

Sonderkommando

German term meaning "Special Commando," which referred to several types of "special" units during World War II.

Originally, the term *Sonderkommando* referred to a German SS unit that carried out special tasks or missions. Some 10 *Sonderkommando* units were also dedicated to the goal of killing Jews as sub-units of the *Einsatzgruppen* or as a unit in Chelmno. Those units in charge of destroying all physical evidence of the mass murders as part of *Aktion 1005* were called *Sonderkommando 1005*.

The name *Sonderkommando* was also assigned to those groups of Jewish prisoners in the Nazi extermination camps who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria. *Sonderkommando* members helped prep the Jews who were about to be gassed. They cut the women's hair (sometimes doing this after the gassing). Others removed the corpses from the gas chambers, removed gold teeth and fillings, and transferred the bodies to pits or to the crematoria. Some *Sonderkommandos* cleaned the gas chambers, while others dealt with the victims' personal possessions, sorting them and readying them for shipment to Germany. After a few months of such gruesome work, the *Sonderkommando* men were themselves executed and replaced with new prisoners.

In October 1944 the *Sonderkommando* unit that worked in the crematoria of Auschwitz -Birkenau staged their own revolt. They managed to burn down one of the crematoria and kill some of their German guards. All of these prisoners were caught and killed. However, some had authored diaries that were later found in the ruins of the crematoria. The diaries described the daily anguish of being in constant contact with murder, and begged the world to understand how the *Sonderkommando* prisoners had not willingly done their jobs, but had been forced by the Nazis to participate in the extermination process.

A Jewish *Sonderkommando* unit was also active in the Lodz Ghetto. This group was part of the Jewish ghetto police.