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*Operation 1005 in Belorussia:  
Commonalities and Unique Features, 1942–1944*

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the little-studied topic of concealing the traces of Nazi mass crimes on the territory of Belarus, in the period from the spring of 1942 to the liberation of the Republic in the summer of 1944. “Operation 1005” is the code name of a top-secret large-scale operation, carried out by Nazi Germany in order to hide the traces of mass killings committed in Europe during World War II. Citing numerous examples of the cities, regions and areas of Belarus, the author reveals the mechanism used by the Nazis for concealing the consequences of mass murders, names the initiators of these crimes, the executioners and their accomplices. The article has been written on the basis of documentary materials found in various archives, which have been supplemented by the testimony of witnesses of those events, that allowed the author to show the general and the particular, and to draw the necessary conclusions.

**Key words:** “Operation 1005”, Belarus, Jews, Holocaust, genocide, Belarus Jewry, WW2, Nazi crimes

INTRODUCTION

During the Second World War, in the region of Belorussia (in the territory of modern-day Belarus), the Nazis established over 260 SS and SD forced-labor and internment camps, prisons, penal colonies, and transit camps and colonies for women and children [Mikhnuik 1995: 295]. The Jewish population of Belorussia was cut off and doomed to die in over 300 small and large ghettos throughout the country. According to estimates, from the pre-war population of 10,000,000 over 1,500,000 civilians and nearly 800,000 Red Army war prisoners perished in the occupied ter-

ritory of Belorussia [*Spravochnik o mestakh prinuditel'nogo sodержaniya grazhdanskogo naselenia na okkupirovannykh territoriyakh Belarusi, 1941–1944* 2001].

The mass destruction plan was well-thought out, organized, and programmed. Soviet historiography traditionally explained the policy devised by Berlin as one that was entirely absurd and misanthropic, calling the perpetrators “blood-thirsty” and “cannibalistic”. Indeed, the Nazi leadership used brutal methods to attain certain practical objectives, and not only to punish or intimidate. They insisted on absolute execution of orders, punished dissenters, prevented pockets of resistance in their midst, and deprived partisans of support by destroying their sources of supply.

General annihilation (genocide) was perpetuated exclusively against the Jewish population, and never targeted the Slavs of Belorussia [Smilovitsky 2000]. For the Belorussians, Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians, the Nazis opened places of learning (schools, institutes, and courses for teachers), allowed cultural establishments (seminaries, churches, Polish Roman Catholic churches, Russian Orthodox churches, and monasteries), cultural centers, museums, circuses, theaters, cinemas; newspapers and books were published, and private entrepreneurship was authorized [Smilovitsky 1994: 192–194; Smilovitsky 2008]. All of this was meant to demonstrate to the local population that the “Stalinist peoples’ friendship” was baseless, and to present the German soldiers as liberators of the people from the tyranny of the Jews and Communists, rather than as ruthless executioners. This approach helped to boost the level of collaboration, which reached significant proportions in Belorussia [Dean 2000; Romanouski 1964; Litvin 2000; Roman’ko 2008].

#### CURRENT RELEVANCE OF THIS ISSUE

Although seven decades have passed since the end of the Second World War, uncovering atrocities perpetuated against the civilian population in the occupied territories is still relevant today. It is particularly important to do this in our day and age when there are some who deny the lessons of WWII and refute the most abominable chapters from its history – the tragedy of East-European Jews [Koch, Polian 2008].

*Aktion 1005* (Operation 1005), conceived in Berlin in the spring of 1942, represented an extensive, long-term plan to conceal the evidence of war crimes in the East. The head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), Henrik Reinhard, on orders from SS-Reichsführer Henrik Himmler, placed the responsibility for the direct execution of *Aktion 1005* on Paul Blobel<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Blobel (1894–1951), architect by training, NSDAP member (1931), SS-Standartenführer (30 January 1941), head of the SS Main Office for Economic Administration (SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt), supervised mass murder of civilians in Ukraine, including execution by shooting in Babi Yar, 29–30 September 1941.

## INFORMATION SOURCES

1. Findings of investigations conducted by Army commissions.
2. Materials of the Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Atrocities Perpetrated by the German Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices (ESC USSR), carried out in Belorussia from 1943 to 1944.
3. Documents of the organizations and institutions of the German occupying regime in Belorussia.
4. Materials from the Soviet judicial proceedings of Nazi criminals and their accomplices in BSSR (Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) and elsewhere.
5. Witness testimonies.

The first documented proof was gathered by the Red Army commissions. The commissions were made up of officers of squadron commander level and higher and several other military personnel including rank and file soldiers. They interviewed the local people who openly described the facts of the devastation of the Jewish population; by contrast, the records produced for civilian authorities most often referred to the Jews as “Soviet civilians”. Information regarding German crimes was transmitted directly by the Soviet soldiers (who were the first to set foot in the liberated zones) to the army command [Smilovitsky 1999: 61–74]. The work of the Red Army commissions, however, had its limits. The commissions were attached to troops in constant movement and, as such, could not conduct in-depth research. The commission members were also often assigned other general military tasks, and the investigation of Nazi crimes was considered to be of secondary importance [*Documenty obvinyayut. Kholokost: svidetelstva Krasnoy Armii* 1996].

The activities of the commissions of the ESC USSR (representatives of party organs and Soviet bodies and of the local population under the supervision of State Security Services) included assessing the damages caused by the German side and to ascertain the number of Soviet citizens who had died. They gathered and consolidated data about the places of execution and the number of people shot, cross-checked the information, and unsealed burial sites.

Administrative correspondence between various German agencies has only survived in fragments and mostly pertains to the principal places of detention. After the end of the war, additional information came to light during pre-trial preparations, through replies to inquiries from abroad or through criminal proceedings initiated against the perpetrators of mass punitive actions.

Witness statements may be divided into several categories:

- A. Statements recorded directly after the liberation of BSSR and before the 1960s (most valuable).
- B. Testimony provided 15–20 years later to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, the audio-documents Archive of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Yale University, Beit Lochamei ha-Gettaot (The Ghetto Fighters’ House – Itzhak Katzenelson Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Heritage Mu-

seum), the Steven Spielberg Fund (Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation), Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (not as pertinent, since these records require additional complex verification).

#### THE SCALE OF NAZI CRIMES IN BELARUSIA

The scope of Operation 1005 activities in Belorussia was quite extensive, requiring a very large amount of work. The biggest mass graves for the victims of Nazi genocide were in the following locations: near the camps for Soviet prisoners of war in Bobruisk (50,000 victims); in the Berezeno Grodno oblast (27,000); in the Baranovichi district in the Minsk oblast – the village of Kolbasino (18,000), the village of Koldychevo (22,000), and the “Lesnaya” railroad station (89,000); in the areas surrounding Mogilev – the village of Lupalovo (over 40,000), Molodechno (33,000), the village of Masyukovshchina in the Minsk district (80,000), and on Bronnaya Mountain (*Bronnaya Gora*) in the Bereza district of the Brest oblast (50,000 people) [Kovalenia, Litvin, Kuz’menko 2005: 150–165]. The majority of victims at these burial sites were soldiers, Jews, Soviet activists, partisans, members of the underground movement and their families, and civilian hostages.

Of the 1,400,000 people who perished in the occupied territory of Belorussia, over 800,000 were Jews. By the beginning of 1942, 250,000 Jews perished in Belorussia:

- 120,000 Jews in the military occupied zone of Belorussia;
- 60,000 in the regions included in the Reichskommissariat “Ostland”;
- 70,000 in the regions of Western Belorussia, included in the Reichskommissariat “Ukraine” and the district of “Białystok”.

The greatest number of victims in Belorussian territory was among the Jews of Minsk – nearly 80,000 people; in Białystok – 43,000 to 58,000 people were killed; in Pinsk – 25,000; in Brest – 22,000; in Bobruisk, Vitebsk, Grodno and Slutsk – up to 20,000; in Lida – 16,000; in Baranovichi – 12,000; and in Mogilev – 10,000 Jews were killed [Altman 2002: 245].

The majority of Belorussian Jews (over 500,000) died during the winter of 1942 and autumn of 1943 during the massive purges and destruction of the ghettos in Western and Central Belorussia. From the autumn of 1943 until the liberation of Belorussia in July of 1944, the Nazis discovered and killed the Jews who had managed to survive the pogroms, ghettos, and work camps (in Koldychevo near Baranovichi, the last prisoners were shot in March 1944). Jews hiding in forest-based family camps and with the partisans were also found and slain – a total of 10,000 people [Altman 2002: 246].

Belorussia was one of the first territories of the USSR to fall under German occupation in Europe and it was used by the Nazis to eliminate the Jews of Germany as well as Jews from other countries in Europe (Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands,

Poland, Czechoslovakia, and France). Between 22,000 and 35,000 Jews (according to various data) were deported from all over Europe to Minsk, from November 1941 to October 1942; almost all perished [Ioffe 2003: 146–148].

## THE PLANNING AND EXECUTION OF OPERATION 1005

### THE PERPETRATORS

Plans to cover up Nazi crimes in Belorussia commenced in the autumn of 1943, when Paul Blobel arrived in Minsk and conveyed the relevant instructions to Dr. Erich Ehrlinger, the director of the security police and head of *Einsatzgruppe* “B”. SS-Obersturmführer Gerhard Müller<sup>2</sup>, head of department 4-B (Jewish and Polish affairs) of the security police in Minsk prepared the initial list (which was expanded numerous times) of mass execution and burial sites. Ehrlinger was in charge of the regions in Eastern Ukraine under military administrative control [Arad 2001: 505].

*Sonderkommando 1005 Mitte* (Middle) consisted of the members of the Minsk security police, 30 German policemen, and a platoon of the 4<sup>th</sup> police armored Tank Company. The sub-units of the Belorussian police, reinforced by Ukrainians and Latvians, guarded the sites during the burning of the remains of the people executed and buried there. However, soon after, in order to safeguard the secrecy of the operation, they were replaced by units from the security police, consisting of *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) from Hungary and Romania. In the territory of Belorussia, direct assistance to Operation 1005 was provided by SS- Hauptsturmbannführer Georg Heuser<sup>3</sup>, SS-Obersturmbannführer Eduard Strauch<sup>4</sup>, and SS-Gruppenführer Eberhard Herf<sup>5</sup>.

### MINSK

Trostenets was the largest mass grave site in the territory of Belorussia [Epstein 2008: 106] and is the fourth largest in Europe after Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka. Soviet prisoners of war, Jews from Belorussia and from a number of other

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of 1942, Gerhard Müller took over from Erich Lutkenhus as the director of department 4-B of the Security Police and the SD in Minsk.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Heuser, born in 1913 in Berlin. From December 1941, in Minsk, director of the 4<sup>th</sup> Security Police department and SD, organizer, director and executor of mass murder in Minsk and its vicinity; after the war lived in Federal Republic of Germany; Kriminaloberkommissar of Rheinland-Pfalz, arrested (1959) for premeditated murder and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment (1963), amnestied (1971).

<sup>4</sup> Eduard Strauch, born in 1906 in Essen, from March 1942 until July 1943 headed the Security Police and the SD, then member of staff of the SS-Reichsführer officer-in-charge of combating partisans; sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials (1948) but later modified to sentence of life in prison (1952), died in 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Eberhard Herf, born in 1887, in Krefeld, commander of the Ordnungspolizei (Orpo) in Belorussia from September 1943 to January 1944, sentenced to death by hanging on 30 January 1946, according to the verdict of the Military Tribunal in Minsk.

European countries, members of the underground and partisans, civilians, those arrested and held hostage, all perished there. The name of “Trostenets” covers several sites where the mass extermination of people took place:

- Blagovshchina Grove, the site of the executions;
- the concentration camp next to the village of Maly Trostenets;
- Shashkovka grove, the site of the mass burning of corpses<sup>6</sup>.

#### BLAGOVSHCHINA

Blagovshchina Grove was chosen by the Nazis as a site of mass extermination in the autumn of 1941. The grove is located 11 km from the Minsk-Mogilev high road and 1.5 km from the village of Maly Trostenets. People were brought there by railroad cars and in trucks. Until the very last moment, the German forces tried to keep up the appearance of a transfer of prisoners to a new place of settlement or work: valuables were inventoried and receipts were given out. The executions took place next to prepared ditches; corpses were pushed into the ditches, compressed by caterpillar tractors, and then buried [Chernoglazova, Zhumar’ 2011: 39–40].

SS-Hauptsturmführer Arthur Harder<sup>7</sup> was charged with assembling a team to eliminate the corpses in Blagovshchina. He arrived in Minsk in the fall of 1943 accompanied by 60 German and 30 Russian policemen and 4 translators. From 27 October to 15 December 1943, the Nazis exposed 34 mass graves in Blagovshchina and disinterred the bodies of 150,000 people. Some graves were up to 50 m long. The operation was assigned to *Sonderkommando 1005 Mitte*, which was led by Arthur Harder, Friedrich Seekel, and Max Krahnert. Adolf Rube<sup>8</sup> supervised and managed the workforce. The latter complained to Himmler that using the excavator buckets was very inefficient. Otto Goldap and Otto Dreves were responsible for the activities of the guard units made up of the 60 policemen from the security units and SS soldiers from the *Volksdeutsche*. A group of Jewish prisoners sent from Minsk had to disinter and burn the corpses. However, after the escape of several Jews from Babi Yar, the Jews doing similar work in Trostenets were killed and replaced by prisoners of war<sup>9</sup>.

Prisoners used forged hooks to exhume the graves. They extracted the dead, transferred the bodies on improvised stretchers, and stacked them to form a large pile, alternating a layer of logs and a layer of bodies until it reached 3–5 meters. Each

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<sup>6</sup> Report of investigator of the military prosecutor’s office of the Minsk garrison, captain of justice, Semenov, pertaining to the inspection of locations where people were exterminated in the area around the village of Maly Trostenets, 14–21 July 1944. SARF f. 7021, op. 87, d. 123, ch. 1, pp. 36–42.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Harder, born in 1910, in Frankfurt, SS-Hauptsturmführer, in the summer of 1943 posted to *Sonderkommando 1005*, after 1945 worked as a stonemason, employed by the Krupp-automotive company in Frankfurt, put on trial in Koblenz for aiding and abetting murder (1963), sentenced to a 3.5-year prison term.

<sup>8</sup> Adolf Rube, born in 1896, in Karlsruhe, SS-Hauptscharführer, from 1942 to 1944 served in the Security Police and the SD in Minsk, responsible for the massive execution of Jews by shooting, arrested (1947), found guilty (in 1949) and sentenced to a 15-year prison sentence, released on amnesty (1971).

<sup>9</sup> From the testimony of Adolf Rube, 17 December 1947, Karlsruhe: Kohl [2003: 77].

stack consisted of up to 200 bodies; gasoline or some other fuel was then poured over the stack which was then set on fire with a torch. In some cases, people were burned alive. Usually the teams were made up of 50–100 Soviet war prisoners. After a certain time, the people doing this work were also put to death and burned, and replaced with new grave-diggers, who were also condemned to die. Bones were crushed with hammers and thrown into open pits. By December of 1943, the pits in Blagovshchina were filled up and the Nazis chose a new location, 1.5 km from the Trostenets camp, in the woods not far from the village of Shashkovka [*Lager' Smerti Trostenets* 2003: 183].

After the liberation of Minsk, 3-meter-deep graves were discovered in this location. They contained incinerated human bones, a layer of ash 0.5 to 1 m. deep and a dark brown liquid below. All around the ditches there were many small bones, hair with hair combs, false teeth, and every-day objects (forks, knives, pots, purses, and children's toys) [*Wegweiser zu ehemaligen jüdischen Leidensstätten der Deportationen von Hamburg nach Minsk* 1995: 61, 62, 64].

#### THE TROSTENETS CAMP

In early 1942, the Security Police and the SD opened a labor camp on 200 hectares of agricultural land that had belonged to the Karl Marx *Kolkhoz* (collective farm) before the war, in order to produce food and to work on secondary farm plots. The camp had a working windmill, sawmill, and subsidiary workshops; at the same time, the camp was used for extermination. Members of the Resistance, civilians who had been taken hostage, as well as Jews were executed at Trostenets. The people arrested would first be sent to a jail on Volodarsky Street in Minsk, then to the concentration camp on Shirokaya Street, and from there on, to Trostenets. From the fall of 1942 until the fall of 1943, the commandant of the Trostenets camp was Henrich Eiche<sup>10</sup>, who was later replaced by Rider (Zaider)<sup>11</sup>.

From 28 to 30 June 1944, not long before the liberation of Minsk (3 July 1944), on the site of the camp's former *kolkhoz* barn (measuring 17 × 88 × 3 m) 6,500 people were shot and then burned. The bodies of 127 men, women, and children that had not fully burned and were in various degrees of carbonization remained next to the log stacks. Fragments of German fire bombs, used to increase the temperature of combustion, were found among the corpses. Forensic tests determined that in a number of cases the victims did not die immediately and that the living had been burned together with the dead [Lipilo, Romanovski 1963: 212].

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<sup>10</sup> Henrich Eiche, born in 1911, in Riga, SS-Unterscharführer, worked for the Security Police in Minsk, after 1945, was in hiding in Argentina, considered missing.

<sup>11</sup> Rider (Ridder, Reider, Rizder, Zaider), in witness statements referred to as the organizer of cremations and since Harder had been sent to Trostenets with the SK 1005 team for this very reason, it may be supposed that they are one and the same person, or that "Rider" is a deformation of "Harder", or that the Nazis themselves called him a "knight" (Ritter).

## SHASHKOVKA

In the autumn of 1943, in the vicinity of Maly Trostenets village, the Nazis built an oven to burn the corpses of the executed people. A special road had been built from the Minsk-Mogilev high road to the burning site, with a special sloping access for vehicles. The oven was in fact a dug-out pit measuring 9 m square and 4 m deep with a sloping driveway. It was surrounded by barbed wire and a solid, three-meter-high wooden fence. Six 10 m long rails were laid in parallel at the bottom of the pit and a metal grid placed on top<sup>12</sup>.

The oven in Trostenets was called a “Kiev oven” since it very much resembled the structure built in Babi Yar’s Syrets concentration camp in the north of Kiev, where in August–September 1943, thousands of bodies had been disinterred, burned, and the ashes scattered. In Minsk, this term was first heard from the Ukrainian police battalion, deployed to Trostenets from Kiev in May 1943 [*Lager’ Smerti Trostenets* 2003: 189].

Peasants from various districts were mobilized to deliver the fire wood. From the Lubavshchina and Danilovshchina districts alone, 5,000 cubic meters of logs were delivered, and 2,000 cubic meters of logs came from the Apchak pine forest<sup>13</sup>. A squad was positioned around the ditch to cordon off the area, at a distance of 100 m from the graves. Guards worked in shifts round the clock, and were then given two days’ rest. According to eye-witnesses, the stench from the area of the burning was unbearable<sup>14</sup>.

The oven was used every day; the prisoners were delivered in *dushegubki* – gas vans, specially modified vehicles used to asphyxiate people with carbon dioxide gas. Sometimes the people condemned to die were brought in open cars with a hitched-on trailer. The massacre was swift. People were shot next to and inside the ovens; in other cases groups of people were blown up with grenades. The ashes from the cremation oven were used to fertilize the fields of the subsidiary farms in Trostenets. In all, from October 1943 until the summer of 1944, based on ESC USSR, at least 50,000 people were murdered and cremated on the site. A barrel with a ladle and tar, clothes, shoes, personal objects, and scraps of food were found next to the oven.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Evidence given on 17 July 1944, by Fedor Fedorovich Bozhko, former prisoner of the Trostenets concentration camp: NARB (National Archives of the Republic of Belarus), f. 845, op. 1, d. 11, pp. 40–41.

<sup>13</sup> Evidence of P.N. Golovich, resident of Bolshoy Trostenets village, Minsk district, on July 19, 1944: SARF, f. 7021, op. 87, d. 124, pp. 59–61.

<sup>14</sup> From the testimony of a member of a *volksdeutsch* squadron, about the destruction of mass burial sites in the vicinity of Trostenets village in the Minsk district from 13 February to 9 August 1943, Hamburg, February 1968. *Unichtozheniye evropeiskikh evreev* [Destruction of European Jews], Munich–Zurich 1989, pp. 151–152.

<sup>15</sup> Report of the Extraordinary State Commission (ESC USSR) on the investigation of atrocities perpetrated by German fascist invaders from 19 September 1944. *Nurenbergskiy process nad glavnyimi*

## THE MINSK DISTRICT

In addition to Trostenets, in the vicinity of Minsk and its immediate suburbs, there were discovered traces of executions and the burning of bodies in surrounding areas as well: at the war prisoners' cemetery near the villages of Glinishche and Tuchinka; at the farm in Petrashkevich, in the groves of Uruch'e and Drozdy, at the Jewish cemetery, and in the Cheluskintsev recreation park.

## GLINISHCHE

Five km from Minsk, near the Minsk-Molodechno railroad, 197 graves of various dimensions were discovered, including mass graves measuring  $35 \times 2 \times 5$  m and individual graves of  $2.5 \times 1.5$  m. It is presumed that the burial site contained 80,000 slain war prisoners and civilians. Cremation of the corpses had begun, but the Nazis did not have time to completely eliminate a burial site of this size.

## PETRASHKEVICH FARM

Eight pit-graves of  $21 \times 4 \times 5$  m were identified. In front of each pit, there was a layer of ash, 5–6 m in diameter, remaining from the corpses disinterred and burned there in the spring of 1944. In addition to deposits of ash, there were also remnants of charred and carbonized bones, clumps of hair, dentures, crutches, small metal objects, and pieces of women's and children's shoes. The number of people cremated here is estimated at 25,000.

## DROZDY

A grove located northeast of the Drozdy concentration camp. During excavation work to create a trench of  $400 \times 2.5 \times 2.5$  m, the following remnants were found at a depth between one and a half meters and a few meters: skulls, bones, ash, remains of a fuel mix, and firewood. Based on witness accounts, 10,000 people were brought here from Minsk to be executed.

## URUCH'E

A grove located 9 km from Minsk on the Minsk-Moscow highway, 800 m from the high road and 250 m from the road to Rakov. Ten mass graves were discovered (district of Kornich marshes) with the following dimensions: eight graves of  $21 \times 5$  m, one grave of  $35 \times 6$  m, and one grave of  $20 \times 6$  m – the graves were three to five meters deep. In each grave, there were three rows of corpses laid lengthwise,

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*nemtskimi voennymi prestupnikami* [The Nuremberg trials of the leading German criminals of war], Vol. IV, Moscow, 1959, pp. 83–88.

in seven layers. According to experts and witnesses, over 30,000 people perished here. The Nazis planned to destroy the mass graves by burning the bodies, but they did not have enough time due to the swift assault of the Red Army<sup>16</sup>.

#### CREMATION OVENS

The enormous scale of the work required in the implementation of *Aktion 1005*, the tight deadlines, insufficient personnel to carry out the task, and a shortage of guards necessitated finding better ways of concealing the crimes. Cremation ovens were built in other towns in Belorussia at the same time as in Trostenets.

One of the first ovens was constructed in November of 1942 in the Koldychevo concentration camp (Lozy grove in the Baranovichi district). The corpses of 600 prisoners brought from jails in Stolbtsy and Baranovichi were burnt there. The oven installation turned out to be ineffective, and the cremations were halted, the ovens were blown up, and the 6 people manning them were shot dead<sup>17</sup>. In the spring of 1944, local police were sent to the surrounding villages to look for stove setters. They obtained construction designs for four new, large cremation ovens. However, due to the approaching front line, the Nazis had to discontinue the construction. The unfinished oven was demolished and the nearly 20 builders were exterminated [Sherman 1997: 65].

In October 1943, an oven was set up near the village of Pashkovo in the Mogilev district. A group of prisoners from Mogilev dug ditches 8 m long and 1 m deep. Two ditches, dug in parallel and 2 m apart, intersected at a right angle with another pair of similar ditches, thus, forming a square. In this configuration, a layer of logs and wood strips were laid in rows in each ditch and topped with chopped wood. The next layer consisted of pieces of tar mixed with coal. Corpses were laid above in a single layer. The entire stack reached 8–10 m in height with up to 20 rows of bodies. The work on the ground above required dexterity. When prisoners had accidents and suffered injuries, under the pretense of bringing them to the hospital, they were taken away to be executed. Gasoline was poured on the fire wood and the oven was lit from three sides. Air circulated freely and the pile was rapidly consumed by the flames.

While some prisoners pulled the bodies from the pits and stacked them onto the pyre, others prepared the firewood, delivered the logs, wood strips, coal, and tar from Mogilev and nearby villages. There was no mercy for the workers. If someone could not bring himself to take a decomposing body into his hands, the German overseers would force him to lie face down on the corpses and breathe in the odor of the cadavers for 5–10 minutes. Watches, gold teeth, money, and other valuables found in the ground

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<sup>16</sup> Report of the Minsk oblast ESC commission of 13 August 1944, on the mass destruction of Soviet citizens in the territory of Minsk and its vicinity, by German fascist invaders from 1941 to 1944: SARF, f. 7021, op. 87, d. 9, pp. 26–34.

<sup>17</sup> Report of the Baranovichy ESC city commission on the mass destruction of Soviet citizens in the town of Baranovichi and vicinity 1941–1944, 1 January 1945. NARB, f. 845, op. 1, d. 6, pp. 18–28.

were handed over to the police. The German overseers compensated them for this, in the form of a piece of bread, a cigarette, a mug of *kvass* (ale), or a larger portion of soup at meal time.

All together, five ovens of this type were built. When one of the ovens finished burning, the war prisoners gathered the remaining bone parts, shattered them with a sledge-hammer on a wooden platform, and then mixed them with the soil. The guards consisted of 68 Germans, armed with sub-machine guns and four mounted machine guns, as well as eight sniffer and guard dogs. Only Germans were authorized to travel down the high road in the vicinity of the ovens; accidental passers-by were shot and burned with the exhumed corpses. The workers were given their food directly on the site, next to the dead bodies, without washing their hands before eating. Intestinal disorders began to appear. The sick were allegedly taken off to hospitals, but on the following day they were spotted in the top-most layers of the pyre stack. The bodies of 25,000 people were destroyed by fire in this way<sup>18</sup>.

#### AKTION 1005 ON THE MOVE

After verifying the methods used to conceal the traces of mass crimes committed around Minsk and Trostenets, Sonderkommando 1005 Mitte deployed its activities further, moving from the west to the east of the country, never staying long in any one location. By relying on the local manpower of the security police and the SD, the Kommando members oversaw the burning of corpses, transferred their “know-how”, and advanced to new mass grave sites.

From 16–22 December 1943, the Sonderkommando worked in the vicinity of Molodcheno, destroying 2,000 corpses by fire. From 17–26 January 1944, they burned another 5,000 bodies in the area of Smolevichi, and in early February started their work to the north of Minsk, where they annihilated 20,000 bodies. On 3 April 1944 the Sonderkommando redeployed to the Pinsk district where the SD handed over 60,000 prisoners. These prisoners exhumed and burned the bodies of 21,000 Jews who had been executed there between 1941 and 1943. Next, they moved on to the districts of Kobrin (31 May–24 June 1944) and Slonim (25 June–5 July 1944). The Soviet war prisoners were also put to death and burned once the work was completed [Arad 2007: 507]. In the vicinity of Orsha and Borisov, nearly 6,000 Jews were exhumed from the graves and burned; in the Bobruisk district, corpses were burned at the end of 1943 until early 1944<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Statement of 20 May 1944 of S.I. Pilunov, resident of the Mogilev district, to head of the BShPD (Belorussian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement), P.Z. Kalinin, about how the Nazis covered up the evidence of their crimes, from 15 September to 4 November 1943, NARB, f. 3500, op. (cat.) 2, d. 8, pp. 211–220.

<sup>19</sup> From the testimony at the court investigation of Hans Koch, former head of Security Police in Orsha, Borisov, and Slonim, 18 January 1946: Trial proceedings of atrocities perpetrated by German fascist invaders in Belorussian SSR (15–29 January 1946), Minsk 1947, pp. 108–110, 112–113.

Sonderkommando 8 was put into operation in October 1943. A special brigade to burn bodies was set up, consisting of 68 Germans and 280 prisoners. Starting on 20 October, 12 km to the north of Gomel, 3,500 bodies were destroyed, including at least 1,000 Jews. By 26 October, the brigade had already arrived in Ozarichi, west of Gomel, and in five days burned 4,000 bodies. In early November 1943, the brigade merged with the main Sonderkommando unit in the village of Polkovichi, where they burned nearly 11,000 bodies. The prisoners were exterminated after the work was completed [Loewenstein 1961: 19, 22, 39].

At the beginning of November 1943, two weeks before withdrawal from Bragin, the Nazis forced Soviet war prisoners and other prisoners from the civilian population to dig up and burn the bodies of those killed. The cremation site was camouflaged by an evergreen grove. After the work was done, all the prisoners who took part in the operation were gunned down and burned [Botvinnik 2000: 214].

In Vitebsk, in October 1943, the bodies of the Jews buried in 1941 near the Ilovo River in the Tolobask valley and in other locations were burned<sup>20</sup>. The field commander, SS-Standartenführer Bikkell, participated in the operation as well as his deputy, Sturmabführer Reingord, the inspector of military justice, Shefran, and Sturmabführer Morendarkh. Direct supervision for the operation was the responsibility of Oberleutnant Zenge, the military judge Rech, and his deputy, Treichel<sup>21</sup>.

In Western Belarus, part of the general district of “Białystok”, Operation 1005 started in the spring of 1944. Hauptsturmführer Valdemar Mahol was appointed as commander of the Sonderkommando. His brigade consisted of members of the Security Police, 60 regular policemen (*Ordnungspolizei*), and gendarmes. The Sonderkommando was responsible for erasing the traces of mass crimes in Augustovo, Skidel, and Lunno (4,000 bodies) [Kholavski 1988: 222–223].

In April of 1944, the Sonderkommando arrived in the Brest area where it received 100 prisoners from the SD. The corpse burning started at Bronnaya Gora, where from 1941–1943, nearly 50,000 prisoners were executed from the ghettos of Brest, Pinsk, Drogichin, Ivanovo, Korbin, and Bereza-Kartuska, as well as prisoners of other nationalities from jails in Western Belarus. The operation to efface all traces of the mass atrocities committed by the Nazis continued until mid-May 1944 [Ioffe 2003: 142–143].

Around Grodno, in the prisoner of war camps of Kolbasino, Kulbaki, Lososno, and Folyush, the exhumation and burning of corpses started in the second half of May 1944, when 10,000 bodies were destroyed. Based on the testimony of A.A. Vladykin, “the Germans brought Jews from somewhere”,<sup>22</sup> whom they forced to

<sup>20</sup> Materials of ESC USSR: SARF, f. 7021, op. 84, d. 3, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Some of the participants of *Aktion 1005* in Vitebsk were arrested, in 1962 the Berlin land tribunal sentenced Filbert to life in prison; Scheider – to 10 years, Shtruck and Tunnat – to 4 years, Greifenberg – to 3 years; later, Filbert’s sentence was reduced and he died in his own home and not in a prison cell: Ryvkin, Shulman [2004: 142–143].

<sup>22</sup> 40 Jews from the prisons on Komintern street in Grodno were transferred to the Sonderkommando of Machol village to exhume graves and burn corpses.

dig up the human remains and to burn them in four pyres. The suffocating stench of burning corpses was noticed as far as the village of Naumovka (suburb of Grodno), the witness's native village. When all was done, the Jews were shot. Various objects were found next to the dug-out pits: pitch-forks with bent prongs, two barrels used to hold tar and lime chloride, and a sieve<sup>23</sup>.

In the town of Grodno itself, the Nazis used the fortification trenches around the fortresses to bury the bodies (there were 12 forts in all around the town). In the summer of 1944, according to the testimony of Todrik, two weeks prior to the German retreat to fortress no. 2, the “big bosses” arrived. They consulted together and then started to deliver logs by car. The place of execution was cordoned off by soldiers and was closely guarded. The workers were brought in and the graves were dug up. The smell of corpses filled the air. The bodies were laid out in stacks of 3–7 rows, surrounded with straw, and set on fire. The burning continued for a week, night and day. The ashes were sifted through a sieve, and the grave mounds flattened out with rakes. Near each fire there was a hole that was used to bury the human ashes and cinders<sup>24</sup>. Operation 1005 in Grodno was assisted by district commissar Von Plets, the head of the town Gestapo, Efreliis, the director of prisons, Shendel, and the commandant of ghetto no. 1, Vize. The burning of the corpses continued until 26 June 1944, when the Sonderkommando returned to Bialystok, where they continued their activities<sup>25</sup>.

#### ATTEMPTS TO MAINTAIN SECRECY

The Nazi leadership focused on ensuring the secrecy of its operations to cover up traces of mass murder as early as the first months of the war against the Soviet Union. Himmler's order of 12 November 1941 prohibited filming or photographing executions, and if absolutely necessary, to archive such materials. On 16 April 1942, Heydrich published additional guidelines stating that filming or photographing authorizations could only be provided by the heads of Einsatzkommandos and Sonderkommandos – SS-unit commanders. These materials were to be considered a top secret of the Reich and, in addition, the negatives had to be transferred to the 4<sup>th</sup> department of the RSHA (Gestapo) [Kershaw 2001: 117]. These rules became more stringent after certain materials were published in the Soviet press and subsequently in other countries where mass graves were discovered in regions liberated by the counteroffensive of the Red Army in 1941–1942<sup>26</sup>.

Sonderkommando 1005 brigades deployed to new districts were under strict secrecy regimes. Operations were given code names so that it would be impossible

<sup>23</sup> Testimony of Aleksandr Alekseevich Vladykin: SARF. f. 70, op. 86, d. 40, pp. 3, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Testimony of Ivan Ivanovich Todrik: SARF. f. 70, op. 86, d. 48, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Report of Grodno oblast ESC committee of 25 June 1945, NARB, f. 7021, op. 86, d. 34, pp. 13–19.

<sup>26</sup> *Documenty obvinnyayut*. Collection of documents on heinous atrocities committed by the German authorities on the Soviet territories provisionally captured by them, Issues 1–2, Moscow 1943–1945.

to guess the nature of the activities: “Leveling” (Trostenets), “Appeasement” (Grodno), “Secret Nature” (Orsha and Borisov), and “Weather Report” (Rogachev). Most orders were given orally with no documentation.

It was precisely to maintain the utmost secrecy of operations that the Nazis very rarely resorted to the services of Belorussian, Russian, or Ukrainian policemen, who were only trusted to stand in the front lines of the cordons, and at a distance of 100–200 m. Only German police, gendarmes, or as a last resort, Volksdeutsch, were allowed access to the exact site of exhumations and burning of corpses. If the presence of Belorussian, Russian, or Ukrainian policemen was unavoidable, then they were eliminated at the end of the operation. Even accidental witnesses who found themselves in the vicinity of the “excavations” were eliminated.

The objective of *Aktion 1005* was even concealed from the German soldiers until the very end. SS-Rottenführer Ervin Hansen recalled that in the autumn of 1943, not far from Rogachev, he received orders from SS-Hauptscharführer Shtertzinger to start preparing for operation “Wettermeldung” (“Weather Report”) without any explanation as to what this meant. When Hansen and his soldiers found themselves in the forest on a small clearing connected to the Jewish cemetery, they saw a large pile of firewood and 20 war prisoners under guard of the Rogachev SD. It was only then that Shtertzinger<sup>27</sup> revealed what “Weather Report” really meant. According to Hansen’s testimony, you could see from the expressions on the faces of all his soldiers that they would prefer giving up their home leave for 10 years rather than do this kind of work. The SS formed a chain in the form of a wide circle, so that no Wehrmacht soldier, no policeman, nor local people could see what they were doing. When the graves were opened up, the stench was so overbearing, that the guards in the cordon could hardly stay on their feet. The prisoners who had to burn the bodies were given vodka and cigarettes, and were even promised that they would be sent to work in Germany. The cordon was only dismissed after the last pyre finished burning. The ashes from the burned bodies were loaded onto a car and taken away somewhere. All of the participants in the operation were seriously warned that they should never even consider saying a word to anyone about operation “Weather Report”. A week later, Ervin Hansen and his brigade took part in another operation of disinterment and burning of corpses...<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> According to Ervin Hansen, Shtertzinger was considered the most “dangerous” Gestapo investigator in Rogachev.

<sup>28</sup> Report of SS-Rottenführer E. Hansen from Sonderkommando 7 A about the conduct of Operation 1005 in the Rogachev area, 24 April 1944: NARB f. 3500, op. 2, d. 38, pp. 431–433.

## OTHER METHODS OF CONCEALING TRACES OF THE CRIMES

When there was insufficient time to burn the bodies, mass grave sites were carefully camouflaged. In Grodno, starting in the spring of 1944, the Nazis gave orders to get rid of grave mounds and to plant flower beds and vegetables on them. After Grodno was liberated, in the main court yard of the town jail on Komintern Street, four “flower beds” were dug up, measuring 5 m by 10 m. By the north wall of the jail, rows of planted potatoes concealed graves that were 30 m long and 20 m wide; near the western wall, similar “vegetable patches” were discovered, measuring 50 m in length and 2 m in width. Graves found between the drug store and the hospital were covered up with refuse. In the jailhouse court yard, cobblestones were removed and reburied, and daisies were planted on the 200 sq. m area; in all, the bodies of 1,000 people were buried there<sup>29</sup>.

In Baranovichi, in the Arabovshchina birch grove, trees were planted on top of the graves, which held the bodies of thousands of executed people. Not far from Koldychevo (Stalag 337), the gutters, ditches, and trenches were filled to the top with bodies, but then the top soil was evened out and individual phony mounds formed on top [Sherman 1997: 66].

## BREACH OF SECRECY

From the fall of 1943, the Headquarters of the Belorussian partisans' movement (BShPD) regularly received reports regarding the Nazis' destruction of the evidence of their war crimes. One of the first accounts was received in October 1943. Korolev, head of the Osipovichy operational group, reported that in Minsk (Trostenets, Krasnoe Urochishche, Uruch'e and other locations), the German forces commenced excavations of mass graves and the burning of the bodies<sup>30</sup>. This was confirmed by K.D. Samushchev,<sup>31</sup> who specified that the corpses being burned were those of the victims of the Jewish pogroms: “The dead bodies are doused with some kind of liquid and dusted with a powder as a result of which they burn up almost completely”<sup>32</sup>. The information thus received was immediately transmitted to P.K. Ponomarenko, first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Belarus, to the people's commissar (*narkom*) for State security L.F. Tsanova, and to the head of

<sup>29</sup> Report of the Grodno city ESC commission of 29 July 1944: NARB, f. 861, op. 1, d. 7, pp. 8, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Coded telegram from N.F. Korolev to the deputy head of the BShPD I.P. Ganenko of 28 October 1943: NARB f. 3500, op. 1, d. 4, pp. 60, 66, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Samushev, Konstantin Danilovich (born 1914), commander of reconnaissance group in the territory of the Minsk oblast assigned to execute special assignments for the BShPD from 1 August 1943 to 1 August 1944.

<sup>32</sup> From dispatch of partisan formation to BShPD about combat activity over the period of October–November 1943: NARB, f. 3500, op. 1, d. 4, p. 16.

the Red Army Headquarters' Intelligence branch, F.F. Kuznetsov,<sup>33</sup> who had all just moved from the Moscow area to liberated Gomel.

Similar notifications arrived from all over Belorussia. According to information obtained by a resistance group from Vitebsk, from 5 to 12 November 1943, the German authorities "opened up all the ditches containing corpses".<sup>34</sup> In January 1944, in Borisov [Rosenbloom 1998: 63] and Smolevichi, the German forces conducted exhumation and burning operations for the bodies of those killed from 1941–42. In order to get more information and details, scouts were sent into occupied Minsk and Bobruisk with orders to capture one or two *Sonderkommando 1005* members<sup>35</sup>.

The most frequent and detailed reports came from Minsk. In April 1944, based on a report by Koreshkov,<sup>36</sup> from July until October 1943, thousands of Jews were transferred and shot in the Blogosky woods (Blagovshchina). In February 1944, in Trostenets, wide ditches were prepared, and from 5 to 10 March, 15,000 refugees from Smolensk, Kursk, and other provinces were shot and burned there: "[...] the Germans burn the bodies, sift and bury the remains"<sup>37</sup>.

Sometimes unforeseeable events occurred. In the spring of 1942 in Rogachev, at a mass grave site, the ditch containing over 3,000 bodies was washed away. The corpses started to drift down the River Drut. The German troops forced the local people to fish out the bodies with boat hooks and to rebury them. In December 1943, in Rogachev, decomposed bodies, skeletons, and bones were dug up and stacked in pyres that burned continuously for three days; no one was allowed to approach the ditch. After the liberation of Rogachev by the Soviet troops, the incineration sites were unsealed (November–December 1944). They discovered a 40-cm thick layer of ash as well as remnants of the burnt bones and small metal parts from clothing – buckles from pants, buttons, and hooks<sup>38</sup>.

#### SURVIVING WITNESSES

In spite of the most stringent measures, the Nazis were unable to fully dispose of direct witnesses of Operation 1005<sup>39</sup>. In a number of locations in Ukraine, the Baltic countries, and in Belarus, Jews who were forced to work on the campaign

<sup>33</sup> Intelligence report BShPD No. 76 (107) of 30 November 1943: NARB, f. 3500, op. 1, d. 4, pp. 529–530.

<sup>34</sup> Idem. d. 856, p. 272.

<sup>35</sup> Intelligence report of BShPD No. 14 (131) of 26 February 1944. NARB f. 3500, op. 1, d. 856, p. 491.

<sup>36</sup> Koreshkov, Mikhail Ivanovich, commander of partisan brigade named after S.M Kirov (October 1943 – June 1944).

<sup>37</sup> Wireless message from the command of the Minsk First Partisan brigade to the intelligence department of BShPD of 17 April 1944, NARB f. 3500, op. 2, d. 8, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup> Record of the Rogachev ESC district commission, 15 December 1944: State archive of Gomel oblast, f. 1345, op. 1, d. 15. pp. 1–6.

<sup>39</sup> From a letter to the head of the Main Archives Directorate in the BSSR Council of Ministers, A.I. Azarov, about arranging for an investigation to find documents on the crimes of *Sonderkommando 1005* in Belorussia, 25 January 1968, NARB, f. 249, op. 5, d. 1174a, pp. 79–80.

to destroy the corpses of victims successfully organized several bold escape plans: Near Kiev, on 29 September 1943, prisoners escaped from Babi Yar; on the night of 25 December, prisoners escaped from fortress IX in Kaunas; on the night of 15 April 1944 [Faitelson 2001: 515–517] an escape was planned from Ponary, near Vilnius. Although the majority of escapees were killed during the pursuit, and others captured and put to death, nevertheless, even a small number of surviving witnesses proved to be enough to tell the world the harrowing truth about *Aktion 1005*.

Each individual case is uniquely horrific and almost beyond human comprehension. In the spring of 1943, three people ran away from Trostenets: G.M. Kantor<sup>40</sup>, a Tartar, and a Russian who worked as a wagon driver. The attempted escape, however, was unsuccessful and the escapees were captured and brutally beaten. Kantor was left alive only because he was a skilled mechanic. At the end of July 1944, the German forces started to dismantle the camp. Trucks arrived and took away the Romanians and Hungarians but at the same time other vehicles could be seen arriving in the distance. These were cars carrying the SD members of the Kommando, to eliminate the remaining prisoners. The camp remained unguarded for a very short time, 15–20 minutes, and several dozen prisoners dashed behind the barbed wire fence, into the wheat field. They remained hidden, lying there until nightfall and could hear the mass shooting of the prisoners in the camp. During the night they ran into the forest in search of partisans, whom they found near Novogradok<sup>41</sup>.

Stepanida Savinskaya was a survivor of the Trostenets concentration camp. She was arrested for her links to the partisans in the winter of 1944 and interned in the concentration camp on Shirokaya Street in Minsk. On 30 June 1944, Savinskaya, together with a number of other inmates, was sent to be shot in Trostenets. In a farm shed used to dry hay, an enormous pyre was made up of human bodies and logs. The prisoners were ordered to climb on top of the pile and to lie down; next, she heard gun shots. The SS-men set the shed on fire and threw several grenades. Savinskaya was slightly wounded in the head and decided that she would rather be killed trying to escape than to be burned alive. When she managed to get out from under the mound of corpses, she noticed two men who were still alive. At that moment, a guard opened fire, and the two men were killed. Stepanida escaped and was in hiding for over 15 days, not knowing that Minsk had already been liberated. For the first two days, the German troops searched for the witness from their boats; they had a dog with them, but the dog did not go into the water. Savinskaya survived by eating water plants and frogs. She was completely exhausted and decided to kill herself. She broke a needle and swallowed it, but did not die. She then left the swamp and

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<sup>40</sup> Kantor Grigori Mendelevich was interned at the concentration camp on Shirokaya street in Minsk from 28 August 1941, and in May 1943 was sent to Trostenets.

<sup>41</sup> From verbatim report of interview of staff of Belgsmusei IVOV (Belorussian State Museum on the History of the Great Patriotic War) with former Trostenets death camp inmates and eye witnesses, 31 January 1960. *Fondy BGMIVOV*, n/v (ref.) 11057.

headed for Trostenets, where she discovered that the German troops were gone. By this time it was already 16 July 1944<sup>42</sup>.

Stepan Pilunov is another prisoner who miraculously survived. He became an eyewitness to the burning of over 30,000 bodies in October–November 1943 in the vicinity of Mogilev and Gomel. The last site where he worked was located in the village of Polykovichi in the Mogilev district, where 11,000 bodies were supposed to be exhumed from six mass graves. When all the work was completed, the Nazis ordered the last four prisoners to climb on top of the pyre. The German troops opened fire from their automatic weapons and Stepan was lightly wounded in the head, but pretended to be dead. The SS-men poured gasoline on the pyre and set it on fire from three sides using thermite bombs. When they left, the burning pyre was placed under the guard of the driver of the gas van and a security guard. When the time was right, Pilunov extracted himself from the pile of corpses and escaped to find the partisans<sup>43</sup>.

In March of 1944, 100 Jews escaped from the Koldychevo concentration camp. Very shortly thereafter, twelve of the escapees were discovered and shot by the guards in the Arabovshchina woods not far from the camp. Another ten people were brought back to the camp and beaten to death with sticks. The bodies were thrown into a heap after which the other prisoners were taken out of their barracks and forced to kick the bodies on the ground and to repeat: “I will not escape!”<sup>44</sup>.

#### INVESTIGATING THE CRIMES

Shortly after the liberation of Minsk, efforts were undertaken to find and prosecute the people responsible for the mass crimes, to locate mass graves, and to gather materials about the murder of civilians and Red Army prisoners of war. A team of investigators and coroners was put together that immediately commenced the excavation and investigation of the incinerated corpses. In order to elucidate the circumstances surrounding the murder of Soviet citizens, a special group was formed, consisting of 12 investigators from the public prosecutor’s office, including 4 who spoke fluent German, to question witnesses and German war prisoners. The NKVD BSSR was instructed to hold a similar investigation and questioning of people working in German institutions, so as to bring to light the methods used by the German forces to exterminate Soviet citizens and to expose guilty individuals among the Nazis and their accomplices<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> Record of testimony of S.I. Savinskaya of 24 July 1944, NARB, f. 845, op. 1, d. 64, pp. 70–73.

<sup>43</sup> The case of Pilunov and similar reports about the activities of Sonderkommando 1005 was cited in detail in the report of P.K. Ponomarenko at the VI session of the Supreme Soviet of BSSR on 21 March 1944: Lipilo, Romanovskiy [1963: 140–149].

<sup>44</sup> Central archive of the KGB of the Republic of Belarus (Minsk). Criminal case of Andrey Korolevich.

<sup>45</sup> Information note by the ESC USSR representatives B.T. Gotsev and V.F. Tabelev of 17 July 1944, for P.K. Ponomarenko, about the need to arrange for investigation into the crimes of German fascist invaders in the vicinity of Maly Trostenets village: NARB, f. 4-p, op. 29, d. 5, pp. 43–44.

The materials and physical evidence gathered during the investigation into the crimes committed by Sonderkommando 1005 were handed over to a working group formed in the summer of 1944 to create the Belorussian State Museum on the History of the Great Patriotic War<sup>46</sup>.

The legal inescapability of retribution was based on the Moscow Declaration of 30 October 1943 “Statement on Atrocities” signed by the leaders of Great Britain, the USA, and the USSR [*Vneshnyaya politika Sovetskogo Soyuza v period Velikoy Ochestvennoy voyny* 1946: 419].

The principles contained in the Declaration were elaborated in the Potsdam Agreement of victorious Allied powers, recognized by the UN and established as principles of international law. Earlier, in November 1942, the Soviet government laid down the law of criminal liability for Nazi criminals and their accomplices for committing atrocities, in the form of execution by firing squad or imprisonment. The Decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 19 April 1943 established the judicial procedure for war criminals and envisaged the death penalty by hanging or banishment to a hard labor penal colony for a period from 15 to 20 years [*Sovetskoye gosudarstvo i pravo nakanune i v gody Velikoy Ochestvennoy voyny* 1985: 324–325].

Operation 1005 was exposed during open public trials covering Nazi acts of atrocity. The first trial of this type was held in August of 1943 in Krasnodar and in December of the same year in Kharkov and Smolensk. Later, such public trials were conducted in Kiev, Riga, Leningrad, Bryansk, Velikiye Luki, and other cities [Semiryaga 1991: 348].

The first trial in Belorussia was held in Minsk from 15–29 January 1946. Every day, 300 people poured into the courtroom. They were brought in from all over the country to attend the proceedings<sup>47</sup> [Semiryaga 1991: 356]. Through the depositions of 57 witnesses, the examination of written statements, and of other documents, more and more cases came to light on the execution of Operation 1005. A documentary film entitled *Atrocities of German-Fascist Invaders in the Territory of Belorussian SSR* was put in as material evidence for the case under consideration.

All of the accused made appeals to the court with the claim that every one of the criminal offenses for which they appeared before the tribunal was carried out based on orders given by the German command and the leaders of the German state. However, paragraph 47 of the military criminal code of the III Reich stipulated that a subordinate officer who carries out an order of a senior officer is only criminally liable if he is aware of the criminal nature of the act resulting from carrying out the order [Tippel’skirkh, Kissel’ring, Gudarian 1998: 564]. The assertion that the Nazis did not know what they were doing is untenable, the best proof of which, is the idea

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<sup>46</sup> Today, the BGIVOV museum is the only place in the world that contains the remains of buried victims, their personal affairs, and an inventory of objects that were used by the executioners and grave diggers: guard booth, stretchers, boat hooks, containers for liquid fuels, logs used in the cremation of corpses, bones and ash from the burned corpses.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. d. 8, p. 36.

itself of Operation 1005. For this reason, the court did not accept the claim that carrying out orders could be deemed an attenuating circumstance that would eliminate criminal liability [Sharkov 2005: 121].

On 30 January 1946, a court in Minsk condemned 14 defendants to death. The execution of the sentences took place on the same day at the Minsk hippodrome, and was attended by 200,000 people. Another 4 defendants were given lengthy terms in labor colonies. The Minsk court laid the foundation of judicial practice in applying penal law to individuals convicted of crimes against humanity. In Belarus, from 1946 to 1947, there were held numerous trials of Wehrmacht soldiers and Germans who had worked in punitive agencies: 10 people stood trial in Vitebsk, 22 people in Bobruisk, and 16 people in Gomel. In all, 3,000 people, including 20 generals and senior officers, were brought to justice in the Belorussian courts<sup>48</sup>. The mastermind behind Operation 1005, Paul Blobel, did not escape his fate either. He was sentenced to death at the Nuremburg trials in April of 1948<sup>49</sup>.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Belorussia proved to be one of the central locations for Operation 1005 in erasing the evidence of Nazi crimes against civilians and war prisoners. The territory of Belorussia, under occupation by early September 1941, remained under German control until the middle of the summer of 1944. By that time, the country was already covered by a dense network of mass graves that concealed hundreds of thousands of human remains. The Nazi plan was to wipe out all traces of these mass graves, based on the plans devised by the Reich Main Security Office of Germany.

When the instructions for *Aktion 1005* were first issued in April of 1942, covering up the traces of mass murder was a way for the leadership of the Third Reich to avoid unwanted publicity and criticism from other nations, since at the time, the outcome of the war was not yet clear. However, events in late 1943 and early 1944 fundamentally changed the rationale behind the Operation. The outcome of military confrontations with the Red Army became increasingly easy to predict. It became ever more important to get rid of the indisputable evidence in order to avoid being charged with committing crimes against humanity.

The very idea of conducting *Aktion 1005*, which was given the status of top State secret, clearly demonstrates the arrogance of its organizers. The timing and scope of the plan and the people used to execute the Operation plainly indicate the impossibility of attaining the plan's final objective. Nevertheless, the Operation did

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<sup>48</sup> 24 people were sentenced to death, the rest were sentenced to 15 to 25 years of hard labor: Archive of MVD BSSR (Ministry of Interior of BSSR) f. 45, op. 1, d. 19, p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> The petition for pardon was rejected. Blobel spent the years before his execution in the Landsberg prison, was hanged on 7 June 1951 together with the leaders of security groups: Otto Ohlendorf, Erich Naumann, Oswald Pohl, and Werner Braune.

start, using the full potential of the oppressive machinery of annihilation. It was conducted with utmost violence on an extremely tight schedule. Einsatzkommando brigades had to move quickly from one region in Belorussia to the next, with pyres of human corpses burned round the clock.

It became increasingly problematic to fully implement *Aktion 1005* in Belorussia because, by the beginning of 1944, two-thirds of the territory was already mostly controlled by the partisans, and enemy communications networks were under constant threat of attack. All the efforts aimed at maintaining the secrecy of the Operation to eliminate hundreds of thousands of corpses were futile. Finally, what the Nazis feared most came about – witnesses who had directly participated in the implementation of the Operation had survived.

Ample factual evidence gathered in Belorussia in the wake of the Sonderkommando 1005 operations was extensively used, not only at the Nuremberg trials, but in a host of other (public and closed) trials of Nazi criminals and their accomplices in Belorussia. We will never know the exact number of disinterred and cremated bodies, as we will never know the majority of the names of the actual perpetrators of these crimes. However, the most important thing is clear – Nazi criminals were not able to cover up the tracks left behind by these mass atrocities committed against humanity, and this will serve as a lesson to all those who deny the criminal nature of the Nazi regime.

Note: “Operation 1005 in Belarus: Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Bobruisk, Borisov, Grodno, Gomel”. International Conference “Operation 1005: Nazi Attempts to Erase the Evidence of Mass Murder in Eastern and Center Europe, 1942–1944”, organized by Yahad-In Unum, the University of Paris IV Sorbonne, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies and College Bernardine, June 15–16, 2009 in Paris.

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