

# “Plans from Hell”: Ethical Implications of the Third Reich’s Vision for War in the East

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*In any case, Western norms did not apply on the Eastern Front; the norm there was lawlessness.*

—Frank Ellis, *Barbarossa 1941: Reframing Hitler’s Invasion of Stalin’s Soviet Empire*

*For Hitler, “conventional strategy” was inseparably intertwined with racial ideology.  
Strategy for Hitler was the grand strategy of race struggle.*

—Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*

*Let there never come a time when we must cast about and ask how it ever came to this.*

—Thomas Childers, *The Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*

## Purpose and Scope

This paper supports the 2019 Fort Leavenworth Ethics Symposium by examining the ethical implications of prosecuting large-scale combat operations in an historical context. By definition, these operations will almost certainly affect civilians and non-combatants in a complex and ambiguous environment, potentially resulting in not only casualties but also internally displaced persons, refugees or a combination of phenomena. At worst, combat operations, if conducted by nations that have little regard for international norms, can include heinous disregard for human populations, resulting in mass atrocities or even genocide. Such was the case with the subject of this paper—the Third Reich—in its prosecution of the Eastern Front during the Second World War. This paper broadly addresses two themes proposed by the Ethics Symposium announcement and call for papers—the ethical considerations with regard to territory and ownership in large-scale conflict, and when did things start to go wrong ethically in an historic case of genocide—in this case the Nazi extermination of European Jewry.

To focus on these themes this paper addresses multiple issues associated with the Third Reich’s planning and prosecution of its operations on the Eastern Front, specifically in conjunction with Operation Barbarossa—the Wehrmacht’s (German armed forces) invasion of Russia and its aftermath. One of this paper’s central arguments is that one cannot understand the nature of Germany’s “war of annihilation” against Russia simply by examining the war plan directives for Barbarossa; one has to look at its intellectual underpinnings as well as the ethical implications of associated “plans from Hell” (my words)—including *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan East) and the so-called “Hunger Plan.” Interestingly, these were the products not of military planners per se, but of civilian intellectuals associated with the ministries of the notorious Reich bureaucracies. While U.S. Army Command and General Staff College students have been exposed to Operation Barbarossa as part of the history curriculum (H111—“Blitzkrieg, 1939-41”), the lesson focused on conventional military operations, without substantive reference to the issues discussed

in this paper. To understand how the Eastern Front devolved into a war of annihilation between two archenemies requires an understanding of the intellectual context, along with its ethical implications, behind the military planning. This supports the first general theme of the Ethics Symposium concerning the ethics of territory and ownership associated with large-scale combat operations. In the case of Nazi Germany, historian Adam Tooze characterizes the war on the Eastern Front in this way: “The German invasion of the Soviet Union is far better understood as the last great land-grab in the long and bloody history of European colonialism.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this land-grab had devastating ethical and moral implications, as will be seen later in this paper.

A second issue of the symposium—when did things start to go wrong ethically in historic cases of genocide—is a sub-theme of this paper as well. Indeed, in the case of Germany’s Third Reich some might argue that “things went wrong” immediately upon Adolf Hitler’s assumption of the Chancellorship of Germany on January 30, 1933. While one could argue that date or just about any thereafter in which Hitler took a substantive step towards achieving his “Thousand Year Reich” and its genocidal elimination of the Jews, the question more often is couched in terms of the initiation of “Final Solution” and by extension, the Holocaust—when was the order (if any) given and by whom? Can the Holocaust decision be pinned down to a single date, or was it based on a series of implementing incidents without a central, overarching decision? While these questions have puzzled historians for decades, there can be no doubt that the Nazi genocide of European Jews certainly accelerated during the period of time examined in this paper—from the summer of 1941 to the winter of 1942—and played a defining role in the war of annihilation on the Eastern Front. This paper argues that the “Final Solution” is intrinsically linked to Nazi plans for the war with Russia, even if it did not assume a primary role at the onset.

Aside from these two central themes—the ethical implications of German planning for Operation Barbarossa and the campaign’s relationship to the Holocaust—this paper touches on a number of other important topics. These include the nature of decision-making within the Nazi hierarchy and Hitler’s personal leadership style; the worldviews of key Reich leaders and how they influenced subsequent planning; the relationship between planning and the progress of war on the Eastern Front; and the role of the German Army and the post-war myth of the “blameless Wehrmacht.” While this agenda may seem overly ambitious for a relatively short paper, its intent is to introduce students to a broad range of themes that may spark interest for future inquiry. The paper also reflects some of the recent research on these topics by a number of scholars based on new evidence and interpretations, which will no doubt continue as new generations of scholars, as well as the general public, continue to examine this crucial period in modern European history.

### **Vision Statements—The Basis for Reich Planning**

A review of Hitler’s top-secret Directive No. 21, Operation Barbarossa, dated December 18, 1940,<sup>2</sup> reveals something of the time, space and purpose of what was to be the opening round in a war of annihilation, the largest in military history, between two archenemies. According to Hitler and his top military advisors in the Wehrmacht High Command, as well as in the Army (Heeres), the war was meant to “crush Soviet Russia in a rapid campaign.”<sup>3</sup> Its space was immense, ranging from the Baltic to the Black Sea, or from the Volga River to Archangel. In terms of time, Reich military planners saw the war with Russia lasting no more than just a few months. Hitler’s directive was largely conventional in its approach, however, belying little of the brutal, horrific, and no-holds barred approach characterizing the nature of the war to come, as described by noted historian Timothy Snyder:

The engagement of the Wehrmacht (and its allies) with the Red Army killed more than ten million soldiers, not to speak of the comparable number of civilians who died in flight, under bombs, or of hunger and disease as a result of the war on the eastern front. During this eastern

war, the Germans also deliberately murdered some ten million people, including more than five million Jews and more than three million prisoners of war.<sup>4</sup>

So how did the war devolve into the maelstrom above? The directive for Operation Barbarossa solely provided guidance for the three primary branches of service in the Wehrmacht—with the Army as the main effort and the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) and Kriegsmarine (Navy) in supporting roles. There is no mention, even in abstract terms, of the elimination of civilians, prisoners of war, or Eastern European Jewry. The Eastern Front, then, was one of the most brutal, unethical and immoral prosecutions of combat operations in modern history, yet this is not revealed in the conventional war plans for Operation Barbarossa. How do we reconcile this difference?

The basic answer is that it is impossible to understand the brutality of Germany's prosecution of the war on the Eastern Front by examining conventional military plans only. It must be seen contextually as a result of the intermingling of multiple plans across different elements of the Reich bureaucracy, some much more sinister in their ethical implications than the military ones.

Before an examination of these non-military plans, it is first necessary to examine their intellectual and ideological underpinnings, and for that one must look first at the role of Adolf Hitler, the *sine qua non* of the Third Reich and its war of annihilation against Russia. As supreme leader of Germany and head of the National Socialist German Workers Party, Hitler was remarkably consistent in maintaining his worldview; indeed, its major tenets have been thoroughly documented by his biographers and countless historians over the years. Hitler himself laid down his manifesto in two volumes of *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"), which provided the philosophical basis for many of his actions once in power. Written both during and after a prison term Hitler served following a failed coup attempt, *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925-1926, was replete with his notions of what was wrong with the world and recommendations for how to fix it.

Hitler's worldview contained a number of seminal concepts, many of which provide the context for understanding the nature of war on the Eastern Front, and by extension the German plans preceding it. Certainly one of those views was acquiring new territory for the German state. *Lebensraum*, or living space, was not an idea originated by Hitler, but an existing theory that fit his developing worldview. Thomas Weber, author of the 2017 biography *Becoming Hitler*, notes the following:

...he [Hitler] was attracted by *Lebensraum* because it gave a name to something he had been thinking about as he was attempting to find a new answer to Germany's security dilemma: namely, that states had to have sufficient territory to be able to feed their population, to prevent emigration, and to be sufficiently strong vis-à-vis other states.<sup>5</sup>

Hitler, well before he assumed the chancellorship in 1933, thus determined that Germany's future lie in the East and that she "would have to acquire, colonize, and subjugate new territory there so as to become the hegemon of the Eurasian landmass and thus be safe for all time."<sup>6</sup> There are multiple references in *Mein Kampf* to this theme of *Lebensraum* and the colonial-style subjugation of the East. An example is the following: "If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only *Russia* and her vassal border states."<sup>7</sup> Conquering Russia was therefore an integral concept within Hitler's vision to secure Germany's future on a hostile European continent.

Other prominent features of Hitler's worldview influencing plans and policies for the East were also a product of his radicalization period in 1919 and were evident from his speeches as the face of the Nazi party in the 1920s, as well from *Mein Kampf*. These included his belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race and the sanctity of the German *volk* (people); the inferiority of non-Aryan races—and particularly the Jews, whom he believed formed a world-wide conspiracy; and the threat posed by the combination of Jews and the Bolshevik party, which Hitler often conflated as the menace of "Judeo-Bolshevism." While historians have

noted that Hitler could emphasize and de-emphasize elements of his worldview as the situation dictated—indicating a degree of pragmatism on his part—there is no doubt that his core beliefs remained present throughout his rise to prominence and until his death in 1945. British historian Sir Ian Kershaw notes, for example that from his radicalization in 1919 to his final testimony, Hitler’s desire to remove the Jews from Europe is a prominent and consistent theme.<sup>8</sup>

While Hitler’s views can be seen today as ethically bankrupt and morally repugnant, he regularly justified his worldview in biblical tones, as in this passage from *Mein Kampf*: “Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*”<sup>9</sup> In the context of the chaos and turmoil characterizing interwar Germany, Adolf Hitler believed it was the highest calling (his) to guarantee Germany’s survival in a Hobbesian world—nasty and brutish—and that he was backed by divine authority. For Hitler, the ends justified the means. This would come to fruition on the Eastern Front, where the implementation of his worldview would take on epic proportions. Thomas Weber observes:

Hitler’s two central policy goals, in the form in which he had defined them in 1919, would dominate his thinking and policies for the next twenty-five years. And they explain his willingness to start another world war and embarking on genocide. They were: the total removal of any Jewish influence from Germany, and the creation of a state that had insufficient territory, people, and resources to be geopolitically on equal footing with the most powerful states in the world.<sup>10</sup>

These elements of Hitler’s worldview would be clearly represented in his plans for the conquest of the eastern territories.

Aside from Adolf Hitler, it is instructive to examine briefly the worldview and vision of Heinrich Himmler, the Nazi leader most closely associated with the “Final Solution” and what later became known as the Holocaust. While technically not Hitler’s deputy, Himmler was head of the Third Reich’s security and intelligence apparatus, known by the umbrella term SS—“*Schutzstaffel*”—“protection squadrons.” As Reichsführer SS, Heinrich Himmler zealously implemented Hitler’s policies to establish a new racial order, and was therefore responsible for some of the most heinous war crimes in human history, including the establishment of concentration camps and Jewish ghettos, mass murder of Jews and others by shooting and gassing, crimes against women and children, deliberate starvation of whole populations, and ethnic cleansing. Prior to Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, Himmler was busy establishing the Nazi police state and consolidating power within its institutions that would later help to implement his own vision for Germany, which of course supported those of Adolf Hitler.

A prominent example and one particularly relevant for this paper is Himmler’s vision of a “greater Germanic empire.”<sup>11</sup> Detailed in Peter Longerich’s magisterial biography, Himmler saw the end state of Germany as a “...ring of settlements surrounding Germany composed of 80-100 million ‘Germanic peasants.’”<sup>12</sup> While that number was achievable only in the long term, the resettlement of ethnic Germans into lands conquered by the Nazis was already beginning to take shape in Poland after the start of that campaign in September 1939.

Based on successful power politics within the Third Reich bureaucracy, Himmler secured greater responsibility for the SS in race and resettlement policy matters, giving it a much more militarized feel—and more specifically an SS one—as opposed to that of competing civilian ministries. In fact, Himmler insisted that the model German colonist be an SS “military peasant,” guaranteeing his organization primacy on this key issue for Hitler.<sup>13</sup> Always interested in minute details, Himmler even prescribed the nature of future Germanic peasant villages, even down to SS-designed blueprints.

Of course, the establishment of the “greater Germanic empire” required a worldview that, like Hitler’s, placed the Aryan race above all others. The Reichsführer SS shared Hitler’s racial and ideological worldview, and had the power within the Nazi bureaucracy to pursue it. Himmler zealously attacked all enemies of the Reich, especially those considered “undesirable” or inferior to the Aryan ideal. As such, his part of the government would play a key role in the war with Russia to come, whose nature is described by Himmler biographer Peter Longerich:

What was new about this war, however, was that from the start it was conceived as an ideological and racist war of annihilation. The Soviet Union was not simply to be defeated; the intention was to eliminate its ruling class, decimate the nations living on its territory by the violent destruction of millions of people, and to exploit the survivors as slave labour for the construction of the new German “living space” (*Lebensraum*).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, understanding the visions of Adolf Hitler and his security chief Heinrich Himmler is essential to grasp their impact on the development of subsequent plans for the Eastern Front. Their ideology of the survival of the Reich at all costs, territorial expansion, the inherent superiority of the Aryan race, and a deep-seated hatred for Judeo-Bolshevism all play a role in the creation of a “Germanic empire.” The Eastern Front thus provided the greatest opportunity for the Reich leadership to fulfill its vision. All of its goals coalesced there.

### **“Plans from Hell”**

Hitler’s personal leadership style influenced the nature of planning within the Third Reich, as it did on most aspects of the Nazi bureaucracy. In a variation of *auftragstaktik*, or in current Army doctrinal terms “mission command,” the Führer gave broad and sometimes conflicting guidance to his subordinate leaders, inviting open competition and “undisciplined initiative” in order to fulfill Hitler’s vision. Noted Hitler biographer Sir Ian Kershaw coined the phrase “working towards the Führer,” explaining it in this way:

Hitler’s personalized form of rule invited radical initiatives from below and offered such initiatives backing, so long as they were in line with his broadly defined goals. This promoted ferocious competition at all levels of the regime, among competing agencies, and among individuals within those agencies.<sup>15</sup>

As noted earlier, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler was particularly adept at this type of bureaucratic in-fighting, carving out a significant swath of responsibilities in the security and racial policy realm, always at the expense of someone else’s portfolio. Kershaw further describes the environment as a “Darwinist jungle” where “the way to power and advancement was through anticipating the ‘Führer will’ and, without waiting for directives, taking initiative to promote what were presumed to be Hitler’s aim and wishes.”<sup>16</sup> Many historians have accepted Kershaw’s analysis, noting that Hitler’s personal leadership style rewarded initiative and opportunism, but could also invite confusion and dysfunction.

Given this milieu we now return to this paper’s main emphasis—Reich planning for Operation Barbarossa and the Eastern Front. As noted early, Hitler’s War Plan Directive does not tell the whole story. Noted German historian Rolf-Dieter Müller, for example, states: “For Hitler, ‘conventional strategy’ was inseparably intertwined with racial ideology. Strategy for Hitler was the grand strategy of race struggle.”<sup>17</sup> As a conventional war plan, the directive gave no indication of the war of annihilation that ensued, nor the shockingly unethical behavior or sheer brutality that accompanied it.

Planning for the Eastern campaign thus took a holistic approach within the Third Reich leadership, with multiple entities “working towards the Führer.” The high commands of the Wehrmacht and the Army did the brunt of the military planning, supported by the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine. Other elements of the Third Reich also took part, most notably the SS and other government ministries.

One must consider the conventional war plans in the context of other plans in order to achieve a holistic picture of the Eastern Front. The first we will consider is *Generalplan Ost* (GPO). While not generally familiar to U.S. military students, GPO provides a contextual backdrop for war in the East and was a product of the SS, not the conventional forces. Clouded in secrecy, a complete copy of GPO did not survive the war but existed in partial forms and mutations. Nonetheless, enough is known about GPO to describe its key themes and concepts.

It is important to note that GPO existed prior to the invasion of Russia by German forces in June, 1941 but was really meant to be a long-term plan implementing Hitler and Himmler's vision of a "Germanic empire." In fact, both men described the end state as a "Garden of Eden,"<sup>18</sup> where Germany would secure the territory and resources needed to ensure its future survival. Heinrich Himmler and the SS were the force behind the plan. Ever the opportunist, Himmler saw GPO as a means to "work towards the Fuhrer" at the Army's expense, as shown below by noted German historian Rolf-Dieter Muller:

Himmler recognised the danger that the Wehrmacht would take control of resettlement, as had been the case in the eastern territories during World War I. For him, there was no doubt that the east had to belong to the SS. So he had his men urgently draw up the first sketch of a "General Plan East," which would regulate settlement in the east after the end of the war.<sup>19</sup>

Himmler, in working towards the Fuhrer, sought to secure a permanent foothold in the East for the SS, at the expense of other Reich ministries. He sought to marginalize the influence of other powerful actors with a portfolio in the East, especially Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, whose job title indicated he should have been Hitler's lead agent for all associated issues.

The fact that *Generalplan Ost* fell under the purview of the SS is an ominous indicator. Specifically, the plan and its various versions resided in the Reich Commissariat for the Strengthening of the German People, within the Reich Security Main Office, Himmler's central office. Its principal architect was Professor (Dr.) Konrad Meyer, a Ph.D. who held rank in the SS as an Oberfuhrer (Senior Colonel). As an academician, Meyer served as Director of the Institute for Agrarian Affairs and Agrarian Policy at the Berlin University; for Himmler, he eventually served as chief SS planner for resettlement and development.<sup>20</sup> Even though race and resettlement issues were not solely the purview of the SS—other ministries argued for primacy in multiple Reich "turf battles"—Himmler was adamant that his organization have oversight on all such issues dealing with newly acquired eastern territories.

Dr. Meyer first worked on ideas associated with *Generalplan Ost* in early 1941,<sup>21</sup> following Germany's successful campaign in Poland. As SS planner for the occupied territories, Meyer incorporated some of the features that would come to characterize a grander scheme for the entire East. Duly impressed with his specific plans for Poland, Heinrich Himmler later charged Meyer with expanding the scheme to encompass the entire area that the Reich hoped to gain as a consequence of Operation Barbarossa. It is important to note that while this scheme was developed after Operation Barbarossa began, much of its elements were already being enacted on a smaller scale in Poland. Thus while historian Alex Kay is correct that "the available evidence is fairly meagre"<sup>22</sup> regarding pre-invasion resettlement planning, there is no doubt that Meyer applied some of the same principles when asked to expand his GPO concept to the whole of Russia, shortly after the start of Barbarossa.

Meyer's versions of GPO can best be described as conceptual plans to achieve Hitler's vision of a "Germanic empire," as it applied to Eastern Europe, whose access the Reich would gain following a successful conventional attack. Meyer envisioned what both Hitler and Himmler referred to as a "Garden of Eden"—a reordering of society in which Germany had ample living space, food security, and a return to its roots in the soil. German colonists buoyed by SS peasants would settle in the East, occupying huge belts of newly acquired territory in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia. Germany's

boundary with Russia would move 1,000 km eastward.<sup>23</sup> The standard of living for the colonists would be high, with modern farms and equipment, interconnecting road networks and modern infrastructure. Although GPO was largely rural in nature, Meyer had in mind a mix of personnel employed in industry, crafts and services to mimic a model German city. In Adam Tooze's words, "the SS vision involved turning the clock back not to the Middle Ages, but to 1900."<sup>24</sup>

GPO was epic in its scale. In the long-term, over a span of 20-30 years, it envisioned the resettlement of 10 million Germans in order to provide the Reich the living space it deemed appropriate for a country of its size and geographic proportions. These eastern colonists would include ethnic Germans resettled from lands and territories previously conquered, as well as from the Reich itself. Meyer proposed that two million of them come from overpopulated urban areas and another 220,000 families from bloated rural areas. In addition, the plan hoped to attract 220,000 young married couples from Germany proper who were willing to take on the rigors of farm life.<sup>25</sup> GPO was also hugely ambitious from a budgetary perspective, and if enacted "...would have involved a massive reallocation of German national capital towards the east."<sup>26</sup> Tooze notes that GPO's cost estimate would have been the equivalent of two-thirds of the Reich's GDP in 1941.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Hitler and Himmler's scheme for a "Garden of Eden" was not without significant monetary cost. It represented a massive investment in Germany's future.

The human cost, as seen through the ethical implications of *Generalplan Ost*, was staggering and difficult to imagine today. For the Reich intended to "Germanize" the lands conquered in the East, according to a racial hierarchy devised—once again—by the SS, as the lead agency for race and resettlement in Hitler's Germany. Indeed, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, wearing yet another hat as "Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of German Nationhood," devised a schema for Germanization that would be partially implemented in Poland and serve as a model for Russia. Put succinctly, the inhabitants of eastern lands conquered by the Germans were to be displaced; only those racially acceptable to them would be allowed to stay. The consequences of this policy are staggering indeed. GPO planners estimated the total number of displaced persons to be a whopping 31 million. Adam Tooze indicates that over the long-term that number could grow to as many as 45 million.<sup>28</sup> All were subject to the whims of the Third Reich.

*Generalplan Ost* thus foresaw the removal of tens of millions from the countries invaded by Operation Barbarossa forces, as well as from occupied Poland. These populations were considered "non-Germanizable"—that is, of races or ethnic groups unacceptable to the Nazis. The fate of these groups included hard labor, deportation further east, starvation and/or extermination. Meyer and the GPO planners even calculated the percentage of each population to meet such fates, as show below by Timothy Snyder in his epic history *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*:

Depending on the demographic estimates, between thirty-one and forty-five million people, most Slavs, were to disappear. In one redaction, eighty to eighty-five percent of the Poles, sixty-five percent of the west Ukrainians, seventy-five percent of the Belarusians, and fifty percent of the Czechs were to be eliminated.<sup>29</sup>

GPO also included additional figures for Estonia (50%), Latvia (50%), Czechoslovakia (50%) and Lithuania (85%). Historians point out that the Reich planned to Germanize the land, not the people. Thus, the priority for colonists would be ethnic Germans, either resettled from previously conquered lands or from the Reich itself. The Nazis also considered western Europeans acceptable, including the Dutch, Flemish, Danes, Swedes and Norwegians.<sup>30</sup> The largely Slavic displaced populations were thus the "bill payer" for GPO; the Nazis disregarded any moral or ethical considerations of such civilian populations in the East. GPO, while conceptual in nature, was thus nothing less than a grand master plan through which Hitler would achieve the ultimate goal of a Germanic empire with sufficient *Lebensraum* and peopled by a racially pure Aryan stock. Horrific in nature and genocidal in approach, it was nonetheless not the only plan that would come to define the war of annihilation on the Eastern Front.

While Himmler, Meyer and the SS worked on their colonization plan for the East, another part of the Reich bureaucracy crafted a policy with similar, potentially devastating consequences for inhabitants of the eastern territories. And unlike *Generalplan Ost*, which was highly secretive and did not survive the war in a complete copy, the subject of this section of the paper—“*der Hungerplan*” (“the Hunger Plan”)—remained intact and circulated throughout the Reich bureaucracy. As such, its provisions have been scrutinized by multiple historians. One can discern much from its very title; the ethical implications of the Hunger Plan, as devastating as they were, concerned the Nazi leadership not in the least. Historian Adam Tooze summarizes the essence of the plan:

This was the Hunger Plan, as formulated by 23 May 1941: during and after the war on the USSR, the Germans intended to feed German soldiers and German (and west European) civilians by starving the Soviet citizens they would conquer, especially those in the big cities... The cities would be destroyed, the terrain would be returned to natural forest, and about thirty million people would starve to death in the winter of 1941-1942.<sup>31</sup>

The Hunger Plan, like *Generalplan Ost*, would set the tone for the war in the East. Taken together or separately, they envisioned a magnitude of death and destruction that far outweighed the conventional war plans.

While this paper has heretofore not mentioned the name of Hermann Goering, it is necessary to do so in conjunction with the Hunger Plan. At this point of the war, prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Goering was a key player in the Nazi hierarchy, second only to Hitler in terms of power and influence. As “Plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan,” Goering oversaw the use of the economic element of power within the Reich, responsible for preparing the German economy, as well as the armed forces, for war within a four-year period (between 1936 and 1940). As if that weren’t enough, Goering also retained his position as head of the Luftwaffe, as well as the lofty title “Prime Minister of Prussia.”<sup>32</sup>

One of Goering’s trusted underlings, Herbert Backe, became the architect of the Hunger Plan. Backe, a State Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, was a confidant of Goering who, like Konrad Meyer, simultaneously held rank in the SS. As such, he was another “Nazi intellectual” who combined professorial and technical expertise with a fanatical belief in National Socialism. Backe “worked toward the Fuhrer” by emphasizing economic factors in the Hunger Plan with which Hitler, Goering and the rest of the Reich bureaucracy could readily agree. As such, Backe readily achieved buy-in, shockingly so based on the plan’s moral and ethical implications.

In its essence, the Hunger Plan encompassed a brutal extraction of resources required to sustain the Wehrmacht and greater Germany for the long haul. In particular, the plan focused on acquiring self-sufficiency in food as well as in oil, both desperately needed by the Reich in order to sustain Operation Barbarossa as well as the home front. Conceptually, Backe’s plan was based on the assumption that the Reich and its occupied territories required 8-10 million tons of grain. These would have to come from Russia—particularly from the Ukraine—whose priority Hitler had emphasized on multiple occasions. Backe considered the Ukraine with its bountiful surpluses of wheat as a “surplus area,” while non-agricultural portions of Russia—including heavily forested regions and urban areas—were deemed “deficit areas.”<sup>33</sup> The Hunger Plan sought to separate and cordon off the two; that is, the Wehrmacht would seize and secure the surplus areas, while cutting off and isolating the deficit areas, particularly large cities such as Leningrad. The Wehrmacht would then lay siege to such cities and starve their inhabitants. The overall intent of Backe’s plan was to feed invading German forces totally by living off the land, send surplus grain back to Germany proper, and disregard any consequences for the conquered peoples. Timothy Snyder observes: “The Hunger Plan foresaw the restoration of a preindustrial Soviet Union, with far fewer people, little industry, and no large cities. The forward motion of the Wehrmacht would be a journey backward in time.”<sup>34</sup> Backe’s Hunger Plan, as shocking as it was, had complete buy-in from the Nazi military, as well as civilian bureaucracy.



Because it prioritized feeding and fueling the Wehrmacht, and eventually the German people, no one in the Reich bureaucracy opposed it.

While the ethical implications of the Hunger Plan are clear—starvation of its victims—the magnitude of its impact may not be. Historians agree that potential victims numbered 20-30 million, similar in order of magnitude to those of *Generalplan Ost*. Backe himself estimated the number at 30 million, and the Reich leadership bandied about this total casually to audiences without any hesitation or compunction. Historian Alex Kay notes that this number also represents the growth in Russia's urban population between 1914 and 1939, the start points for both World Wars.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the Nazis particularly targeted urban populations in the Hunger Plan, who would starve in place, while those in the surplus areas would help in the production of food for the Wehrmacht and the greater Reich, or else be shipped off to Siberia. In short, The Hunger Plan contained “some of the most explicit Nazi language about intentions to kill large numbers of people.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike much of the SS language regarding the extermination of European Jewry, it was not clouded in euphemisms such as “resettlement” or “special treatment.” Readily accepted and discussed openly with the Nazi bureaucracy, the Hunger Plan is a testament to a sheer lack of any sense of ethical or moral compunction on the part of Reich planners. According to historian Stephen Fritz, the only question asked by the authors of the Hunger Plan was, “How does this help Germany?”<sup>37</sup> The plan “provided the moral premises for the war in the East”<sup>38</sup> and as such provided, like GPO, the “ends” for the Reich's Eastern campaign.

*Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan provided the moral and intellectual underpinnings for the Wehrmacht's conventional war plan for Operation Barbarossa—the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Both were in consonance with the Fuhrer's grand design for a “Germanic empire”—a supposed “Garden of Eden” for German colonists that implied sheer hell for the Baltic and Russian inhabitants. Both plans envisioned horrific death and destruction for millions of civilians in order to achieve Nazi ends that were along economic, racial and ideological lines. Although much of the *Generalplan Ost* planning took place after the invasion began on June 22, 1941, there is no doubt that both the GPO and the Hunger Plan had their roots prior to that date. While the GPO was much more secretive than the Hunger Plan, it is also clear that the Nazi regime—both military and civilian leaders—clearly embraced the principles of both. Thus, *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan were “plans from hell” designed to enable the Nazi “Garden of Eden.”

Finally, it is important to note that while both plans were clearly genocidal in intent, neither represented a final decision by Adolf Hitler to implement the “Final Solution”—the extermination of European Jewry. While that process is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that while both *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan foresaw the extermination of millions *assumed* to include large numbers of Jews, neither targeted them specifically. Additionally, the origins of both plans lay prior to the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941. While the majority of historians agree that the final decision for the “Final Solution” cannot be pinpointed to a single date, many concur that it resulted from a process of radicalization by those responsible for its implementation. Historian Ian Kershaw believes this occurred over a period of about one year between the summers of 1941 and 1942.<sup>39</sup> As we shall see, Operation Barbarossa occurs at the beginning of that period, marking a pronounced intent to expand the killing of Jews that first began with the Polish campaign in 1939.

### **Implementation in Combat**

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the War Plan Directive for Operation Barbarossa belies the nature of the war of annihilation that ensued. However, one can begin to understand the Eastern campaign based on the ends of both *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan. Both were largely conceptual and required a successful campaign by the Wehrmacht to enable them. In strategic terms, then, GPO and the Hunger Plan provided the ends, while the German armed forces, including Himmler's SS units, provided the means. This paper now

turns to a discussion of two additional elements that contributed to the brutal war of attrition in the East, neither of which was conceptual. These were the role of the Einsatzgruppen and their enforcement of illegal orders issued by the German high command.

The conventional war plan directive for Barbarossa makes no mention of any of the elements of *Generalplan Ost* or the Hunger Plan, nor the role of the SS—particularly in the mobile killing units known euphemistically as the Einsatzgruppen (“task forces”). The Einsatzgruppen were notorious by reputation and were a primary feature of the Polish campaign, which of course preceded the German invasion of Russia. Basically, their job was to assist in consolidating the areas and gains achieved by the conventional forces after their blitzkrieg-style advances. Once again Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS, saw the Einsatzgruppen as a means to “work towards the Führer” while helping to achieve the racial, ideological and economic goals of Germany’s empire in the East. The Einsatzgruppen were so notorious for their immoral and unethical conduct in Poland that the conventional armed forces, the Wehrmacht, were only too pleased to distance themselves from the SS in the division of tasks for Operation Barbarossa and beyond.

The Einsatzgruppen played a key role in accelerating the killing that would be associated with the Nazis’ “Final Solution,” and by extension the Holocaust. Indeed, their legacy was so abominable that the allies decided after the war to conduct a separate trial of the Einsatzgruppen as part of the International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg. The Einsatzgruppen’s mission, according to Himmler biographer Peter Longerich, lacked clarity:

Their duties were, however, only vaguely defined: where they were near the army front line they were to ‘secure’ documentation and people; in the rear area they had responsibility, amongst other things, for ‘identifying and combating activities hostile to the state and the Reich.’<sup>40</sup>

As such, their charter was virtually limitless, allowing for increased “radicalization” at the behest of Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler. After conflicts in Poland, Himmler negotiated with the Wehrmacht an exclusive role for his Einsatzgruppen, allowing them to perform “special tasks”—in the euphemistic words typical of the SS. According to the agreement, these tasks were necessary “to settle the conflict between two opposite political systems.”<sup>41</sup> Hitler thus gave Himmler and the SS a wide and independent berth in the accomplishment of their mission in Russia.

The Einsatzgruppen followed in the wake of the Wehrmacht, which conducted a massive, multi-pronged attack commencing on June 22, 1941. Three Army Groups comprising over 150 German divisions, including four panzer groups, spearheaded the attack, designed to encircle and annihilate the unprepared and surprised Soviet armies as close to the German border as possible. The three Army Groups covered an enormous front, spanning the Baltic to the Black Seas and encompassing the Baltic States as well as Belarus, the Ukraine, Crimea and western Russia. They were arrayed from north to south, with Army Group North oriented towards Leningrad, Army Group Center (the main effort) directed against Minsk, and Army Group South pointed towards Kiev.<sup>42</sup> The four Einsatzgruppen, lettered from A to D, supported each of the Army Groups, as well as the separate Eleventh Army in the far south. Einsatzgruppen A-C supported Army Groups North, Center and South, respectively and were responsible for operations in the Baltics, Belarus and the Ukraine. Einsatzgruppe D in the far south would target southern Ukraine, Crimea and eventually the Caucasus.<sup>43</sup>

The Einsatzgruppen were essentially fully motorized mobile killing units consisting of between 500 and 900 personnel each, encompassing a variety of units within the SS. This reflects Himmler’s successful consolidation of SS and police functions in his quest for absolute power in the Reich’s security realm. Commanded by SS officers, some of whom held doctorates, the Einsatzgruppen included a hodge-podge of units ranging from the elite Waffen-SS combat units to members of the Order Police, whom historian Christopher Browning, in his epic study of Reserve Police Battalion 101, described in this way:

They were middle-aged family men of working- and lower-middle class background from the city of Hamburg. Considered too old to be of use to the Germany army, they had been drafted instead into the Order Police. Most were raw recruits with no previous experience in German occupied territory.<sup>44</sup>

Other units under the umbrella of the SS in the Einsatzgruppen were the infamous German State Police (Gestapo), as well as the Criminal Police (Kripo) and the Security Service (SD). All told, the Einsatzgruppen numbered about 3,000 in four roughly battalion-sized units. Mobile, lethal, and sworn to uphold the Fuhrer's desires, the Einsatzgruppen had already shown by their acts in Poland that they were willing and able to enforce the Reich's murderous ideological and racial policies in Russia during Barbarossa.

The Ostheer (German Army in the East) made short work of Soviet forces during the summer months of the war, enveloping whole armies, gobbling up huge swaths of territory, and subjecting untold millions, including Russian prisoners of war (POWs) as well as indigenous civilians, to the potential horrors envisioned by Meyer's *Generalplan Ost* and Backe's Hunger Plan. In this regard, the SS and Einsatzgruppen's over-arching commission from Himmler was to decimate 30 million<sup>45</sup> during the Russian campaign—the same number of victims Backe ascribed to the Hunger Plan. However, in contrast to an abstract concept, the Einsatzgruppen were a concrete means to put policy into practice. They performed “special tasks,” again using the euphemistic language of the SS, that included mass atrocities, extra-judicial killings, ethnic cleansing, deportations, starvation and other deprivations against Jews, Russian prisoners of war, and numerous other victim populations.

The Einsatzgruppen worked with murderous efficiency, employing mass shootings of victims, the majority of them Jews, at point blank range using pistols, rifles and machine guns. In one particularly notorious incident at Babi Yar, a ravine outside of the city of Kiev in the Ukraine, units under Einsatzgruppe C, commanded by Paul Blobel, executed 33,771 Jews during a two-day period in late September, 1941. Much of what we know about these death totals comes from the units themselves; the SS kept meticulous records that went directly to Reichsfuhrer Himmler. Richard Rhodes estimates that Einsatzgruppen, by their own record keeping, executed 738,827 Jewish men, women and children during the Russian campaign but that this number is most likely very low.<sup>46</sup> For the total period of the war, some estimates run as high as 1.3 million Jews killed in the East following Barbarossa<sup>47</sup> by Einsatzgruppen, as well as other SS military and police units assigned to Russia.

The Einsatzgruppen received plenty of guidance from Reichsfuhrer Himmler, who visited the front lines often in order to encourage his units to pursue his policies more vigorously. The Fuhrer himself, as quoted in “Himmler's Files from Hallein,” which documented a meeting in July 1941, said, “The fundamental problem is to slice up this tremendous cake so that we can (1) rule it, (2) administer it, and (3) exploit it.”<sup>48</sup> Himmler's personal philosophy for the Russian campaign, as communicated to his SS leadership, is shown below:

We must be honest, decent, loyal and comradely to the members of our own blood and to nobody else. What happens to a Russian, to a Czech does not interest me a bit... Whether or not nations live in prosperity or starve to death interests me only as much as we need them as slaves for our Kultur; otherwise it is of no interest to me...<sup>49</sup>

Thus, while the Reich leadership spoke euphemistically about the war in Russia in public, behind closed doors there was no doubt as to their intent. In a few instances, however, they communicated it in black and white terms via illegal and unethical orders.

Two of the most notorious of these punctuating the nature of the war of annihilation in the East concerned jurisdiction in the Barbarossa areas of operation and treatment of captured Soviet political officers.

Commonly referred to as the “Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree” and the “Commissar Order,” respectively, these represent the German high command’s direct order to the Wehrmacht as well as the SS; hence, they help to negate the so-called “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” promulgated by that institution after the war. It is important to note that the Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree of 13 May 1941 and the Commissar Order of 6 June 1941 both preceded the start of hostilities on 22 June. The Reich fully intended to initiate a war of annihilation in the East, rather than as a response to enemy actions.

While translations from the German language vary slightly, there is no mistaking the intent of the Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree, formally titled “Order Concerning Martial Law in the Area of Operation ‘Barbarossa’ and Special Measures for the Troops.”<sup>50</sup> The order recognized the expanse of Russia and “especially the peculiarity of the enemy,” demanding that “guerillas are to be eliminated ruthlessly by the troops in combat or in flight.”<sup>51</sup> It did not define guerillas but required that any persons suspected of crimes be brought before an officer, who would decide whether or not they would be shot.<sup>52</sup> Further, the order essentially absolved the German military from committing crimes against civilians stating, “There is no compulsion to prosecute actions committed by members of the armed forces... against enemy civilians, even when such acts constitute crimes or offenses under military law.”<sup>53</sup> In a fascinating excursion from these general provisions, the order also provided its own moral justification:

In judging such acts it should be kept in mind in each case that the collapse of 1918, that later times of suffering of the German people, and the fight against National Socialism, with the many National Socialists who perished, were mainly the result of bolshevist influence, and no German must forget that.<sup>54</sup>

The jurisdiction decree thus provided *carte blanche* for German forces, Wehrmacht as well as SS, to eliminate all opposition. The Chief of Staff of Wehrmacht High Command, Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel, promulgated the order, so there is no doubt that its knowledge was widespread within the armed forces. Later, Keitel ordered all copies of the decree destroyed, but its provisions remained in effect nonetheless.

The Commissar Order, formally “Guidelines for the Treatment of Political Commissars,”<sup>55</sup> mandated the harsh treatment of Soviet political officers in a manner similar to the Barbarossa Jurisdiction Decree. If German forces encountered commissars on the front line in opposition, they were to separate them from Soviet regular forces and execute them on the spot. If they were “not guilty of any hostile behavior,” German forces were to keep them unharmed and then decide their fate based on “the personal impression made [on their captor] by the commissar’s attitude and manner...”<sup>56</sup> Finally, those apprehended in rear areas were to be turned over to the *Einsatzgruppen* or other security police, where execution was almost certain. Like the jurisdiction order, the Commissar Order went out of its way to justify the action to the German soldier. It states, “In this struggle mercy and any consideration of international law with regard to these elements are wrong.”<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the order emphasizes that Soviet political officers “are the originators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of waging war” and must be handled “with all severity.”<sup>58</sup>

Together, the *Einsatzgruppen* and the Wehrmacht conducted a war of annihilation in the East, implementing the vision of their leadership as personified by Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler. Hitler and the German high command empowered their forces through unethical and illegal orders dealing with jurisdiction in the Barbarossa area of operations, as well as the treatment of Soviet political officers. Additionally, the high command gave Himmler’s SS a wide berth in the rear areas to interpret threats and deal with them accordingly. In many cases, that amounted to extrajudicial execution. Thus, given *carte blanche*, the *Einsatzgruppen* and other SS forces committed mass atrocities in Poland, the Baltic States, Belarus, Ukraine and western Russia that forever condemn them to association with the “Final Solution.” This is not to absolve the conventional forces—the Wehrmacht. Eager to disassociate themselves from SS atrocities in the Poland campaign, the Wehrmacht nonetheless committed heinous crimes during the Russian campaign.

These included laying siege to large cities and razing villages, starving their inhabitants, participating in killings alongside the SS, mistreating Russian POWs, and executing Soviet commissars. Thus, the myth of the guiltless Wehrmacht, as perpetrated by its surviving generals after the war, is largely a fiction.

Finally, the work of the Einsatzgruppen must be seen as an accelerant to Germany's "Final Solution" of the Jewish question, or *endoslung*. As such, the murderous acts of the task forces, under the tutelage of Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, constituted one of the phases of what came to be known later—after the war—as the Holocaust. While Einsatzgruppen mass killings began during the Polish campaign as early as 1939, they burgeoned in the summer of 1941 based on Germany's acquisition of expansive new territories and their inhabitants, including an estimated three million Jews resident in the Baltic States and Russia. Einsatzgruppen executions in the East, mostly by shooting and later by gassing victims in mobile vans, contributed to the deaths of approximately one million Jews, or about one-sixth of the total attributed to the Holocaust. Inspired by the visions of Adolf Hitler and motivated by Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, the Einsatzgruppen achieved new levels of barbarism that mark the period of the Russian campaign as one of history's darkest.

### **Aftermath and Commentary**

The Third Reich failed to achieve its vision of a "Germanic empire" in the East, and eventually fell 888 years short of its one thousand-year goal. A resurgent Russia turned the tide at Stalingrad, inflicting a shocking and humiliating defeat on the Wehrmacht in February 1943. Based on these events, *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan were "overcome by events" and the Nazis shelved these plans for the colonial subjugation of Russia. The Einsatzgruppen, however, continued their murderous ways up until the end of the war, as the "Final Solution" became a separate and intrinsic part of Nazi policy—even as the Reich realized that the war was unwinnable.

The roles of *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan cannot be understated. While the Nazis were unable to implement them to their fullest extent, they provided the "ends" that were sufficient to guide Hitler's satraps in their relentless pursuit of his vision. While neither plan initiated genocide per se, both were clearly genocidal in nature and reflective of the Nazi mindset. And there is no doubt that their implementation by the Einsatzgruppen in Poland, Russia and other eastern states resulted in the accelerated killing of Jews, as well as others, constituting an early phase of the Holocaust. While the Einsatzgruppen death toll has been mentioned, historian Timothy Snyder—in his epic work *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*—reminds us that the Germans also deliberately starved millions during the war in the East, including three million Soviet POWs and one million inhabitants of Leningrad.<sup>59</sup> That is a staggering total, indeed but pales in comparison to what the Nazis had hoped to accomplish given a successful campaign in Russia. Thus, *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan provided the ideological, racial and economic pillars framing the war of annihilation Germany conducted against the Soviets.

As for the perpetrators and post-war justice, the record is at best mixed. Those most responsible for the events described in this paper—Hitler, Himmler and Goering—all committed suicide, either before or during captivity by the allies. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, who promulgated many of the illegal orders on behalf of the *Wehrmacht*, was found guilty by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg and executed following the first and best known of the twelve "thematic" trials. During the eighth such trial—that of the Reich Security Main Office—the allies found Dr. Konrad Meyer, architect of *Generalplan Ost*, guilty of membership in the SS but not guilty of war crimes. He later served as Professor of Agriculture at the University of Hanover. Dr. Herbert Backe, author of the Hunger Plan, committed suicide in prison in 1947 following the "ministries trial"—the ninth of the International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg.

It is appropriate at this point to address the themes mentioned at the beginning of this paper—the ethical considerations around territory and ownership in large-scale conflict, and when things started to go wrong

ethically in this historic case of genocide and mass atrocities. Regarding both, we must remember that the fascist Nazi regime was among the most unethical, immoral and illiberal regimes in modern history. While Hitler and the Nazi party chose to rise through the democratic process, it was not until he assumed the Chancellorship of Germany in January 1933 that Hitler had the means to enable the vision that he had been ruminating on since 1919. Indeed, some believe that things “started to go wrong” in Germany on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 1933. For once in power, Hitler took incremental steps, many first initiated by his underlings, in a long and indirect path leading to the genocide of European Jewry.

This paper has shown that territory and ownership was at the essence of Nazi ideology, especially in the establishment of the “Germanic empire” that Hitler and Himmler so desperately craved. For them, the future of Germany and the spirit of “*volk*” lay in the connection between the people and the soil. Because Hitler and much of the Reich bureaucracy were convinced that their people deserved more space and a better standard of living, German policy goals coalesced in the Russian campaign. There, Hitler’s twin ideological pillars of *Lebensraum* and the elimination of the scourge of “Judeo-Bolshevism” provided the ends for German policy and planning. *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan were morally and ethically bankrupt. Normal ethical considerations contained in just war theory and the law of armed conflict held no sway for the Germans. They violated *jus ad bellum* by conducting a pre-emptive war of aggression and annihilation on an opponent with whom they had signed a pact of non-aggression just two years earlier. Morally and ethically, they justified their behavior on that of their opponents, as shown in historian Thomas Childers’ recent observation:

But the real thrust of Hitler’s remarks that day dealt more directly with the underlying ideological nature of the coming battle. This campaign would be a conflict not bound by the international rules of war established in the Hague and Geneva Conventions. While Germany was a signatory to those agreements, the Soviets had allowed their commitment to lapse. Therefore the army could expect the most savage, barbaric conduct from the Russians, and the troops must be prepared to respond in kind.<sup>60</sup>

Instead of treating POWs and civilians and their property with dignity and respect, the SS and Wehrmacht took the exact opposite approach in order to Hitler’s vision of a “Garden of Eden” that extended their eastern border to the Ural Mountains. They seized lands and resources, expropriated property and decimated populations through extermination, starvation or deportation.

## **Conclusion**

Large-scale combat operations will no doubt continue to have large-scale ethical implications. The example of the Third Reich shows what can happen when an illiberal regime, empowered by a fanatical autocrat, controls the mean to impose a racist and genocidal vision on an adversary. The Nazis disregarded virtually all ethical considerations in their war on the East, from the tenets of just war theory to the law of armed conflict. Using a moral justification prioritizing Germany’s survival and the supremacy of the Aryan race above all else, the Third Reich embarked on an illegal war of aggression against Russia on a far greater scale than that conducted against Poland or Western Europe. This was to be a no-holds barred contest against a mortal enemy, one between diametrically opposed political systems. As such, Reich planning for Operation Barbarossa was clearly genocidal in nature, as evidenced by the subjects of this paper—*Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan.

After June 22, 1941, the start of Operation Barbarossa, the Nazis demonstrated their total disregard for *jus in bello* as well. While the SS Einsatzgruppen were the most notorious offenders of human rights, the conventional forces of the Wehrmacht were complicit as well. Enabled by illegal orders and encouraged from the high command, both groups killed innocents, mistreated POWs, seized or destroyed property, and

starved countless non-combatants. Even after the war in the East was lost, the killing continued—mainly by the SS—as the “Final Solution” of the Jewish question assumed primacy amongst Reich policy options.

This paper has argued that one cannot understand the nature of war in the East simply by reviewing the conventional war plans associated with Operation Barbarossa—that it takes a comprehension of the interplay between multiple factors in addition to military ones—social, economic and ideological. The Reich incorporated many such considerations in their planning and execution of Operation Barbarossa. While their grand vision for “race and space” culminated in a “Garden of Eden” that was decidedly long-term in outlook, it required military victory as an enabler. This was the role of the Wehrmacht, as supplemented by the SS. Despite falling well short of killing 20-30 million inhabitants of the East as envisioned in both *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan, the Nazis nonetheless inflicted more harm on POWs and civilian non-combatants than the world has ever witnessed. This descent into barbarism has marked the Third Reich as one of the most fanatical, unethical and murderous regimes in history.

So what value does studying the Third Reich have for today’s military students and future planners of large-scale combat operations? After all, it represented the exact antithesis of a liberal democracy. To begin with, many observers have noted the rise of illiberalism in today’s international community, so U.S. armed forces may very well find opponents who disregard or minimize the impact of moral and ethical considerations when considering large-scale combat operations. The National Socialist example shows what can happen when one extremist ideology confronts another, different in outlook but similarly determined to win at all costs. The same thing could happen today.

More importantly, the example of the Third Reich reminds us of the importance of properly applying just war theory, with its emphasis on moral and ethical considerations. As has been shown in this paper, the Reich did everything wrong, from our ethical perspective. They waged an unjust war of annihilation in the East, murdered or starved millions of innocent civilians, mistreated POWs and shot Soviet political officers. Led by unethical fanatics such as Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, they brutally imposed their vision of a “Garden of Eden”—a Germanic empire that required a racial and economic reordering of Eastern Europe. Moreover, they put SS officers in charge of *Generalplan Ost* and the Hunger Plan, Nazi intellectuals who strove to please their bosses. The rest of the Reich bureaucracy, along with the conventional forces—the Wehrmacht—either supported these plans enthusiastically or at least did not voice any opposition to them. The result was a descent into brutality and barbarism that was the Eastern Front.

Modern military planners should learn from the mistakes of the past. Those at the strategic level should weigh in on the reasons for going to war in the first place—*jus ad bellum*. Once national authorities have decided to go to war, especially conflicts involving large-scale ground combat, planners must ensure that moral and ethical considerations are at the forefront—not an afterthought—of both conceptual design or detailed processes such as Military Decision Making Process or Joint Planning Process. Large-scale ground combat operations will clearly have multiple ethical considerations for both *jus in bello* and *jus post bellum* involving a whole host of issues that have been mentioned in this paper. While the example of the Third Reich is the antithesis of a liberal democracy, it will no doubt continue to be an object of intense scrutiny for lessons we can learn, and mistakes we must avoid.

## End Notes

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