941, in the biggest land battle in history, Germany invaded Russia—then known as the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa, named after a mythical Germanic warrior-king who led the Germans to victories over the Slavs in the 13th Century, opened with 4 million men attacking on an 1,800 mile long front that stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

The invasion of Russia also marked the beginning of the Nazi Holocaust, mass murder on an unprecedented scale also began that day. Following close behind the advancing troops were four special battalions, called Einsatzgruppen, and in every village, town and city overrun by the German Army, they rounded up the local Jews, took them into the countryside, made them dig their own graves, and then shot them.

Hitler had ordered planning for Barbarossa to begin in December 1940. On March 13, 1941, an order so secret only five copies were made came down from Hitler's headquarters to the Army High Command: "Directives for Special Areas" informed the German generals that in this upcoming war in Russia, the SS would be carrying out "special tasks" that the Army would have no control over and was not to interfere with. In April and May, SS Gruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich began assembling the four Einsatzgruppen units, tempting men to volunteer for this duty with extra pay and extended home leave.

Once in action, the Einsatzgruppen set about their task with zeal. On September 29–30, 1941, Einsatzgruppen C murdered 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar in Ukraine—the two bloodiest days of the Holocaust. So many people were buried in shallow graves that in the months that followed the gases produced by their deterioration cause geysers to come spurting out of the ground, as if the earth itself were rejecting all these deaths. SS Colonel Paul Blobel, who had been in command of the operation, observed, while passing by this hideous spectacle, "That is where my Jews are buried." In 1951 Blobel was hanged by the American occupation forces in Germany. His last words were, "I die in the faith of my people."

By the end of 1941 Einsatzgruppen A reported that it had killed 250,000 Jews; Einsatzgruppen B 45,000; Einsatzgruppen C 95,000, and Einsatzgruppen D, 92,000.

Hitler's war in Russia took the lives of between 20 million and 27 million Russians. It also proved his undoing. By attacking Russia he had started a fight he

could not finish. Four years later the shattered remnants of the Wehrmacht were defending Berlin, which was being destroyed house by house by the invading Red Army. For the Jews of Europe, June 22, 1941 was the beginning of a nightmare that led to Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Treblinka, and Sobibor, and 6 million dead. We must remember, for if we don't, we invite these horrors to be repeated.