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Killing on the Ground and in the Mind
The Spatialities of Genocide in the East

Waitman Wade Beorn, with Anne Kelly Knowles
In the late summer and fall of 1941, a holocaust was taking place across the Soviet Union.1 This was not the Holocaust of popular memory. There were no gas chambers, no train journeys, no barbed wire. This was a “holocaust by bullets,” an intimate iteration of the Nazi genocidal project in which Jews were murdered at home, by killers who found themselves acting in the closest proximity to the victims.2 If Auschwitz has come to symbolize the industrial, assembly-line face of the Holocaust, the murder of approximately one and a half to two million Jews by the Einsatzgruppen (EG) mobile killing squads more closely resembled the domestic system in which work was performed in countless homes dispersed across the countryside.3 Indeed, the metaphorical comparison between factory and cottage industry functions on a regional scale (central location with transportation to factory versus dispersed locations of work) and a microscale (work within the confines of a single building or setting versus work in various structures set in the countryside). The two statements to the left, by perpetrators at the lowest and highest levels of the killing process, serve as a good introduction to this discussion of EG killing in the context of a locational model that examines killing at both a regional and a personal scale and from both a logistical and a moral perspective.

The murders of Jews by Nazi Einsatzgruppen (literally “operational groups”) in mid- to late 1941 has increasingly been seen as more than a prelude to the later industrialized killings that occurred in the death camps. Indeed, these mass killings of Jewish men, women, and children were well under way before any of the Nazi extermination centers opened and before construction on many of them had even begun.4 Thus, these killings were the first implementation of the Final Solution.

After a more ad hoc employment of killing squads during the invasion of Poland in 1939, Nazi authorities sought a closer and more clearly delineated relationship between the EG and the military in preparation for the invasion of the Soviet Union.5 In April 1941, an agreement was hammered out between Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS; Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) and architect of the Final Solution; and the army representative General Eduard Wagner. They tasked the army with “march, quartering, and supply” support of the EG and directed that the “combating of enemies of the state and Reich” was the general responsibility of Army Group Rear-Area commanders.6

These killing squads, which would receive their mission from the RSHA, were broken down into four large EG (A, B, C, D). Arranged behind the major army groups with A in the North and D in the South, these units were to follow closely behind advancing Wehrmacht...
(German Army) units, eliminating communist functionaries, Jewish leadership, and male Jews of military age. Each of these EGs was further broken down into numbered Einsatzkommandos (EKs) and even smaller Sonder- or Teilkommandos, which were to carry out the actual shootings. The leadership of these units was entrusted to highly motivated, highly indoctrinated, and oddly enough highly educated SS officers, while the rank and file was composed of a mixture of Waffen-SS, Gestapo, and Security Service personnel. All told, there were only about three thousand men assigned the daunting task of eliminating Soviet Jews and communists. Their task was made even more difficult by the decision late in the summer of 1941 to expand the killing operations to include all Jews regardless of sex or age. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that by the end of September 1941, the manpower and weaponry of German Army units were being marshaled in support of the Nazi genocidal project.

In the past decade, scholars have begun to focus more intently on the nature of mass shootings in the East, although the subject has yet to receive as much attention as the extensive and detailed scholarship on SS concentration camps and extermination centers. This neglect has many origins, including the politics of the Cold War, the inaccessibility of much documentation in the Soviet Union, and the relatively few survivors available to give testimony. Indeed, we still do not have a comprehensive catalog of open-air shootings in the East. In addition, we still lack a thorough examination of the multifaceted participation of the German military in the Holocaust. Initial studies of the EG in the East focused on structural relationships and policy implications as well as the place of these killings in the context of dating decisions for the implementation of the Final Solution. These higher-level and bigger-picture studies are important in providing context for the killings the East and in identifying larger organizational structures and responsibilities.

As scholars begin to focus on this period and region in more detail, we encounter the challenge and necessity of both empirically identifying the spatial distribution of the killing as well as qualitatively analyzing its meaning in the larger context of the Holocaust, specifically, and genocide, generally. These questions are geographical and historical. Indeed, spatial and epistemological analyses cannot easily be separated. In the spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration between history and geography, this chapter proposes the use of a locational model that functions quantitatively and qualitatively at a regional and a personal scale. It informs a dynamic visualization of the spatial distributions of killing while facilitating analysis of the motivations and decisions of the individuals involved.
A Locational Model of Killing

It may be surprising that no comprehensive map or database of Einsatzgruppen killings has yet been constructed. Information, some of it quite detailed, exists in archives, regional studies, and survivor testimonies, but these sources have yet to be compiled or examined in a deliberate and comprehensive manner. It is one of the goals of this study to demonstrate the value of such a project. A database of killings would logically include where they took place and when, along with information about who was killed, by whom, and other details of the event. Location can also provide a conceptual framework for analyzing data on atrocities in the East. The model proposed here consists of three components: location, actions at that location, and the meanings that can be drawn from these actions and their attributes (see figure 4.1). What makes this particular theoretical framework potentially valuable is that these three simple components can be used at the regional and the personal scale.
At the regional scale of EG killing operations, location can be defined as the geographic coordinates at which killings took place linked to information about each event. Next, we must identify the relevant details of the actions that took place at this location. Who were the killers—Germans, non-Germans, SS, army, police? What was the nature of the killing site—a forest, town square, Jewish cemetery? Finally, who was killed—numbers, men, women, children, Jewish and non-Jewish, intelligentsia? Not every source will be able to provide each of these attributes; however, triangulating multiple sources can bring a great deal of richness to the data that would then facilitate a comprehensive analysis. Our final component, meaning, is historical interpretation derived from analyzing the data. With the ability to plot these events and generate visualizations, scholars would be able to discern patterns across the occupied territories that would raise larger questions of timing, policy implementation, and the range of normal and exceptional behavior at an organizational level of the EG killers. We will return to these potential questions when we examine the proof-of-concept project by Alex Yule, Robert Burton, and Benjamin Perry Blackshear.

Of course, all models are only as good as the data entered into them. These data will have to be mined from a variety of sources such as official documents, survivor testimony, perpetrator testimony, and secondary sources. Each of these presents the researcher with its own complexities and nuances that must be considered as this information is rendered into discrete data. For example, sources may identify the time of a killing only by month and year, or the victims may not be identified by age and gender. Although such incompleteness and inconsistency would limit the utility of the data for answering some questions as precisely as one might wish, there are established methods for dealing with these problems. The data need not be perfect to support worthwhile and quite powerful visualizations.

At the opposite end of the geographical spectrum, this locational model posits that we can better understand participants’ attitudes toward killing and complicity if we consider their physical position and behavior. We apply the same three data categories, albeit this time at the micro or individual level. Location: here, the location of the participant in genocide is defined in more relative terms. How close was he to the actual act of killing—at the killing pit, guarding it, in the town? Second, action: what did the individual actually do (or not do) in support of the killing process—shoot, guard, give the shooters food and drink, round up victims? Last, meaning. This attribute has two contexts for the researcher. First, what did the position (and the accompanying actions) mean to the participants, at the time of the event and later; and second,
what conclusions can we as scholars draw about the individual’s attitude toward his own participation and perhaps his level of agreement with it?

The employment of the model also relies on the data entered into it. At this level, the nature of the data is somewhat different, for much of it comes from the close reading of a variety of personal accounts (survivor, perpetrator, witness). The researcher must have an intimate knowledge of the events at hand and the personalities involved before applying this approach, as the sources require judicious interpretation (survivors may not remember accurately; perpetrators often seek to obscure or lie about their roles). Therefore, unlike the regional version, the findings for individuals’ locations are likely to be more suggestive than definitive, though they could be more certain when combined with other sources of evidence. Indeed, examining actions and testimonies from a spatial perspective could provide insight into how participants in genocide negotiated their participation, how they may have felt about it at the time, and how they may have viewed their actions after the war in the context of their personal life narratives, insights that are not readily apparent from a superficial examination of their “official” statements.

Finally, this model demonstrates the power of what geographer Mei-Po Kwan calls “hybridity,” a combination of the quantitative and qualitative that “seeks to cross the boundary between geo-spatial technologies (GIS and GPS) and a qualitative understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in various cultural contexts.” The locational model functions at the regional level as well as the personal level, it accepts both “hard” data and subjective readings, and it raises (and can perhaps answer) previously unexplored questions within a coherent and consistent framework. In the end, the approach also brings to light the great potential energy released when geographers and historians work together not only on a common subject but from multiple theoretical perspectives. It is important to underscore that this is a suggestive model with a proof-of-concept application. It does not presume to be in any way predictive but merely serves as one possible explanatory or methodological framework among many. With this as an introduction, I will now turn to two examples of the model at work, at both scales.

**Regional Killing: The Case of the Einsatzgruppen in Lithuania**

In December 1941, a curious and chilling report was crafted by Karl Jäger, the fifty-three-year-old commander of Einsatzkommando 3 (EK 3) assigned to Einsatzgruppe A (EG A). In it, the SS officer documented the actions of his unit in murdering 137,346 civilians in Lithuania, the vast majority of whom were Jews. This death toll was reached between
July 2 and December 1, 1941. In many ways, the Jäger Report is “the best example we have of an extensive Kommando report ‘from the field.’”

The incredibly detailed document proudly noted dates, locations, number of victims, and their ethnicities. It often went on to include sex and nationality and to distinguish between adults and children. The infamous Jäger Report concluded with Jäger’s boast that “I can confirm today that Einsatzkommando 3 has achieved the goal of solving the Jewish problem in Lithuania. There are no more Jews in Lithuania, apart from the working Jews and their families.”

In 2008 Middlebury College students Alex Yule and Robert Burton translated the Jäger Report into a historical GIS database in order to create an animated map showing the locations and timing of the EK 3 attacks. They expected to confirm the general patterns shown in previous maps of EG actions. Like many maps of military actions, the map in figure 4.2 depicts the capture of territory and, in this case, attacks on civilian populations as linear thrusts, with side branches reinforcing the general direction of forward advance. In fact, this map is so general as to offer little to those seriously investigating the movements and actions of the Einsatzgruppen. Yule and Burton were stunned when their animation of the Jäger Report data gave a very different impression. Instead of orderly, methodical movement, the animation showed EK 3 darting back and forth across Lithuania in what seemed random or chaotic patterns.

Although still maps cannot convey the dynamism of the animation, the selected frames shown in figure 4.3 indicate how the killing squad’s movements and locations of atrocities.

Einsatzgruppen Routes, 1941, from The Einsatzgruppen Reports, edited by Arad et al., originally published by the Holocaust Library in 1989, is used with permission from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Prewar Borders

Territorial Boundaries as of July 31, 1941

Period 1 Period 2 Period 3

Extended Massacres

Single Days

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targets changed over time. In July and early August, the killers advanced rapidly across Lithuania, crossing the border as far as Dünaberg. The sequence of early attacks by EK 3 units generally trends along a north-west diagonal, which suggests that they may have been traveling along the main highway that ran through the country in that direction and that they were initially focusing on towns and villages within easy reach. Even in this first phase, however, either EK 3 was constantly retracing its steps or subcommandos were striking repeatedly at certain places.

4.4. Numbers of civilians killed by EK 3 over time. Graph by Benjamin Perry Blackshear.
In late August (the second frame), a markedly different spatial pattern appears, with a burst of attacks in west-central Lithuania. In September and October (the third frame) came repeated mass atrocities in larger towns, particularly the ghetto towns of Vilnius and Kaunas, but also in some more rural communities.

In 2011–12, Benjamin Perry Blackshear, another geography student at Middlebury College, explored other ways to visualize the Jäger Report data. Statistical graphing software revealed striking temporal patterns that were harder to see in the animation. Two of these visualizations demonstrate the utility of the locational model particularly well.

The first (see figure 4.4) combines two histograms that plot both the number of discrete killing events (in tan) and the number of victims (in red, counted in thousands) over time. This simple presentation illustrates much. Period 1 (July 1–August 14) was characterized by frequent killings of small numbers of victims. Period 2 (August 15–September 9) showed a marked increase in both incidents and victims. Period 3 (September 10 through November) had far fewer operations but much higher death tolls per attack. How does this visualization match up with the history? Do the trends in the data correspond to broader patterns of EG actions in the East?

Eminent Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg divided the EG killings in the Soviet Union into what he termed two “sweeps” or stages. The first sweep began with the beginning of the war in the Soviet Union and finished at the end of 1941. The second sweep took place in 1942 as the EG were reinforced by Order Police units. This operation was also characterized by an increasing use of local auxiliaries. Hilberg’s first sweep might also be broken down into periods. As mentioned, the EG were initially to target communist functionaries, Jewish leadership, and Jewish men of military age. Sometime late in the summer of 1941, as the targeting of Jews was expanded to include all Jews, the scope of the killing increased exponentially. We might add a further third sweep in late 1942 and 1943 in which surviving Jews in ghettos across the Soviet Union were targeted for extermination.

At the regional scale, the patterns in figure 4.4 correspond well with the historical scholarship. During period 1, we would expect to see many shootings with smaller death counts as EK 3 was rushing east behind advancing German troops. The goal was to eliminate the smaller category of “enemies” (communist functionaries, intelligentsia, Jewish leadership) in as many towns as possible and move forward. By period 3, the data show fewer killing operations but a massive increase in victims per attack. This makes sense as well, for by this time all Jews were to be killed, which both increased the numbers of victims and
limited the ability of the killers to conduct as many killing operations simultaneously. This leaves the spike during period 2, when there were many operations and many victims. Was this the period when Jäger's unit received the order to kill all Jews? Figure 4.5 argues for this interpretation. It shows a dramatic change occurring in the last week of

**4.5. EK 3 killings by date, number, and victim demography. Graph by Benjamin Perry Blakeshear.**

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August, when suddenly women and children in Lithuania were being killed in large numbers, sometimes accounting for more than half of the victims. Reading the figure horizontally, it is also possible to pick out the places where the greatest number of attacks took place: Vilnius and Kaunas, to be sure, but also Panevezys and Ukmerge. Did some Jews manage to survive in other small places that were targeted only once, early in the onslaught, or was Jäger correct in boasting that his men had killed all the Jews in Lithuania except those who were working? Were surviving Jewish workers disproportionately from places where political opposition had been viciously suppressed in the summer, before the order came to kill all Jews?

The visualizations and analysis made possible by an HGIS of the Jäger Report clearly support scholarly interpretations of the nature of the EG killings in the East. Seeing the events summarized in maps and diagrams prompts comparison between attacks and raises questions such as those above. This proof-of-concept study was based on one detailed document from one EK over a period of six months. Consider how much more we might learn if we could generate a similar set of data for the entire eastern front from 1941 to 1944, a set that includes many more of the attributes included in the locational model. The task sounds daunting but is certainly feasible. A fairly complete record of all EG reports exists in many archives and in published form. These records can be supplemented by a vast body of secondary research on the Holocaust in regions targeted by the Einsatzgruppen. In addition, a wealth of survivor documentation from oral testimonies to memory books (Yizkor) to genealogical websites such as JewishGen.org can provide additional information, as well as supplement and potentially challenge perpetrator-generated documents.

Bringing together these varied sources into a database to visualize the scope and nature of EG killing in the Soviet Union is likely to prompt new questions, particularly of comparison and change over time. A geographical approach then informs and enriches historical analysis. What policy decisions might become apparent? When and where did the killing of women and children begin? What might this tell us about the transmission of a verbal order to kill all Jews as we trace the first killings of women and children across a one-thousand-mile front? Were some units faster or slower to make the transition? What could explain the differences?

A GIS based on this locational model could also inspire us to ask questions about the perpetrators on the ground. Did certain units travel farther and kill more people than others? Why might this be? Did some units prefer certain types of killing locations over others? Did the various units remain within certain geographical boundaries or did they
overlap? Who were the perpetrators? How did their identities change over time? Did some locations see greater involvement of local auxiliaries than others? And did the German Army become more complicit in one place than another?

Finally, such a study would also allow us to learn more about the experience of the victims. How did the frequency of killing change over time? Were some areas spared longer than others? Was there a clear progression from urban to rural locations, or were EG movements more complex than that would suggest? When and where did ghetto clearing begin? What can we infer about the nature of the killing sites themselves? Were early killing sites more public (cemeteries, town squares), then became more secluded? Were operations more or less comprehensive in certain areas, allowing greater or lesser chances for survival? Finally, this study might allow us to probe the important question of what Jews could have known about the extermination process taking place around them and what effect this might have had on their decision making regarding flight, hiding, or resistance.

Pursuing spatial questions such as these would then require new historical research to answer. A comprehensive GIS database of EG killings would be an immensely powerful resource for understanding the nature of these open-air killings in the East.

**A Geography of Complicity: Mental Landscapes of Killing**

The locational model can also be used to consider the relationship between location and attitude, in this case among German soldiers involved in killing operations in the East. Reconstructing the mentality of Holocaust perpetrators can be exceedingly difficult. The killers have rarely talked about their motivations or emotions, and the statements of those who have are often self-serving or intentionally misleading. An analytical model focused on location and behavior can lessen some of this uncertainty and fill some gaps in the testimonial record. The question of motivation cuts to the heart of genocide research: how and why do seemingly normal people become killers?

Early in the fall of 1941, the German Army became increasingly involved in assisting and sometimes participating in genocide. As German soldiers were not initially intended to be murderers of Jews, their participation makes them a case study in whether, and how, a group of perpetrators negotiated their new roles in killing. Of course, this interpretation is predicated upon the ability of individuals to control their location as well as their actions vis-à-vis killing. Since the Nuremberg Tribunals, where the “obedience to orders” defense was first raised, this concept has been a complex one, subject to much debate. Exactly how
much agency did German soldiers have in their own participation in genocide? After all, most of them were not Mengeles or Eichmanns. Certainly, they were under a great deal of social-psychological and institutional pressure to conform and obey.

However, even those directly tasked with genocide and specially indoctrinated to carry it out were offered the option of nonparticipation. For example, Otto Bradfisch, the commander of EK 8, which had murdered 28,219 Jews behind the Army Group Center, offered his men an out. “He who cannot in good conscience participate in shootings,” one of his men recalled him saying, “should report to him. He would be understanding.” This man recalled that everyone in the unit was aware of this.25 SS-Obersturmbannführer Alfred Filbert of EK 9 recalled that “a young law graduate SS officer . . . came to him at Vilnius and said, ‘I cannot do it’”; Filbert reassigned him to the unit office.26 The commander of Reserve Police Battalion 101 explicitly told his men that they would be executing women and children and that any man who did not want to participate could step forward and be relieved. Twelve men accepted his offer.27 Christopher Browning’s work on Police Battalion 101 led the way in simultaneously demonstrating the prevalence of consent and the possibility of dissent among perpetrators.

There are many examples of similar behavior among Wehrmacht soldiers. Unlike the killing squads whose explicit task was to murder, these men had more latitude to refuse. Murdering women and children was not part of their official mission, and no evidence has yet been found of anyone being executed or otherwise severely punished for refusing to participate. Indeed, most commanders, if displeased with the insubordination of a soldier refusing to kill, were reticent about preferring formal charges, which would result in a very official and documented court-martial. For all concerned, it was better to leave the task to those more willing. In the summer of 1942, the commander of a Wehrmacht Signal Company decided to murder all the Jews in the small village in which the unit was stationed. He ordered his clerk to participate in the killing, to which the clerk responded that that sort of thing was not for him and to leave him be.28 In 1941, after one round of a shooting, two German soldiers in Belarus requested to be relieved and were reassigned to guarding the victims in the town.29 In these examples of refusal, there is no record of negative repercussions beyond perhaps insults; indeed, one commander who directly refused to order his unit to kill was simply judged to be “too weak” by his battalion commander but suffered no further ill effects.30

Having established that there was at least a possibility of modifying or choosing one’s role in mass murder, we can proceed to applying the locational model, though much differently from our previous example.
The attributes (location, actions, and meaning) are not as clearly defined and must be determined somewhat subjectively from a variety of sources. In this example of German soldier participation, the data are derived from close reading of a critical mass of postwar interrogation materials, survivor testimony, and fieldwork at the killing sites themselves.

The tasks of the army in assisting in Einsatzgruppen shootings fell into a similar routine across the Soviet Union (see figure 4.6). First, in the predawn hours, the village would be surrounded to prevent anyone from escaping. Even this position was not perhaps as benign as it seems: men in the outer cordon were often confronted with Jews pleading for their lives, and at times German soldiers shot these people as they approached. Another group of soldiers would begin rounding up Jews, pulling them from their houses and collecting them in a central location such as the marketplace or synagogue where they would be guarded by another group. The roundup could be violent and commonly required intimate contact with the victims. Often, there was an automatic shoot order for Jews who were too old or infirm to leave their houses. One soldier recalled seeing Jews shot down in the street during a roundup. Many others recalled hearing the shooting and some saw the bodies of those shot in their houses. Those collected to be murdered were then marched to a killing site. They were often beaten along the way; one soldier candidly admitted after the war that “it is true that the Jews were kicked and beaten by the Army soldiers of this platoon. I myself also saw how they were beaten with rifle butts.” Once at the designated killing sites, the Jews would be guarded until led to the shooting trench that had been prepared for them. They were then shot. Here, of course, was the epicenter of the violence. One Belarussian witness who was a child at the time recalled that “the procession was peaceful but once they reached the pit they started to scream. There was an awful scream.”

A German medic at the scene of one shooting described it as follows:

When a truck arrived, two men, I believe they were Lithuanians, jumped up and chased and threw the Jews down. For this, they also used clubs. Then ten men were counted off and forced to run to the trench. The trench could not be seen from the unloading site. . . . I stood in the immediate vicinity. The shooting detail was composed of 15 Lithuanians who stood at the edge of the pit. In groups of ten, the Jews had to jump into the pit and lie down. Then the shooting began immediately. I did not hear a fire command. It was pandemonium. They were shooting with machine pistols. If someone still moved, they were shot again. Whether they were dead or not was not determined. They only shot into the pit until the movement stopped.

One man, it could have been an SS man, tore the babies away from the women and shot each infant in the neck then kicked them into the pit. . . . One Jew, however, went after a police official with a knife and wounded
4.6. Wehrmacht soldiers’ routine positions during a roundup and shooting. Increasing rectangularity of the field of action represents the clarity of what was happening and the increasing moral dilemma soldiers faced. Color represents relative proximity of participants to death and thus the probability of witnessing murder (warmer color = more likely to witness). Figure by Waitman Beorn, with Benjamin Perry Blackshear.
him in the face. The Jew was then handcuffed, thrown in the snow, and beaten to death. He was beaten between his legs on his genitals. When he was dead, he was then dragged to the pit and thrown in.35

German soldiers participated in all elements of this process; some roles were also played by the EG personnel or local auxiliaries.

The explanatory value of each location from the outer cordon to the route to the killing site to the trenches lies in its proximity to the ultimate site of murder as well as to the violence associated with that location (see the spotlight section “Testimony, Technology, and Terrain”).36 Requests for volunteers often focused on areas recognized as being more “traumatic” for the soldiers involved, such as dragging Jews out of their houses and shooting them at close range. As we have seen,
the open-air shootings were intensely physical and spatial at the lowest level. Indeed, within the broad concept of “mass shooting” lies a complex microlandscape of very different physical positions. What, then, does location say about the attitudes of those who participated?

**Spotlight on Methods: Testimony, Technology, and Terrain**

The methodology behind this chapter challenges convention in that it attempts to combine qualitative interpretation of testimony, textual analysis of archival documents, digital visualizations of data, and on-the-ground fieldwork in seeking to interrogate and explain the unfolding of mass killing in the East at a variety of scales.

One of the shootings that figures prominently in this chapter took place in the small Belarussian town of Krupki, where somewhere around a thousand Jews were murdered in September 1941. I have written about the details of the killing itself elsewhere (see note 36), but it is an instructive example of the potential power of the multifaceted approach described above. My desire to learn more about the complicity of German soldiers at the local level led me first to the Central Office for the Investigation of Nazi Violent Crime in Ludwigsburg, Germany, which houses a mass of legal documents, including investigations of potential war criminals. It was here that I discovered the interesting case of one German infantry unit in Krupki.

The 146 statements by various individuals involved in the killing provided a rich, though complex, body of evidence with which to begin the analysis. Naturally, these men had given testimony in the adversarial environment of a police interrogation, and not all their testimony could be taken at face value. However, close readings of these texts allowed me to begin to outline the basic shape of the killings in Krupki. Contemporary military documents such as maps, orders, and personnel rosters were vital for several reasons. First, untainted by any postwar desire for obfuscation, these sources explicitly placed individual units at the scene of the crime. Second, they often proved that certain soldiers giving testimony in the 1960s had, indeed, been members of the guilty unit. Last, orders and guidance from the leadership painted a picture of the organizational culture in which these men operated. Testimony from other Nazi personnel such as Einsatzgruppen, SS, and civil administrators also provided a different perspective on the actions in Krupki. Yet these sources from the perpetrators’ perspective could not tell the whole story. The addition of the small amount of remaining survivor testimony provided one corrective. Unfortunately, the mass killings in the East left comparatively fewer witnesses than other Holocaust experiences.
In an attempt to better refute or corroborate a narrative still reliant on the perpetrators, I undertook a research trip to visit these killing sites themselves in Belarus. I wanted to walk the ground and interview any surviving Belarusian witnesses. I modeled this approach on the pioneering (and far more extensive) work of Father Patrick Desbois, who journeyed across Ukraine, interviewing witnesses, re-creating forgotten shootings, and locating killing sites (see his 2008 book, *The Holocaust by Bullets*). My visits to these small villages, quiet fields, and haunting villages throughout Belarus were decisive in helping me to understand both the spatiality of the killings and the ways in which the soldiers involved participated.

Fieldwork in Krupki corroborated important elements of the narrative. It confirmed the location of the killing site itself from two perspectives: German and Soviet. One soldier interrogated by German police stated that the site was approximately eight hundred meters from the center of the town. Others testified that the journey took approximately forty-five minutes, which, accounting for the slow movement of a large mass of children and elderly, makes sense. Second, a Soviet investigatory team drew a map of the killing site after liberation (see figure 4.7). It indicates the graves located in the curve of a river north of Krupki. My journey to the killing site, today marked by a simple monument, confirmed this location as well as the testimony of other perpetrators who claimed that the site had been marshy and bordered on one side by forest (see figure 4.8). Beyond confirming the location of the crime, the confirmation of one set of details in a suspect's testimony often gave greater validity to other elements that often could not be confirmed in other ways.

With the help of a local amateur historian, I was able to identify the former German headquarters as well as the central square where the Jews were likely held before being marched to their deaths. The intimacy of the environment belied the compartmentalized and distant relationship to the killings that many former soldiers professed; indeed, walking the ground showed that practically no soldier could have been billeted in Krupki without coming into close contact with the Jews there and their impending murder. The relatively undeveloped nature of these small Belarusian villages is not characteristic of places like Auschwitz, but it does offer researchers who venture there geographic clues that should not be overlooked.

Looking forward to the larger project of a comprehensive and detailed database of open-air shootings in the Soviet Union, such fieldwork still finds a place. It allows us to categorize the nature of the killing site in important ways (urban or rural, distance from residences, soil type, and so on). At a larger scale, plotting all of these microgeographical
In his work on geographies of genocide, political scientist Allan D. Cooper writes that connecting genocide with geography “locates the geographical with identity in a cognitive sense. It suggests that location (or space) helps to define not just identity but attitude. Spatiality has influence.” Although Cooper is mainly looking at large geographic areas and populations, might not the same conclusion apply in the microspaces of genocide?

Psychologists and sociologists have reached a similar conclusion with regard to our behavioral choices in general. Philip Zimbardo writes, for example, that “individual behavior is largely under the control of social forces and environmental contingencies rather than personality traits, character, willpower or other empirically unvalidated constructs.” Taken together, these two interpretations suggest that physical position is both an expression of attitude and one of the situational forces that can influence human choices.

Psychologists use positioning theory to explain interpersonal relationships and behaviors. The very name of the theory reflects its focus on location, though perhaps not as literally as our model intends. Regardless, the framework seems to be useful here as well. A recent overview of advances in this field states that “‘positions’ are features of the local moral landscape” that “consists of practices” from which we extract “something we call a ‘position’ which someone seems to ‘occupy.’”

Using our locational model to describe killing, can we not add a very real physical location to more metaphorical definitions of position? Proponents of positioning theory already argue that “every socially significant action . . . must be interpreted as an act; that is, not just as an intended action (e.g., a handshake) but as an intelligible and meaningful performance (the handshake can be a greeting, a farewell, a seal, et cetera).”

Extending position theory to the eastern front in 1941, how did soldiers enact or perform their response to the violent situations in which they were placed? Consider the case of Emil Zimber. Zimber, the highest-ranking sergeant in his unit, volunteered to carry out a mass killing on behalf of his ineffectual commander. He divided his men into three
groups: one to round up the Jews, one to march them to the killing site, and one to carry out the actual shooting. Zimber positioned himself with the killers, directing all aspects of the physical murder of the Jews in the closest proximity. He personally gave the order to fire. Some soldiers remembered that he also walked among the victims, shooting those still alive. Zimber could have chosen any location in this operation (his commander remained alone in the office during the killing), yet he positioned himself at the point he deemed most decisive and while there personally participated in the violence. This was no accident. It was where he wanted to be and strongly suggests that he was particularly motivated to participate in the Nazi genocidal project. Other testimony supports this conclusion. This is but one of countless examples in which individuals chose to place themselves at the ground zero of killing. We could also apply this reasoning to those who acted as grave robbers, again voluntarily bringing themselves into close proximity with the bodies of the victims, if not the killing itself.

For a more nuanced application of this model, we can look at the case of the soldiers mentioned earlier who refused to participate. After one round of shooting, two of these men asked none other than Zimber to be relieved from this duty . . . and he assigned them to guard Jews waiting to be shot. One later testified that “I could with joy inside turn my back on this horrible place.” This statement explicitly associates the physical space with evil. Yet he seems to have been content to guard people whom he knew from immediate personal experience would shortly be murdered due in no small part to his own actions in preventing them from escaping. One scholar has written that “it has long been understood that there is a direct relationship between the empathic and physical proximity of the victim, and the resultant difficulty and trauma of the kill.” It seems that for this soldier, increasing his physical distance from the shooting operation decreased his discomfort with his own behavior to such an extent that he was able to accept his new location in the process.

Here, we can see the power of the spatial approach shift from suggesting soldiers’ original motivation to describing the perpetrators’ memories and conception of their own behavior. In their statements regarding participation in the crimes of the Third Reich, German soldiers commonly described their actions in geographic terms. The locational model helps one understand the merging of space and narrative as a reflection of how these men conceived of their wartime complicity years later. Positioning theory includes elements of this personal memory making. The theory views our actions as “meaningful components of story-lines.” Thus, “the meanings of people’s actions are social acts. The illocutionary force of any human action . . . determines its place

Beorn, with Knowles
in a story-line and is mutually thereby determined. Any action might carry one or more such meanings." Memory making for all of us is storytelling. Therefore, "what you are is partly constituted by what roles you have—in conversations, both personal (ruminating) and social. And that depends in part on how one is positioned." The locational model incorporates some of these memory issues while shifting the focus to how former soldiers consciously and subconsciously made sense of the same attributes we used to explain their actions in the past.

German soldiers often defined the level of their own complicity in spatial terms. For many, particularly after the war, their degree of

4.5. The Krupki killing site showing the field in which Jews were forced to wait. A small memorial, placed in 1970 in the grove of trees planted after the war, commemorates the murder of "Soviet civilians" but does not recognize them as Jews. Photograph by Waitman Wade Beorn, 2009.
guilt in the crimes of the Third Reich was directly connected with a location and with their relative proximity to violence. Thus, these men saw themselves as positioned in a moral (or immoral) landscape. When questioned after the war, they often attempted to use their physical location as evidence of their innocence. For example, consider the following examples of testimony:

“I would like to once again assure you,” he told investigators, “that I never participated in the shooting of civilians. I merely once had to serve in the cordon as Jews were shot.” (Georg R., 1964)

“We soldiers were merely employed in the encirclement,” he said. “We had nothing to do with the killings.” (Bruno M., 1961)

“I only had the task of escorting the people to the execution site. I was also not alone, but with other members of my platoon. I didn’t shoot.” (Richard M., 1966)

All of these men attempted to convince interrogators of their innocence by emphasizing their locations and actions relative to the actual killing of the Jews. They viewed their actions in preventing the escape of the victims as distinct and separate from murder. Certain locations, which included shooting as well as the removal of Jews from homes, were, in their minds, tainted with complicity and responsibility.

Some men even seem to have explicitly exaggerated their physical remove from sites of murder. Johann G. told investigators that he witnessed the massacre of the Jews of Novogrudok from the outer cordon. He remembered seeing two trenches, approximately 2 meters wide and 50 meters long. He watched as the Jews were taken off trucks and half led, half driven to the trenches. Yet he claimed that he was 500 to 600 meters away from the killing. He argued that, because of this distance, he could not identify any of the killers or give any more details about the killing itself. Of course, from such a distance (1,640 to 1,968 feet), one wonders how he could so accurately estimate the size of the shooting trench or describe much of anything at all about the events. Another soldier who came to a killing site out of curiosity described the killing process in detail, though he claimed to have been 200–300 meters (656–985 feet) away. It seems that these men viewed literal geographic distance as directly related to their involvement and thus exaggerated how far away they were physically from the shootings. These attempts to increase the physical and the moral distance from the act of killing likely served both a legal and a personal purpose. This exaggerated physical distance also allowed them to serve as fly-on-the-wall observers, able to satisfy investigators with some level of detail about events but unable to specifically implicate their comrades.
In the personal narratives of their lives, these men perhaps sought to position themselves as far away from the killers among them as they could. Such narrative story lines could serve to minimize feelings of guilt. The theory of cognitive dissonance is a useful explanatory concept here as well. The theory argues that when our actions and our beliefs conflict, we are thrown into an increasingly uncomfortable mental state. This “dissonance arousal” is, in essence, a threat to our conception of self. The effect on our self-image is vital because “people experience dissonance after engaging in an action that leaves them feeling stupid, immoral, or confused. Moreover, the greater the personal commitment or self-involvement implied by the action and the smaller external justification for that action, the greater the dissonance and, therefore, the more powerful the need for self-justification.” In order to escape this threat to their mental well-being, individuals seek to change either their beliefs or their actions to bring their mental and physical states into congruence. In many situations, it is easier to change beliefs than acts. Consider the self-deception of one policeman describing his participation in shooting. “I made the effort . . . to shoot only children. . . . My neighbor then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother, the child could not live any longer. It was supposed to be, so to speak, soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers.” It seems that some men chose to relieve feelings of cognitive dissonance by believing they were physically removed and therefore morally not a part of the overall outcome of the operation: the murder of thousands of innocent civilians.

Conclusion

Geographer Mei-Po Kwan has lamented the “separation of spatial-analytical geographies from social-cultural geographies through attempts to create a mode of disembodied geographical analysis that separate [sic] spatial patterns and relations from social, cultural, and political processes.” She is arguing against the artificial separation between the “hard” and “soft” sides of geographical research. This chapter’s exploratory journey from the regional to the personal using a locational model attempts to bridge this divide as well as to suggest the power of interdisciplinary collaboration between geography and history at the empirical and the conceptual level. Focusing on location, actions, and the meanings of those actions can serve as a framework for analysis at a variety of scales and a variety of contexts, from seeking to understand broad spatial patterns to the role of location in memory.
The creation of a comprehensive HGIS database of EG killings and the nature of those atrocities should be a priority. The proof-of-concept work based on the Jäger Report demonstrates the potential of such a spatial and historical project to help scholars identify patterns and anomalies that are yet unseen among the myriad and dispersed data concerning these shootings. Important questions that speak to larger issues of high-level Nazi decision making as well as to individual differences in the execution of open-air shootings lie waiting to be discovered and analyzed.

The microlocation of perpetrators can also give us insights into their attitudes toward participation in killing. Certainly, position alone is not sufficient to determine an individual’s attitude toward genocide. However, substantial evidence suggests that Wehrmacht soldiers had far more agency in determining the nature of their involvement, particularly in killing, than they liked to admit in postwar legal testimony. Evidence from many different killings indicates that these men could decline participation without penalty. However, we should recognize that most individuals involved in these actions were where they were because they had not requested to be elsewhere, for a variety of reasons, from fear to peer pressure to indifference. By looking more closely to see how many volunteered for shooting, we can be more certain that those men wanted to be killers, because attitudinal position could lead to physical position. Further research may also show that occupying certain physical positions could perhaps lead to changes in attitudinal positions, which would suggest an ever-deepening complicity on the part of some Wehrmacht soldiers over time.

The relation of physical location to moral culpability was not lost on perpetrators being interrogated after the war. It is interesting to note that there was often a tendency for former Einsatzkommandos and Wehrmacht soldiers to exaggerate the distance from which they were removed from the event itself while at the same time testifying to witnessing details that would have been impossible to see from such distances. Such testimony seems intent on placing themselves in an “acceptable” geographic location that they felt lessened or erased their culpability.

This locational approach to examining perpetrator behavior and decision making is not limited to EG or Wehrmacht killings in the Soviet Union at the regional or personal level. Indeed, several projects in this volume can be integrated into such an explanatory model. The camps visualizations and the examination of architectural planning at Auschwitz both ask us to examine the significance of purpose and location as a function of specific intent. Such questions can be asked elsewhere during the Holocaust as well. Why, for example, was the zoo
at Buchenwald positioned so close to the perimeter fence? What does the location of the camp commandant’s house in Auschwitz I imply about his personal stance toward his role in Nazi genocidal policy? Further, how are the regional level and local level connected? For example, what do patterns at the regional level tell us about the recognition of personal challenges at the local level? Were some sites chosen to minimize the emotional impact on the perpetrators? Were killings increasingly carried out by local auxiliaries for the same reason? If so, what does this change look like over space and time? Does a lack of activity by one EK commander suggest a reluctance to be proactive or simple logistical issues? These are just a few potential questions that demonstrate how the model functions at both regional and local levels simultaneously.

Nor is such a model limited to the Holocaust. The key attributes required in this theoretical approach are common to all genocides. In attempting to better understand the Ugandan genocide, two geographers recently asked questions central to this discussion:

1. How do human rights violations and mass atrocity appear in the world of geospatial representations? How (if at all) might GIScience contribute to the development of knowledge, data, and evidence concerning significant crimes; that is, crimes of international concerns such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes?

2. How does GIScience succeed, or fail, to complement the “ground truth” of the qualitative interview data?

3. How, and in what ways, are convergences and divergences in these methods significant to the potential of the techniques? Is it possible to deploy multiple methodologies to help address the “silences and gaps between data sets,” particularly in the context of investigating mass atrocity?

The locational model proposed in this chapter addresses precisely these issues. This approach combines the analytical tools and processes of GIScience with qualitative data from the level of the perpetrators and victims. In so doing, it allows both geospatial and experiential representations. If this is possible for events that happened almost eighty years ago, surely such an approach is both viable and necessary for understanding and intervening in present-day genocides.

If we begin to look at physical location and proximity as not random but as often quite intentional, we must begin to ask important questions about how and why perpetrators chose not only to do what they did, but to do it where they did. Theologian Paul Tillich once said that “morality is not a subject; it is a life put to the test in dozens of moments.” Looking at genocide and its perpetrators from a spatial perspective should make us wonder if morality is not also a life put to test in dozens of places.
Notes


7. The leaders of the killing squads were highly educated. Most had doctoral degrees. For a more detailed analysis of this education, see Hilary Earl, The Nuremberg SS-Einsatzgruppen Trial, 1945–1958 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 177–22.


10. For example, one can structure queries of the database by degree of aggregation (that is, the common resolution of the data), asking the GIS to display killings, for example, by year, then month and year, then day, month, and year. The key is to explain the level of detail in any given analysis.


15. Yule and Burton’s report on their project is archived at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, along with other project reports from Anne Knowles’s spring 2008 class at Middlebury College, GEOG0419, Research Seminar in Historical Geography.

16. Blackshear was working as Knowles’s research assistant.
18. This reinforcement was what brought the infamous Police Battalion 101 to the eastern front. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).
19. For a detailed analysis of the timing of the decision to murder all Jews, regardless of age or sex, see Browning and Matthäus, *Origins of the Final Solution*; Christopher R. Browning, “Beyond ‘Intentionalism’ and ‘Functionalism’: The Decision for the Final Solution Reconsidered,” in *Path to Genocide*, by Browning, 86–121.
22. Yizhkor books are volumes of collective memories of specific locations in Eastern Europe compiled by former residents. They are underutilized by most historians.
23. Christopher Browning has argued convincingly that orders for the increased scope of killing by the Einsatzgruppen in the East were transmitted orally. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 11; Browning and Matthaus, *Origins of the Final Solution*, 312.
30. Josef Sibille was the only one of three company commanders who steadfastly refused to obey an order to murder all the Jews in his area. He described his decision in a letter to the court in 1953. See “Sibille Letter, 2.2.1953” (HSA-D: H 13 Darmstadt, Nr. 979 I, Bd. III), 208.
34. “Kosenkova, Margarita Interview, 8 July 2009” (author’s personal archive), interpreted by Vadim Ovsyanik.
36. Manuscript map of the Krupki killing site is BA-ZS, B162/30132, Bundesarchiv Bundesarchiv Zentrale Stelle zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen in Ludwigsburg, Germany. For

37. Allan D. Cooper, Geography of Genocide (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2009), 61.


42. See, for example, “Magel W. Statement, 16 June 1951” (HSA-D: H 13 Darmstadt, Nr. 979 I, Bd. I), 165; “S., Willi Statement, 9 August 1951” (HSA-D: H 13 Darmstadt, Nr. 979 I, Bd. I), 178; and “V., Adam Statement, 7 July 1953” (HSA-D: H 13 Darmstadt, Nr. 979 I, Bd. II), 272.


46. Ibid., 12.


54. Browning, Ordinary Men, 73.

