

Christina Winkler

## “2,000 Jews Have Registered So Far” Historiography and the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don

Rostov-on-Don is known for being the site of the largest massacre during the Holocaust in contemporary Russia and witnessed the annihilation of Soviet Russia's third-largest pre-war Jewish community within only a few days. It is considered the Russian Babi Yar by some Russian historians. Yet, outside of Russia, the city's tragic past is hardly known. In August 1942, a massacre was committed here by *Sonderkommando 10a* of *Einsatzgruppe D*. The numbers of victims of the mass atrocity diverge in the literature, in some cases considerably. A conservative estimate is that 15,000–18,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered within only three days on the outskirts of Rostov, near the Zmievska colony. Some scholars speak of even higher victim numbers. Nevertheless, the atrocity has not received much scholarly attention. The events in Rostov are but one example of the escalation that Hitler's *Judenpolitik* had undergone between the beginning of 'Operation Barbarossa' on 22 June 1941 and the summer of 1942. It illustrates that it is vital to bring together all existing sources, including perpetrator documents, records of post-war trials, as well as Soviet files, because a one-sided focus on perpetrator documents in previous Western studies on Rostov does not allow for a full understanding of the scale and the course of events, as this article aims to demonstrate.

Russian regional archives such as the State Archive of Rostov Oblast, the Rostov Province, and the Centre for Recent History of Rostov Oblast hold files produced by the city's Soviet Extraordinary State Commissions, including eyewitness testimonies, which cannot be found elsewhere. In 1942, this Extraordinary State Commission for Discovering and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German–Fascist Invaders and Their Accomplices (Extraordinary Commission, Чрезвычайная Государственная Комиссия, or ChGK) was established. Around 32,000 public representatives gathered evidence from all over the occupied parts of the Soviet Union by interviewing witnesses whose testimonies were then used for reports on the damage caused in a liberated town or region. In addition, about seven million Soviet citizens collected and prepared documents for the ChGK. The overall material consists of about 54,000 witness statements and some 250,000 interrogation protocols. About four million reports on the damage caused by the Nazis were compiled, based on these testimonies, although only 27 reports were published in English and Russian between 1943 and 1945.<sup>1</sup> The ChGK documents stored in the State Archive of Rostov Oblast contain essential information regarding the course of events, and they are particularly important if, as in this case, perpetrator sources are hardly in evidence. Apart from *Einsatzgruppen* Report no. 16 of *Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten* (*Reports of the Occupied Eastern Territories*), no documentary evidence of the perpetrators is extant regarding Rostov. However, all stages of this particular mass atrocity were covered in accounts which were collected by the Soviet

<sup>1</sup> Marina A. Sorokina, *People and Procedures. Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR*, in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6 (2005) 4, 801.

Extraordinary Commission as well as by West German authorities from civilian observers, perpetrators, and their local collaborators.

It has proven difficult to determine the number of Jewish victims of the Zmievs-kaya Balka mass atrocity. From the author's point of view, this can mainly be explained by the deviating numbers we find in the Extraordinary Commission's report and the aforementioned Report no. 16 of *Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten*. While the latter does not provide us with any victim numbers, the figures stated in the Soviet Extraordinary Commission's reports range from 10,000<sup>2</sup> to 13,000,<sup>3</sup> 15,000-18,000,<sup>4</sup> and even 27,000<sup>5</sup>. The first two refer explicitly to Jewish victims, whereas the last speaks of "people" or "civilians", the common Soviet paraphrase used to disguise the victims' ethnicity. A statement as to the exact scale of the crime is thus hardly possible unless the final registration lists were found. Report no.16 speaks of a *Judenrat*, which had been established on 1 August 1942, and of about 2,000 Jews who had complied with the registration order when the report was written. However, it is unclear when exactly the original report of *Sonderkommando 10a* or one of its subunits was compiled, upon which Report no.16 is based. These initial reports went through several stages and respective editing before they were sent to Berlin. Generally speaking, the

"*Sonderkommandos* and *Einsatzkommandos* reported on their extermination activities to their respective *Einsatzgruppe* headquarters which sent the information to Berlin. There the RSHA [Reichssicherheitshauptamt] compiled concise reports in the name of the Chief of Sipo [Sicherheitspolizei] and the SD."<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, the initial reports were edited by the *Sonderkommando* leaders who drafted more extensive reports based on the various incoming initial reports. These more substantial documents were then sent to the *Einsatzgruppen* headquarters and edited once more by the chiefs of the *Einsatzgruppen* before being sent to the RSHA. There, they were eventually used for final reports that documented the operations of all four *Einsatzgruppen*.<sup>7</sup> In other words, "the reports to this point were the result of several steps in a series in which a number of people – the men carrying out the operations, their leaders, various officials in the *Kommandos*, and those on the staff of the *Einsatzgruppen* headquarters – all came to bear on the content of the reports".<sup>8</sup>

The *Einsatzgruppen* reports were marked *Geheime Reichssache* and were therefore subject to the highest security level.<sup>9</sup> Report no.16 is a clipped RSHA report compiled in Berlin and dated 14 August 1942, two days after the mass killings in Rostov had ended. Two aspects seem problematic when trying to determine whether the

2 Gosudarstvennyi Archiv Rostovskoj Oblasti (GARO), fond 3613, opis'1, delo 30, 'Akt no. 1231', list 10; in the trial against collaborators of *Sonderkommando 10a* conducted by Es'kov, Psarev, Skripkin, Veikh et al in Krasnodar in 1963, the number of victims of the mass execution named by the court was 10,000; see M. Andriasov, 'Palachi derzhat otvet', Molot (24 October 1963).

3 GARO, fond 3613, opis' 1, delo 2, 'Dokladnaya zapiska', list 4ob.

4 GARO, fond 3613, opis' 1, delo 25, 'Akt', list 14. GARO, fond 3613, opis' 1, delo 30, 'Akt no. 1' list 1ob., 2.

5 GARO, fond 3613, opis'1, delo 30, 'Akt no. 1231', list 10.

6 Ytzhak Arad/Shmuel Krakowski/Shmuel Spector (ed.), *The Einsatzgruppen. Reports Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign against the Jews in Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union July 1941–January 1943*, New York 1989, xiii; see also Raul Hilberg, *Die Quellen des Holocaust entschlüsseln und interpretieren*, Frankfurt am Main 2002, 66.

7 Ronald Headland, *Messages of Murder. A Study of the Reports of the Security Police and the Security Service, 1941–1943*, London 1992, 39.

8 Ibid.

9 Hilberg, *Die Quellen des Holocaust*, 71.

document could be interpreted as a reliable source regarding the victim numbers, as has been done by Aleksandr Kruglov, Andrej Angrick, and Dieter Pohl.<sup>10</sup> First of all, Report no. 16 indicates that the registration process had not yet been finalised when the initial report was compiled. The relevant passage in the document reads as follows: “On 1 August 1942, a Jewish *Ältestenrat* was constituted by the *Sonderkommando* which is deployed in Rostov and 2000 Jews have been registered so far. Further necessary measures have been taken.”<sup>11</sup> Bearing in mind the aforementioned compilation process, this could not have been stated on 14 August 1942. We must therefore assume that the author of the initial report that was used as the basis for Report no. 16 described activities that took place before the annihilation of Rostov’s Jewish population and that a concluding document from *Sonderkommando 10a* about its extermination activities in Rostov was either never compiled, went missing, or was destroyed. The historian Ronald Headland points out that “[t]here was a time lapse between the events and their appearance in the reports”.<sup>12</sup> These lapses were small in the first reports, yet “greater distances, plus the ever-increasing amount of information sent to Berlin made even greater the time lapse between the events and the final reports”. Two or more weeks could have passed between an event and its reference in a report, Headland concludes.<sup>13</sup>

The *Einsatzgruppen* were instructed by Reichsführer SS Reinhard Heydrich to give continuous, detailed reports about their operations. This usually included exact information on executions and the number of people killed. The reports were at first cabled to Berlin. From late summer of 1941 however, the documents were sent to the Zentrale Nachrichtenübermittlungsstelle situated at the Reichssicherheitshauptamt by courier, therefore it is possible that the documents were either lost or destroyed.<sup>14</sup> Andrej Angrick commented that the loss of documents marked *Geheime Reichs-sache* is “immense”.<sup>15</sup> Another possibility, however, is that an initial report by *Sonderkommando 10a* that included information about the mass execution was never compiled, and could consequently not form part of Report no. 16, as suggested by Gert Robel.<sup>16</sup> In this context, Roman Headland points to the discrepancy in the representation of the four *Einsatzgruppen* in the Operational Situation reports, particularly staggering for *Einsatzgruppe D*, which received the least representation according to his findings.<sup>17</sup> This might be explained by the fact that the “Kommandos often filed separate reports directly to the RSHA, and these reports appeared frequently on their own, independently of other reports from their *Einsatzgruppe*”.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunate-

10 Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord. Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941–1943*, Hamburg 2003, 561–565; Aleksandr Kruglov, *O nekotorykh spornykh momentakh Kholokosta v Rostove-na-Donu* [On some controversial aspects of the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don], *Istoriya Kholokosta na Severnom Kavkaze i sud’by evreyskoi intelligentsii v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny, Materialy 7-i Mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii „Uroki Kholokosta i sovremennaya Rossiya“*, Moscow 2013, 47; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944*, Munich 2009, 277.

11 *Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten*, no. 16, BAL, R 58/698, 144 [Translation by the author].

12 Headland, *Messages of Murder*, 55.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Bert Hoppe/Hildrun Glass, *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, Volume 7, *Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten I. Besetzte sowjetische Gebiete unter deutscher Militärverwaltung, Baltikum und Transnistrien*, Munich 2011, 89, 146; see also Headland, *Messages of Murder*, 40.

15 Andrej Angrick/Klaus-Michael Mallmann/Jürgen Matthäus/Martin Cüppers (ed.), *Deutsche Besatzungsherrschaft in der UdSSR 1941–1945. Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion*, Darmstadt 2013, 18.

16 Gert Robel, *Sowjetunion*, in: Wolfgang Benz, *Dimension des Völkermords. Die Zahl der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*, Munich 1991, 499–500.

17 Headland, *Messages of Murder*, 94–95.

18 *Ibid.*

ly, so far no relevant report which refers to the mass atrocity in Rostov could be traced. Another aspect which might also be very important in terms of the informative value of Report no. 16 concerns the methods of reporting: on the *Kommando* level, *Einsatzgruppe D* produced less informative reports compared to the other *Einsatzgruppen*. Especially the information on killing activities were often imprecise regarding the dates of shootings. More importantly, in terms of the victim numbers, Roman Headland states that “relatively little can be learned about numbers for individual *Kommandos* of this *Einsatzgruppe*”.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, the *Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten*, which replaced the *Ereignismeldungen UdSSR* from 1 May 1942, were compiled on a weekly basis, unlike the preceding *Ereignismeldungen UdSSR* that appeared almost every day.<sup>20</sup> According to Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, the *Meldungen* were more general and hardly offered details about the annihilation of Jews.<sup>21</sup> Wilhelm adds that reports from the *Einsatzgruppen* would not reach the Zentrale Nachrichtenübermittlungsstelle on a daily basis, as with the military intelligence corps, but within days. Furthermore, the radio stations that finally cabled the reports to Berlin had often first left them unhandled for a very long time.<sup>22</sup> The difficult task for the editors of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt then was to put the incoming reports into chronological order, occasionally failing to do so. Given the fact that Report no. 16 from 14 August 1942 informs about the 2,000 Jews that had been registered “so far” – meaning when the original report was compiled in the first days of August – Headland’s suggestion is probably correct that there was some time-lag between the two documents. It is likely that Report no. 16 would have mentioned a mass execution of this scale, had it already taken place.

In summary, we can assume that Report no. 16 is not relevant when trying to determine the number of victims of the mass executions in Rostov on 11 and 12 August 1942. Even if the number is mentioned in the war crimes indictment against Kurt Trimborn et al and the testimony of a former member of *Sonderkommando 10a* draws this connection, we cannot assume that because 2,000 Jews had been registered, this was also the number of people who were executed.<sup>23</sup> We therefore need to depend on the Soviet documents when trying to determine the scale of the crime. Here, however, we are confronted with yet another problem: Due to the Soviet policy of concealing the victims’ ethnicity, the Extraordinary Commissions’ relevant reports often do not indicate whether the victims were Jewish. Some examples nevertheless confirm Karel Berkhoff’s and Kiril Feferman’s findings on occasional deviations of the ban on addressing the Jewishness of victims in reports by the Soviet Extraordinary Commission as well as Soviet media responses to the Holocaust. Feferman mentions several examples of the commission investigators even being asked to confirm that the Nazis’ victims were Jews and not representatives of other nations, as in a Smolensk investigation. More frequently, questions about the de-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Arad/Krakowski/Spector, *The Einsatzgruppen Reports*, xv.

<sup>21</sup> Helmut Krausnick/Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, 1938–1942*, Stuttgart 1981, 336.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> USHMM, 14.101 M, B 162/1.263, 27, Indictment against H. Görz, F. Severin and K. Trimborn. In his testimony from 20 March 1967, Werner Spiegelberg mentions having been informed about Ereignismeldung no. 16 from 14 August 1942, according to which about 2,000 Jews had been executed in Rostov; see USHMM, 14.101 M, B 162/1.230, 3843; see also Werner Spiegelberg’s earlier testimony from 4 November 1964, USHMM, 14.101 M, B 162/1.224, 2300.

struction of the Jewish population were posed.<sup>24</sup> When trying to determine the number of victims we can therefore only refer to documents which clearly indicate that the civilians were indeed Jews. In the case of Rostov, two documents illustrate this quite well: An undated report entitled *Record. Atrocities of the German Fascist Cannibals in the City of Rostov-on-Don* contains information on the collection, deportation, and finally annihilation of 15,000–18,000 “peaceful citizens” of Rostov. The document lists the names of some of the persons who were among the victims:

“According to incomplete specifications, the German tormentors shot and poisoned 15,000–18,000 people. Among those who were shot are the department head of the Soviet hospital no. 2, lecturer KIRSHMAN, internist INGAL, jurist LUTSKII, deputy director of the Voroshilov factory BUNKOV and his wife, lecturer NOVIKOV, his seventy-year-old mother, his wife, and his eight-year-old son, medical doctor SHERSHEVSKAYA, nurse SIMONOVICH, wood turner PAVLOVSKAYA, and others.”<sup>25</sup>

In the other document, entitled *Record No. 1*, which was produced only three days after the city’s liberation and is identical to the first regarding contents, we find the same list of names, augmented by the victims’ age and full name, but in this case the preceding passage reads as follows: “According to preliminary specifications, the number of Jews who were shot, poisoned, tortured to death, and annihilated in Rostov-on-Don between 23 July 1942 and 13 February 1943 adds up to 15,000–18,000 people.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout this file, we find the word ‘Jew’, whereas the first lacks any such information.

In conclusion, it is hardly possible to verify the exact number of Jews who lost their lives in the mass atrocity committed in the Zmievka ravine by members of *Sonderkommando 10a*. What we can conclude, however, based on inspections of the crime scene, the estimates of the number of Jewish inhabitants including refugee, in Rostov in July of 1942, and the eyewitness testimonies that served as the basis for ChGK reports, is that at least 15,000–18,000 Jews were murdered. Bearing in mind that their non-Jewish spouses were killed together with them, of the 27,000 overall victims calculated by the ChGK the majority were victims of the Holocaust. All in all, the author therefore agrees with Luck’s conclusion regarding the mass atrocity in Rostov: “If, in short, eyewitnesses report a vast killing of Jews at Rostov or anywhere else in occupied Russia, then there is no objective reason for assuming that it did not occur.”<sup>27</sup>

24 Karel C. Berkhoff, Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population. The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941–45, in: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10 (2009) 1, 61-105; Kiril Feferman, Soviet Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR. Documenting the Holocaust, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 5 (2003), 4, 591.

25 GARO, fond 3613, opis’ 1, delo 25, list 14.

26 GARO, fond 3613, opis’ 1, delo 30, list 1ob., 2.

27 David Luck, Use and Abuse of Holocaust Documents. Reitlinger and „How many?“, in: *Jewish Social Studies*, 41, (1979), 2, 105-106.

Christina Winkler  
Historian, University of Leicester  
[cw229@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:cw229@leicester.ac.uk)

Quotation: Christina Winkler, "2000 Jews Have Registered So Far". *Historiography and the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don*, in: *S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods, Documentation* 3 (2016) 2, 103-108.

[http://simon.vwi.ac.at/images/Documents/Essays/2016-2/2016-2\\_ESS\\_Winkler/ESS\\_Winkler02.pdf](http://simon.vwi.ac.at/images/Documents/Essays/2016-2/2016-2_ESS_Winkler/ESS_Winkler02.pdf)

Essay

Copy Editor: Tim Corbett

**S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.**  
ISSN 2408-9192

Board of Editors of VWI's International Academic Advisory Board:  
Gustavo Corni/Dieter Pohl/Irina Sherbakova

Editors: Éva Kovács/Béla Rásky  
Web-Editor: Sandro Fasching  
Webmaster: Bálint Kovács  
Layout of PDF: Hans Ljung

S:I.M.O.N. ist das unregelmäßig in englischer oder deutscher Sprache erscheinende E-Journal des Wiener Wiesenthal Instituts für Holocaust-Studien (VWI).