

## *Introduction*

Operation Barbarossa, the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, launched the most destructive military campaign in Europe since the Thirty Years' War. For Adolf Hitler and the Nazi leadership, the war "in the East" was not simply an epic land grab. The territory from the Baltic to the Black Sea that Germany and its allies conquered during 1941 and 1942 was singularly important to the Third Reich's plan to transform Europe and ultimately, perhaps the globe. Nazi war aims were twofold. First, Hitler believed that Germany could project hegemonic power only by conquering Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Where this expansion was to stop was unclear, even to the Nazis. Their mental map of *Lebensraum*, or "living space," apparently ended at the Ural Mountains.

Second, Nazi planners believed that this territory would become an asset to Germany only if the region's millions of Slavs and Jews disappeared. Regarding Jews as the most pernicious of the area's many supposedly inferior peoples and as the Soviet regime's puppeteers, Nazi authorities targeted Soviet Jewry for mass killing from the very start of Operation Barbarossa. During the war, German authorities, their allies, and local collaborators murdered some two million Jews in conquered Soviet territory – more than a third of all Holocaust victims. Whereas German authorities in the Reich and Western Europe generally transported Jews to theoretically clandestine extermination centers in Poland, their counterparts in the occupied sections of the Soviet Union perpetrated a very public genocide. There, German forces and their helpers gunned down their victims in mass shootings.

Although Jews were the Nazis' preeminent racial enemies in the occupied Soviet Union, they were not alone. Nazi planners envisioned enslaving local Slavs once the war against the Soviet Union had been won, until German agricultural machinery made them obsolete. Then, they too would share

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

*The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*

the Jews' grim fate. For the Nazis, the destruction of Soviet Jewry was a gambit in a planned long-term genocidal demographic revolution.<sup>1</sup>

This study explores a complementary wartime Nazi project in the occupied Soviet Union that facilitated the Holocaust: the mobilization of local ethnic Germans, or *Volksdeutschen* (hereafter *Volksdeutsche*), to support Nazi rule. To replace the Jews and Slavs slated for eradication, German officials anticipated populating the region with militarized agricultural settlements inhabited by Germans. Without a surplus of Germans in the Reich or the wartime resources to relocate Germans to the conquered Soviet Union, the Nazis marshaled the territory's *Volksdeutsche* as the Third Reich's demographic vanguard.

Tens of thousands of German-speakers had relocated to the Russian Empire at the tsars' invitation by the early nineteenth century. They settled along the Volga and the Black Sea. The descendants of these "colonists" often clustered in homogenous communities, maintaining limited connections to Germany. The largest group of Soviet ethnic Germans to come under the Third Reich's control was the so-called Black Sea Germans (*Schwartzmeerdeutschen*), 130,000 *Volksdeutsche* located largely in southern Ukraine's Odessa oblast.<sup>2</sup>

During the Second World War, German occupiers targeted the Black Sea Germans for a violent Nazification program. When area German authorities resolved to murder Jewish deportees, the region's ethnic Germans became some of the most heavily involved Holocaust perpetrators. This study examines the Nazi *Volksdeutsche* enterprise in southern Ukraine and analyzes why so many local ethnic Germans participated in the Holocaust with apparent enthusiasm.

## GERMAN VOLKSDEUTSCHE POLICY

Nazi planners were not the first to conceive of *Volksdeutsche* as a foundation for German territorial expansion "in the East." Before the First World War, Pan-German thinkers – many of them ethnic Germans – believed that the Russian Empire's *Volksdeutsche* could aid Germany's eastward expansion.<sup>3</sup> At the First World War's twilight, the German military

1 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32–33.

2 German Police Decodes Nr 2 Traffic: 19.2.43, March 1, 1943, British National Archives [hereafter BNA], HW 16, Piece 37, Part 1, 5. Stabbefehl Nr. 101, April 10, 1943, Bundesarchiv Berlin [hereafter BB], R 59/67, 105.

3 Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Die Deutschen im Zarenreich: Zwei Jahrhunderte deutsche-russische Kulturgemeinschaft* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1986), 393.

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978-1-107-06123-1 - The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

3

advanced German influence in the crumbling Romanov Empire by succoring local Volksdeutsche.<sup>4</sup> Germany's 1918 defeat increased the importance of German-speaking minorities in East Central and Eastern Europe in projecting German power. With the postwar reallocation of the German Empire's eastern periphery to Poland and the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire, German-speakers, formerly dominant members of Germanophone empires, became minorities in newly formed states. For Pan-Germans, Volksdeutsche abroad no longer supported future territorial expansion deep into the Russian steppe, but maintained a demographic claim to land that German nationalists regarded as rightly part of Germany. To this end, the Weimar Republic subvented these minorities financially and guarded their linguistic and cultural autonomy diplomatically.<sup>5</sup>

State assistance to ethnic Germans abroad intensified after the 1933 Nazi seizure of power. Like the governments of the Weimar Republic, the Nazi regime saw Volksdeutsche communities as an instrument to reverse Germany's territorial losses after the First World War. The Nazis centralized the diffuse efforts of the Weimar governments and placed ethnic German affairs under the supervision of the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle (Ethnic German Liaison Office) or VoMi. The VoMi coordinated the multitude of state and private actors working on behalf of Volksdeutsche and communicated a unified National Socialist message to ethnic Germans. During the mid-1930s, Heinrich Himmler's SS (Schutzstaffel, Protection Squadron) colonized the VoMi, ultimately co-opting it.<sup>6</sup> Hitler's October 1939 appointment of Himmler as Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of Germanism (Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums) cemented Volksdeutsche affairs within the SS's domain.<sup>7</sup>

The Third Reich used Volksdeutsche to provoke war. During 1938, Hitler trumped up accusations of assaults against ethnic Germans as a pretext to annex the Sudetenland and an entrée to occupy rump Czechoslovakia. The following September, alleged mistreatment of ethnic Germans in

4 Ibid., 583–585.

5 John Hiden, "The Weimar Republic and the Problem of Auslandsdeutsche," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12, no. 2 (1977): 273–289.

6 Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 64–66.

7 On the Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums, see Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy, 1939–1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957). Markus Leniger, *Nationalsozialistische "Volkstumsarbeit" und Umsiedlungspolitik 1933–1945: Von der Minderheitenbetreuung zur Siedlerauslese* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2006). See also Isabel Heinemann, "Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut: Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas" (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Poland constituted a key Nazi justification for the invasion. Whereas Volksdeutsche minorities in Czechoslovakia and Poland facilitated Hitler's foreign policy aims, ethnic Germans elsewhere in Eastern Europe presented a diplomatic impediment, particularly in territory that, after the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, fell within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. To remove this source of friction, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact's secret protocols included provisions for population transfers. After the accord, Hitler ordered Himmler and the VoMi to relocate Volksdeutsche from the Baltic, Volhynia, Bessarabia, and northern Bukovina to German-occupied Poland. There, Eastern European Volksdeutsche could help "Germanize" occupied Poland.<sup>8</sup>

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis reversed their short-lived policy of relocating Volksdeutsche from Soviet territory. With Germany now at war with the Soviet Union and confident of victory, the VoMi took charge of the country's remaining Volksdeutsche, whom Soviet authorities had not permitted to relocate to German-controlled territory before the invasion. Himmler dispatched Sonderkommando R (Special Command R[ussia]), a special VoMi unit to mobilize ethnic Germans in conquered Soviet territory as the demographic seeds of future "Germanization." Removed from the VoMi's chain of command and subordinated directly to the Office of the Reichsführer-SS, Sonderkommando R functioned as Himmler's back-pocket Volksdeutsche affairs unit in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. It operated in both German-occupied Soviet territory and, significantly for the Black Sea Germans, in "Transnistria," the territory along the Black Sea that Germany had granted its Romanian allies.

## ROMANIA AND THE HOLOCAUST

Romania's wartime alliance with Nazi Germany and participation in the Holocaust shaped Nazi efforts to marshal the Black Sea Germans. During 1941, Romania was an eager partner in Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and mass murder.<sup>9</sup> Before Operation Barbarossa, Romania and

<sup>8</sup> Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, 157–179. See also, Phillip T. Rutherford, *Prelude to the Final Solution: The Nazi Program for Deporting Ethnic Poles, 1939–1941* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Catherine Epstein, "Germanization in the Warthegau: Germans, Jews and Poles and the Making of a 'German' Gau," in *Heimat, Region, and Empire: Spatial Identities under National Socialism*, eds. Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann and Maiken Umbach (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 93–111.

<sup>9</sup> Romania's alliance with the Third Reich and its involvement in the Holocaust has been the subject of considerable historical research. See Jean Ancel, *Transnistria, 1941–1942: The Romanian Mass Murder Campaigns*, trans. Karen Gold, 3 vol. (Tel Aviv: The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research

Germany shared a key ambition – Soviet defeat. Ironically, Nazi Germany's pre-1941 diplomatic machinations had permitted Romania's neighbors to claim Romanian territory. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact declared Bessarabia and northern Bukovina within the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet Union annexed those territories during June 1940.<sup>10</sup> Sensing Romanian weakness, Hungary pressed its claims to Transylvania, a contested region in northern Romania. To secure Hungarian support, Germany and Italy brokered the Second Vienna Award, which granted Hungary northern Transylvania in August 1940.<sup>11</sup> The following month, Bulgaria, again with German and Italian backing, compelled Romania to sign the Treaty of Craiova, transferring the contested border region of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria.<sup>12</sup> Successive territorial losses forced King Carol II's abdication and brought Ion Antonescu to power. Otherwise unable to reverse its territorial losses, Romania accepted Nazi entreaties to join in the attack on the Soviet Union. Participation promised not only the return of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina but also the acquisition of territory between the Dniester and Bug Rivers, the region that Hitler dubbed Transnistria.<sup>13</sup>

Romania also had an established anti-Semitic tradition. It did not grant Jews civil equality until after the First World War, when the conflict's victors extracted this concession in exchange for territory.<sup>14</sup> During the interwar period, preexisting Christian anti-Judaism, perpetuated by the Romanian Orthodox Church, reinforced economic anti-Semitism that grew from the disproportionately high representation of Jews in the Romanian middle class.<sup>15</sup> Romania's territorial expansion after 1918 into previously Habsburg lands in Transylvania and northern Bukovina and the formerly Russian province of Bessarabia exacerbated anti-Semitism. Most Jews in

Center, 2003); Dennis Deletant, "Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 1 (2004): 1–26; Dennis Deletant, "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the 'Jewish Problem,'" in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, eds. Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008), 156–189; Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000). See also Mariana Hausleitner, et al., eds., *Rumänien und der Holocaust: Zu den Massenverbrechen in Transnistrien, 1941–1944* (Berlin: Metropol, 2001).

10 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 136.

11 *Ibid.*, 185.

12 *Ibid.*, 137.

13 As Alexander Dallin noted, Antonescu expressed interest in trading Transnistria for Hungarian-occupied Transylvania. Alexander Dallin, *Odessa, 1941–1944: A Case Study of Soviet Territory under Foreign Rule*, 2nd ed. (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998), 59–60.

14 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 12.

15 William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66–70, 238–248.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

these territories were Yiddish-, Hungarian-, or Russian-speaking, which fueled Romanian fears that unassimilated ethnic minorities, above all Jews, were diluting the ethnic purity of the expanded Romanian state.<sup>16</sup> Anti-Semitism was prominent in interwar Romanian political discourse and constituted a key platform for two political parties, the Christian National Defense League and the League of the Archangel Michael (later known as the Iron Guard). During the early 1940s, anti-Semitism became state policy.<sup>17</sup> The Romanian government under King Carol II, taking its cue from Germany's Nuremberg Laws, enacted Law No. 2650, which circumscribed social interaction between Jews and gentiles and codified a definition of who was a Jew that was more expansive than the one employed in its German model.<sup>18</sup> After Carol II's September 1940 abdication, Antonescu's new Legionary State copied Nazi anti-Semitic measures. During his first six months in office, Antonescu expropriated Jewish property, conscripted Jews for forced labor, and limited Jews' access to education and health care.<sup>19</sup> Within a year, Romania erected a wall of anti-Semitic legislation comparable to the one the Nazi regime had taken nearly a decade to build. By early 1941, Romania had clearly signaled its willingness to collaborate in Nazi Germany's war upon the Jews.

Romanian anti-Jewish violence intensified after the attack on the Soviet Union. At Iași, on the border between the Regat and Bessarabia, which Soviet forces had occupied the previous year, Romanian forces unleashed a multiday pogrom during which thousands of Jews perished.<sup>20</sup> This pattern repeated itself as the Romanian military advanced into Bessarabia, Bukovina, and the Soviet Union's pre-1939 border territories. During July 1941, Romanian forces and their German counterparts systematically shot many of the Jewish residents of the city of Kishinev (Chișinău) and deported the survivors.<sup>21</sup> Romanian anti-Jewish violence peaked a few months later. When a Soviet-planted bomb destroyed the Romanian military headquarters in Odessa in late October 1941, Romanian authorities blamed the city's Jews and launched a killing spree that claimed as many as 25,000 lives.<sup>22</sup>

Despite what the Nazis regarded as auspicious anti-Semitic foundations, Romanian anti-Jewish policy differed from that of the Third Reich. Unlike their Nazi counterparts, Romanian authorities differentiated between assimilated Romanian Jews and those viewed as unassimilated foreign Jews residing in the newly (re)acquired territories. For Romania, the decisive

16 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 13–14.18 *Ibid.*, 20.20 *Ibid.*, 63–90.22 *Ibid.*, 178–182.17 *Ibid.*, 17–21.19 *Ibid.*, 22–27.21 *Ibid.*, 104.

factor was culture, not race. Although Romania pursued expropriatory and discriminatory measures against assimilated Jews in the Regat – the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia in their 1859 borders – it did not target them for annihilation. By contrast, Romania’s leaders persecuted Jews in Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, whom they viewed as alien and therefore a threat. During the war, this distinction permitted the Romanian Jewish community’s leaders, including Dr. Wilhelm Filderman, to meet with high-level Romanian officials in Bucharest as Romanian military and police forces murdered thousands of Jews in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union – a situation that the Germans found unfathomable.<sup>23</sup>

Although Romania and Germany pursued intense anti-Semitic campaigns during 1941, they differed on what the “Jewish problem” was and how it might be “solved.” If by summer 1941 it had not yet decided to kill all of Europe’s Jews, the Nazi regime anticipated the mass murder of Jews in captured Soviet territory. Before the invasion, German planners proposed killing Soviet Jews through an unspecified combination of starvation and exposure in Arctic Russia. As it became clear that this plan was infeasible, the Germans shifted to a policy of immediate and total mass killing by mobile shooting squads.<sup>24</sup> Romanian aims were more limited. To eliminate what they considered inassimilable ethnic minorities and to solidify control over newly reacquired Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, Romania’s leaders used ethnic cleansing to eliminate Jews and other allegedly troublesome minorities, including Roma.<sup>25</sup> Deportation deep into the Soviet Union and, according to Antonescu, preferably across the Urals, constituted the solution most attractive to the Romanian leadership.<sup>26</sup> Provided that Jews from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina disappeared, it mattered little to the Romanians whether they reached their destination or perished en route. Whereas the Germans planned in summer 1941 to murder Soviet Jews and viewed deportation and ghettoization as stopgap measures, the Romanians generally preferred deportation to mass shootings.

Romania’s enthusiasm for mass murder waned during late 1942 as prospects of total German victory dimmed. During fall 1942, for example, Antonescu postponed indefinitely the implementation of an agreement with Germany to deport Jews from the Regat to Operation Reinhard’s

23 Deletant, “Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944,” 7.

24 Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 103.

25 Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, trans. Richard Davies (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 163–188. Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

26 Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, 142.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06123-1 - The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

killing centers in Poland. During 1943 and early 1944, Romanian authorities not only suspended deportations of Jews and Roma to Transnistria but even began to allow the deportees to return to Romania. The coordinated mass killing campaign that Transnistria's Romanian authorities pursued with German assistance during winter 1941–1942 marked the height of Romanian anti-Jewish violence that ebbed and flowed with Germany's military position.

## SONDERKOMMANDO R IN TRANSNISTRIA

Offering Antonescu control of Transnistria was the price Germany had to pay for Romanian support in the invasion of the Soviet Union, but it had the tremendous drawback of placing the largest group of Soviet ethnic Germans in occupied territory under Romanian control. For Himmler and the VoMi, this situation was intolerable. They feared that the Black Sea Germans would languish under Romanian rule, and they also insisted that an ethnic German demographic bulwark in southern Ukraine was necessary to secure future German claims there after the war when a victorious Germany might wrest control of Transnistria from the Romanians.<sup>27</sup> The Romanians, junior partners in the alliance, permitted Sonderkommando R to operate in their occupation zone although they were well aware of the SS's designs on Transnistria.

In German-occupied territory, Himmler's subordinates were often challenged by other powerful German organizations, including the Wehrmacht and the civil administration. In Transnistria, by contrast, Sonderkommando R had to contend only with the Third Reich's Romanian allies. Owing to high-level agreements between the SS and the Romanians, which ceded ethnic German affairs to Sonderkommando R, and the willingness of area SS officers to run roughshod over Romanian occupation officials, the SS carved out unparalleled autonomy in Transnistria. Nowhere else in German-dominated Europe did the SS have such unfettered freedom to mobilize local German-speakers as a precursor to future German settlement. Examining Sonderkommando R's Volksdeutsche project in Transnistria provides an exceptional window into embryonic Nazi plans for the German-occupied Soviet Union.

27 There was substantial debate among German authorities regarding Transnistria and its Volksdeutsche population. Some Nazi planners, including Dr. Georg Leibbrandt, Alfred Rosenberg's deputy for political affairs and himself an ethnic German from southern Ukraine, opposed granting Romania southern Ukraine. Dallin, *Odessa*, 57. As late as early 1942, however, some German planners continued to toy with relocating Volksdeutsche from Transnistria to occupied Poland on the model of earlier German "resettlements." Heinemann, "Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut," 420–421.

Spread thinly across Romanian-controlled southern Ukraine, Sonderkommando R's personnel faced daunting challenges in organizing local Volksdeutsche into militarized islands of Germanness. Soviet rule and months of combat had devastated southern Ukraine's once-fertile countryside, and area residents faced starvation with winter's rapid approach. Tensions between Sonderkommando R's personnel and local Romanian authorities also boiled over into violent confrontations.

To make matters worse from the SS's perspective, the VoMi found few sufficiently "ethnically German" area residents to include in the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the Nazi racial community. Despite extensive institutional experience identifying and relocating ethnic Germans across Eastern Europe before 1941, the VoMi had not operationalized a definition for a category as ambiguous as ethnic identity. Its personnel therefore resorted to highly subjective evaluations of cultural proximity to Germany, especially inter-war National Socialist affiliations, to identify would-be ethnic Germans. In Transnistria, even these measures of "Germanness" proved useless. The Black Sea Germans' circumscribed historical contacts with Germany made them one of the most culturally distant groups of ethnic Germans that Nazi forces encountered. Transnistria's Volksdeutsche also had only rarely, if ever, engaged in National Socialist agitation before the war. That Transnistria's ethnic Germans had intermarried with Slavs and Jews, as the SS suspected, merely compounded the VoMi's concerns about the racial viability of the area's Volksdeutsche. Although tantalized by the demographic opportunities that the Black Sea Germans presented, Sonderkommando R's personnel were left to rule a population that they regarded as especially suspect in an especially remote and backward corner of Hitler's new empire.

Driven by a commitment to National Socialism and a desire to maintain the VoMi's outpost in occupied Ukraine, Sonderkommando R's leaders brushed aside these obstacles. Without knowing which local residents to include in the Nazi racial community, the VoMi ceded ethnic classification to supposedly reliable indigenous informants, permitting them to define the boundaries of Germanness. For these putative Volksdeutsche, the VoMi unfurled a muscular Germanization project that hinged on material rewards, ethnic cleansing, propaganda, and constant violence.

Notwithstanding the brutality of Nazi rule in rural Transnistria's ethnic German communities, local residents understood the benefits of inclusion in the *Volksgemeinschaft* and adeptly manipulated the Third Reich's racial categories. In insular communities, where family ties danced across Nazi racial boundaries, area inhabitants exploited their power over ethnic classification to benefit from German policies. Initially unpersuaded by Nazi

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

entreaties to identify all local Jews, many would-be Volksdeutsche communities conspired to hide their thoroughly integrated Jewish or “mixed” ancestry members from the Germans. Enticed by the scarce agricultural resources that the VoMi channeled to local Volksdeutsche, area residents charged with ethnic classification included their non-German relatives in the Volksgemeinschaft. By late 1941, unbeknownst to the SS, the Nazi Germanization project was foundering on local prevarication.

At the same time, unanticipated actions by Romania moved local VoMi commanders to enlist residents in mass murder. During fall 1941, the Antonescu regime deported Jews from territories that it had acquired during the invasion, sending them to camps and ghettos near Odessa and along the Bug River’s right bank. Fearing that these Jews could spread epidemic typhus to local SS-controlled communities, Sonderkommando R assisted the Romanians in murdering Jewish deportees near the Bug River during mid-December 1941. Without other personnel in the region, the SS deployed its ethnic German militia (Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz) – units that German authorities had used to contest Romanian rule in the countryside – to shoot tens of thousands of Jews. Initially, Sonderkommando R regarded mass murder as a detour from its central Germanization mission. The Romanians, however, recognized that, if pressed, Sonderkommando R and its local militiamen could assist in “solving” their “Jewish problem.” When German authorities in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine refused to permit the Romanians to deport Jews across the Bug River and into German-controlled territory, the Romanians capitalized on Sonderkommando R’s willingness to kill. Instead of sending Jews across the Bug River, they deported their Jewish prisoners to villages in northeastern Transnistria – the heart of the VoMi’s population project. Confronted by the threat of racial “contamination” and epidemic disease, Sonderkommando R sent ethnic German militiamen on killing operations that lasted until spring 1942, when German diplomatic pressure and the increasing scarcity of victims largely ended the unit’s participation in mass murder. By summer 1942, Transnistria’s Volksdeutsche militiamen had evolved into skilled *genocidaires*, who had mastered many of the techniques that German perpetrators were beginning to deploy at extermination centers in occupied Poland.

Sonderkommando R’s initially unanticipated participation in mass murder bolstered the unit’s once-tenuous Germanization project in Transnistria. Aware that they had sabotaged Nazi ethnic categories, area residents used genocide to demonstrate their Germanness to the SS. As local inhabitants correctly suspected, the SS regarded complicity in genocide as evidence of the National Socialist convictions that, in turn, demonstrated Germanness. Sonderkommando R’s transformation into a killing unit also