

Celebratory Ritual and Comradeship in the Wake of Mass Murder

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The actions of Einsatzkommando 2 (EK2), stationed in Liepāja (Libau), Latvia near the coast of the Baltic Sea, provides one example of the integration of photography into the process of mass murder. During a three-day massacre from December 15 to December 17, 1941, the men of EK 2, the Order Police, and local auxiliaries killed some 3,000 Jewish men, women, and children. As part of the unit's largest mass murder action, SS Lieutenant Wolfgang Kügler, the commander of EK 2, not only hosted high ranking SS and Wehrmacht officials from Riga at the execution site, but also allowed photos to be taken of the killing process, photographs that were reproduced and shared among the members of the unit after the event.

In fact, the process of photographing mass killings and the subsequent exchange of photographs of these atrocities was not uncommon, and once again offers an important insight into the way the perpetrators thought about such actions and reveals their own desire for keepsakes and souvenirs of these events. Likewise, the interaction of these men in social spaces such as barracks, bars, and community areas were sites for ritualistic bonding between men involving excessive drinking, boasting, and song. These occasions served to emphasize Nazi masculine ideals of hardness and camaraderie, and to prepare men for their roles in violence. Hans Baumgartner, a member of EK2 stationed in Liepāja participated in numerous mass executions during his time in the East. He recalled how notification of upcoming executions occurred at "group dinners" the night before the killings accompanied by the distribution of .75-liter bottles of vodka to the participants. This paper examines the ways in which the men of EK 2 used social spaces and souvenirs to celebrate and commemorate their participation in mass murder.