

THE KOMMANDOSTAB REVISITED

Martin Cüppers, *Wegbereiter der Shoah. Die Waffen-SS, der Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS und die Judenvernichtung 1939–1945*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005, 464 pp.

Reviewed by

RAUL HILBERG

It must not have been a simple matter for Martin Cüppers to write his treatise, which is a doctoral dissertation in printed form, nor is it easy to find one's way around the contents of the book. The book is divided into five parts and subdivided into fifteen consecutively numbered chapters. These are followed by close to 1,700 endnotes, which are difficult to use, because one must first look for the appropriate chapter number in the back and then find the meaning of the numerous abbreviations in a separate glossary.

Even the title is complicated. The heading, in red letters on the cardboard cover, can be interpreted as referring to persons who prepared the way for the Holocaust. Inasmuch as such an overarching phrase, standing alone, would have been misleading, the smaller lettering in the subtitle points to the role of the Waffen-SS and the Kommandostab in the annihilation of the Jews. Yet placing the SS and the Kommandostab side by side is still no real solution, since the Kommandostab was actually an organization within the SS.

Apart from inserted passages about occurrences in western Poland and northern Italy, Cüppers is concerned only with areas of the occupied USSR, where the Kommandostab became active in June 1941. He concentrates his primary attention on those SS units that were kept segregated from other SS forces and under the control of the Kommandostab until the fall of 1942. Throughout that time the Kommandostab did not even command its units in the field directly. Rather, it assigned all but a few of them to the *Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer* (HSSPF; Higher SS and Police Leaders) and military commanders for daily operations.

Defining the scope of the book was not the only problem. Understandably, not all of the materials that the author collected are new. Soon after the war, the anti-Jewish and anti-partisan activities of the Waffen-SS attracted the interest of German prosecutors, journalists, and historians, and, over the decades, a veritable literature about this topic had been produced in several countries. Thus, facing a substantial accumulation of pertinent publications, Cüppers lists them in his introduction, weighing their adequacy, and promising something more. Prepared to exploit the availability of an exceptionally dense accumulation of sources, he set out to construct a seamless chronological study. The sheer bulk of the finished work suggests an exhaustive research effort, yet one must ask: how complete is his story, and how reliable?

Originally, when *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler sent Kommandostab units into Soviet territory, he thought of them as a reserve, not to be used at the front, but in the rear for pacification. He had in mind such activities as capturing disorganized Red Army men behind the German lines, combating partisans, and, especially, the shooting of Jews — all in the name of German security. Cüppers calls the troops of the Kommandostab political soldiers. All told — including the staff of the Kommandostab itself, specialized elements, two motorized brigades, and two cavalry regiments — they numbered over 16,000. The brigades and the cavalry were lent out regularly. Since the 2nd Brigade was in the northern sector, where it was not needed for the roundup and killing of Jews,

Cüppers discusses mainly the 1st Brigade and the cavalry. He does not list their numerical strength, which was as follows:¹

	Total Strength	Combat Strength
1 st Motorized Brigade (1. SS-Brigade [mot.])		
(as of July 31, 1941)	6,128	5,127
1 st Cavalry Regiment (SS-Kavallerieregiment 1)		
(as of August 3, 1941)	2,250	1,929
2 nd Cavalry Regiment (SS-Kavallerieregiment 2)		
(as of August 3, 1941)	1,864	1,705

The motorized brigade had two regiments, and the two cavalry regiments were formed into a cavalry brigade in early August. Each of the cavalry regiments had a headquarters with several support detachments. Directly under regimental command were artillery, engineer, and bicycle squadrons, and a battalion, called Abteilung, which contained four squadrons mounted on horses. A squadron (Schwadron) belonging to a battalion had three platoons.² The commander of the mounted battalion Reitende Abteilung of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, Franz Magill, was a professional riding instructor, and in the 1st Squadron of this battalion, the horses were white. According to a postwar German indictment of Magill, the commander of this parade squadron, Stefan Charvat, had been an officer in the Romanian cavalry.³

Cüppers deals at considerable length with the backgrounds and motivations of the personnel in the 1st Motorized Brigade and the 1st and 2nd Mounted Squadrons of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. He

- 1 Report by *Hauptsturmführer* (SS-Captain) Rudolf May, Kommandostab Ic (Intelligence), August 4, 1941, Military History Archives, Prague, Kommandostab RF-SS Ia/2/1, Kr. 10. In Cüppers' notes the designation is Central Military Archives.
- 2 Table of organization of the Kommandostab as of August 20, 1941, *ibid.*, Kommandostab RF-SS Ia/2/1 Kr. 10. German military icons are used in the table.
- 3 Indictment of Magill and others, signed Thieme, to the court (Landgericht) in Braunschweig, June 15, 1963, p. 29, in court file 2 Ks 1/63.

discovered that the upper and upper middle classes as well as the unskilled workers of the lower class were underrepresented in these components and that the cavalry had the largest percentage of men born in rural areas. In all of the units that he investigated, the officers were by and large well educated, although it would seem that they did not reach the intellectual level of some of their counterparts in the Einsatzgruppen. These are data that might have been anticipated.

More intricate is an exploration of attitudes, particularly with regard to the place of ideology in the men's thinking. Officially they were volunteers, but the underlying actuality was somewhat more complex. If they had been members of the Hitler Youth, they were expected to join the SS, and if they were ethnic Germans, such as Romanian citizens who came to Germany to study, they could have found themselves unexpectedly in the SS. It is evident that even those who made their decision with deliberation could have been looking for a career in a labor market that did not offer any better opportunities, or they could indeed have harbored a desire for strutting about in a SS uniform. They might have been sadists at heart, or they might have despised or hated the Jews, and any one of them could have had more than one of these inclinations. Once they were in the field, from the opening phase of the war in Poland, long before the creation of the Kommandostab, the army complained about SS outrages against Jews, and Cüppers records some of these incidents.

Given the combination of such factors, Cüppers writes extensively about indoctrination. Was this the principal tool for unifying the SS men so that they could become a cohesive body in which every man could be categorized as a believer? In the SS this education was certainly provided continually. Why? Was it because the leadership feared that the lessons would be too quickly forgotten? Cüppers attaches considerable importance to the inculcation — albeit without resisting the temptation to make room for a poem by one of the SS students who patently ridiculed the instruction.

There is no question that in the SS, and not only there, words of disgust and contempt were uttered at the sight of poor Jewish communities living without a sewage system or indoor running water, of Jews whose clothes were well worn and in need of cleaning or repair, or of Jews in general. But did the SS men need courses for that? And if they really believed that Jews were truly dangerous, that all of them were communists, or that none could be trusted, did they first acquire those convictions in their SS schooling? No clear-cut answers to such obvious questions can be retrieved from this analysis. Cüppers abstains from a pronounced cause and effect approach, and he reveals his uncertainty when he singles out the propagandistic feature film *Jud Süß* as having had an impact on the SS viewers — so much so that explanations did not have to be supplied by instructors — even while he raises the possibility that comments could have been superfluous if the audience had already harbored an “antisemitic potential.”⁴

When Cüppers goes on to describe the crossing of the SS units into the area newly seized from the USSR, he has to explore the instructions they were given. At this point the raw documents themselves convey ambiguity. For every echelon of the Nazi regime, the summer months of 1941 mark a transition from uncertainty to certainty; therefore, every scrap of paper dating from that time and written not only by the Kommandostab or its formations, but also by others who were involved, acquires basic importance. He does not cite all of these materials.

4 The film was banned in the Federal Republic of Germany, but in the 1970s the Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen, which prepared cases against wartime German perpetrators, showed it to its staff in Ludwigsburg once a year. An explanatory lecture was delivered by one of the attorneys who was also a student of history. In 1976, as a visiting private researcher not liable to succumb to the message of the film, I was invited to see it. That year the old plot was transposed to a postwar setting by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in his play “Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod,” *Stücke*, 3 (1976). The publisher, Suhrkamp withdrew the book, and the play subsequently appeared under another imprint.

From the moment that the German army assaulted the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the starting line — which was the border between the Germans and the Soviets on the eve of the assault — became a barrier to all non-military traffic not sanctioned by the military. Before the Einsatzgruppen moved into the occupied territory, an elaborate agreement about jurisdictions and logistics was therefore negotiated between the SIPO (Sicherheitspolizei — Security Police) and the army. Cüppers does not say that this preliminary step was omitted by the Kommandostab for its units and that, on July 5, the Quartermaster-General of the Wehrmacht (Generalquartiermeister des Heeres), Eduard Wagner, requested that Chief of the SS-Operational Main Office (SS-Führungshauptamt) Hans Jüttner inform him of the intentions of the Waffen-SS formations. The information, wrote Wagner, was really necessary.⁵

It would have been a problem for the SS to write about aims or plans as its ultimate ideas were not yet fully formulated. However, one clue to their evolution is contained in an order of July 11, which Cüppers does not cite. It bears the signature of Oberstleutnant (Police Lieutenant Colonel) Max Montua, commander of Police Regiment Center (Polizeiregiment Mitte), one of three ORPO (Ordnungspolizei — Order Police) regiments sent to the occupied USSR.

Like the SS brigades, each regiment had been placed under the command of a HSSPF, and the police, like the SS, killed Jews. In the central sector, the HSSPF was the formidable Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. Writing in pursuance of an order by von dem Bach, Montua told his police battalions that all Jewish men between the ages of seventeen and forty-five were to be shot immediately as plunderers. He went on to give specific directions about methods: the shooting was to take place away from towns and villages; there was to be no photographing; and comradely evenings were to be set

5 Wagner to Kommandostab, July 5, 1941, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group 48.004, Roll 1.

aside by battalion and company commanders to erase the impressions of the day.⁶

Not until later that month did von dem Bach also obtain the mounted battalions, while the HSSPF South, Friedrich Jeckeln, acquired the 1st Motorized Brigade, which he transferred upon Himmler's order to the Sixth Army for a time. The commanders were:⁷

Cavalry Brigade (SS-Kavalleriebrigade)	Hermann Fegelein
1 st Regiment (SS-Kavallerieregiment 1)	Fegelein
Mounted battalion (Reitende Abteilung)	Gustav Lombard
2 nd Regiment (SS-Kavallerieregiment 2)	Heinrich Hierthes
Mounted Battalion (Reitende Abteilung)	Franz Magill
1 st Motorized Brigade (1. SS-Brigade [mot.])	Richard Hermann

The two mounted battalions were to sweep the Polesie region and its marshes.

By July 27, as recounted by Cüppers, more specific language was communicated by Himmler through the Kommandostab to Fegelein. Villages inhabited by hostile or inferior people, or by banished criminals, were to be erased, and the women and children, along with the cattle, were to be transported away (*abzutransportieren*). Fegelein, rephrasing the order for his troops, wrote “driven away” (*wegzutreiben*). On July 31, Himmler met with von dem Bach, and, on the following day, at 10 A.M, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment radioed the following message to its squadrons:

6 Order by Montua, July 11, 1941, Military History Archives, Prague, Kommandostab RF-SS 46 (153).

7 For a list of officers and their positions in the Cavalry Regiment as of July 20, 1941, see National Archives of the United States, Record Group 242, T 354, Roll 165.

Express order of RFSS Himmler

All Jews must be shot. Jew women [to be] driven (*treiben*) into the swamps.

As Cüppers states, this order left much to interpretation, and inasmuch as Lombard referred to a similar transmission, also received on August 1, each of the two mounted battalion commanders had to draw his own conclusions. With some exceptions, Magill killed only men, and when he listed in his concluding report the number of “plunderers, etc.” that his battalion had shot, he noted that driving women and children into the swamps was not the success it should have been because the marshes were not deep enough. Lombard, on the other hand, instructed his men bluntly at six o’clock of the evening of that day that no Jewish family was to be left alive. As to the motorized brigade in the south, no comparable orders seem to be extant, but there are indications in its reports that late in July it had already shot approximately 800 Jews and Jewesses (*Juden und Jüdinnen*) aged sixteen to sixty and that early in August one of its regiments killed 1,109 Jewish men and 275 Jewish women.⁸

The fact that the open-ended character of Himmler’s orders in July-August could give rise to a spectrum of decisions by his commanders in the field is not an insignificant revelation. Cüppers, however, emphasizes the direction of the process as a whole. For him, it is the overall escalation that counts. He has a special interest in Lombard, who first used the word “Dejewification” (*Entjudung*), a concept that, in 1937, meant the takeover or liquidation of Jewish business enterprises, to characterize the extirpation of the Jews as human beings. In this instance Lombard verbalized something that others were not yet ready to state plainly.

8 See the reports of the brigade dated July 30 and August 6, 1941, in Fritz Baade et al., eds., *Unsere Ehre heisst Treue* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1965), pp. 95–99.

How many Jews were killed, sector by sector, was in part a matter of geography. A major massacre during the formative stage was perpetrated by the hesitant Magill in Pinsk. It was not a large city, but it was the largest in the Polesie region, and it stood out because the Jews were a distinct majority of its inhabitants. To reconstruct the events in Pinsk, Cüppers could exploit the relatively abundant sources, including testimony of cavalry veterans and a few survivors that had been gathered by the postwar German prosecutors for an indictment of Magill. From the contemporaneous documents supplemented by the later recollections, some essential facts emerge.

Before the arrival of the cavalry, a small SIPO contingent under the command of Hermann Worthoff was stationed there. By August 4/5, two of Magill's squadrons were in the vicinity. The closest was the 1st, under Charvat. The other was the Fourth, under Kurt Wegener. Magill brought along a lengthy order dictated by Hierthes, stating that the battalion was to shoot Jewish men, aged fourteen and up, who were considered a potential reservoir of the Soviet partisans. Magill and his two squadron commanders met with Worthoff to inform him of the directive and to plan the operation. The Jewish men were then instructed to assemble under the pretext that they would perform labor, and were marched out in columns of 100 to be shot outside the city at pre-prepared graves. When an older man could not keep up in one of the columns, he was shot, and the other Jews fled in panic. The SS men fired on the crowd, and Cüppers included on one of the pages of his book a photograph of bodies scattered in a field.

A SIPO report cited by Cüppers lists roughly 4,500 dead in Pinsk. Cüppers believes the number to have been at least 6,500. He does not cite a report by Hauptmann (Captain) Binz of the 3rd Battalion, Police Regiment Center, who was sent to the city with more than 100 men to search all Jewish apartments for "plunder" on August 25 and 26. Pointedly, the captain reported that on this occasion "executions did not take place," inasmuch as there had already been a shooting, which he attributed to the Security Police

of 5,000 Jews during the last week of July (*sic*). The rest, he said, were needed for labor.⁹

In Magill's final report the battalion's entire toll from July 27 to August 11 was 6,526, and Lombard's reported total was 6,265. In the final report by the cavalry brigade of September 18, the combined figure of dead "plunderers" is 14,178. Cüppers advancing his own calculations, proposes 14,000 for Magill and 11,000 for Lombard, bringing the aggregate to 25,000. It is conceivable, of course, that some killing was not included in the official tallies, but numerical assumptions about possible omissions are hazardous. Few of the victims had been tracked down in the countryside. Magill stated that the Jews in his area lived mainly in the larger towns, and Lombard noted explicitly that he had not found a single Jewish family in the small villages. Speculations by Cüppers that in the major actions the cavalry lost an overview or that radioed messages were not received are tenuous.

For the 1st Motorized SS Brigade farther south, a complete summary is lacking. A large part of the periodic shooting of Jews, which the brigade conducted until December, can be found in its reports. Adding the figures that he had, Cüppers arrives at 11,200 Jewish dead.

There is also a judgment of a SS court against Max Täubner, a fanatical leader of a replacement workshop platoon temporarily assigned to the brigade for vehicle repairs, who, at his own

9 Report by Hauptmann (Captain) Binz, August 26, 1941, Military History Archives, Prague, Pz Pol Batl. III/Regiment Mitte. Cüppers relies on the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (in the German translation) for an estimate of about 30,000 Jews in Pinsk as of June 1941. The Polish census figure for 1931 was 20,200. An increase of nearly 50 percent is far higher than the estimated growth of interwar Polish Jewry as a whole, and it cannot be derived from a somewhat higher regional birthrate, or the presence of some remnant of the 1939 refugees who streamed through the city eastward. On October 14, 1941, the Jewish Council in Pinsk reported a population of 17,781 Jews, and on December 9, 1941, the figure was 17,581, including 3,890 children under the age of ten. See Brest-Litovsk Archives of Belarus, Fond 2120, Opis 1, Delo (Folder) 422, Yad Vashem Archive, microfilm M.41/708-889.

initiative, drove his mechanics to kill 969 Jews in three towns. Since the three actions are not mentioned by the brigade itself, Cüppers adds these victims to his figure of 11,200 and, trying to make up numbers for reports he did not find, arrives at a grand total of 17,000.

But his estimating does not end there. Cüppers does not confine himself to enlarging figures that he believes to be too small, or filling in a sum where he sees a gap in a chain of documented numbers. Looking at the map and drawing inferences from testimony, he will also argue that the sheer location of a SS unit may confirm its participation in a shooting operation. Thereby he can ascribe to the two brigades a total that is higher than the 14,000 + 11,000 + 17,000 he had posited before. In the middle of a chapter near the middle of his book, he states that together they murdered at least 57,000 Jewish men, women, and children before the end of 1941.

For the various operations of the brigades, Cüppers does not provide a recognizable context. He does not chart the movements of the police, which complemented the SS in 1941, and he does not integrate the police with the SS when he writes about a joint operation of August–September 1942. That summer concerted attacks on partisans were inaugurated, and the 1st Motorized Brigade, as one of the assembled forces, took part in a major sweep in Belorussia, *Aktion Sumpffieber* (“Swamp Fever”). Also at the scene were three battalions of a police regiment and several battalions of Lithuanian and Latvian collaborators. By the end of the campaign, as Cüppers points out, 10,013 people had been killed, among them 389 in battle, 1,274 as suspects after capture, and 8,350 because they were Jews. From the summary report, however, one can no longer assign a specific number of dead to a specified unit of shooters. The lingering question then — which Cüppers does not pose — is the extent to which all of the perpetrators were regarded as interchangeable.

Within definable limits, the SS men themselves did not have a choice of tactical assignments. Whether they confronted Jews or

partisans in the rear, or the Red Army at the front could be a matter of chance. Many had all these experiences. The commander of the 1st Motorized Brigade, Hermann, was killed by artillery fire in December 1941. The cavalry squadron commander, Charvat, who is said to have rushed frantically to and fro in order to complete his shooting operation in Pinsk before sundown, was killed in combat in March 1942. The Nazi insider Fegelein advancing in rank, eventually fought in the battle of Berlin, where he is reported to have been shot for cowardice in April 1945.

In reverse order, the exercise of a purely military function could have preceded an encounter with Jewish affairs. Wilhelm Plänk, who had no verifiable role in the killing of Jews when he was a low-ranking officer with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in 1941, commanded the SS-Kavallerie Ausbildungs- und Ersatzabteilung Warschau (SS Cavalry Training and Replacement Battalion) in the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943. Joachim Mrugowski, who is listed as a medical officer of the Kommandostab in 1941,¹⁰ sat in a different SS office when he purchased urgently needed poison gas for Auschwitz in 1944. Kurt Becher — who is shown by Cüppers in a photograph as an ordinance officer in the cavalry brigade riding on a boat on the Pripet River in the summer of 1941 — was in Hungary, engaged in ransom negotiations with Jewish leaders to obtain Jewish property for the Germans in 1944.

If the shooter could have been a German or a collaborator, in the SS or the police, and if the SS man could have been anywhere and done anything, the analytical task takes on latitudinal as well as longitudinal aspects. Killing could affect the peace of mind of many killers, irrespective of their insignia. The fact that even a high rank did not confer immunity from psychic repercussions is confirmed in the frequently quoted correspondence about von dem Bach in a hospital bed with nightmares. That in the wider array of uniformed raiders there were also eager shooters, as well as those for whom

10 List of officers of the Kommandostab as of December 31, 1941, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group 48.004, Roll 1.

the actions simply became routine, has been observed with respect to the SS and the police alike.¹¹

Even though Cüppers works in a narrow framework, his illustrations are often selective enough. He is interested in salient incidents, particularly if they appear to be unexpected or bizarre. To achieve this kind of effect, he labels without evidence those collaborators in Pinsk who guided the SS to Jewish homes as a “Polish militia,” and he replicates without reservation a survivor’s uncorroborated account about a German who is supposed to have walked in the streets, singing, while carrying a dead one-year-old Jewish baby speared on a bayonet.

But among the examples of aberrant behavior, which are dispersed in the book, there is a plausible recollection that is especially noteworthy for its multilayered meaning. It was related by a SS man about one of his fellow SS men in the 1st Motorized Brigade. A Jewish shoemaker, his wife, and three-year-old child lived in a village hut. All three were taken by two SS men to their post, where the couple had to clean the rooms. On the way the man and the woman were beaten with a club. When the work was done, the family was brought to the edge of the wood by two or three SS men, including the man in charge, Alois Knäbel. The account of the witness continues verbatim:

There Knäbel alone killed them without much ado, shooting them with his pistol in the neck. The small child of the Jews, which Knäbel first led by the hand and then carried on his arm, had to look on when the parents were murdered. Thereupon it started to scream. Knäbel took it into his arm again, and calmed it with stroking and words. When the child was quiet, he killed it too with a shot in the neck. At the moment of the shot he carried it on his arm (p. 119).

It was a demonstration of perfection, SS-style.

11 For the police, see especially Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) and Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005).

