

The World of Auschwitz

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Set Sail: Holocaust as History and Memory

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Nazi Germany's concentration camp systems originated in 1933 to 1934 as a response to cope with the tens of thousands of opponents to the Nazi regime. Over 100 early camps appeared during the regime's consolidation of power but most of them closed due to the emergence of the SS police system under Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler. The camps that did remain were consolidated under the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps due to the quick realization that these camps could also be used not only against persecuting opponents but outcasts from the national community as well.

On May 8, 1945, Germany laid down its arms. For the world at large, this meant the end of World War II, but for a few thousand Jews, it marked the end of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the rescue of many of these survivors came too late. Many were in such advanced stages of starvation and disease that not even the best medical attention could save them. Those who survived these unspeakable events now had the freedom to begin a slow and painful journey from the land of the dead to the land of the living.

Auschwitz was not the first concentration camp constructed, but it is the most infamous and has come to symbolize the atrocities of the Nazi regime. In this literature review, I will be providing an overview of the history of Auschwitz by first covering the upbringing of the concentration camps system. Then I will cover how Auschwitz was established as well as address the national origins of the victims of this camp. The paper will finish with an examination of what occurred behind the barbed wire

The Nazi Concentration Camp System

In the Third Reich, concentration camps were set up almost as soon as the Nazis came to power. Following an attempt to burn down the Reichstag, Paul von Hindenburg, the president of

the Reich, issued an order on February 28, 1933, at Hitler's request, suspending civil freedoms for an ambiguous amount of time and paving the stage for the widespread detention of Nazi opponents (Nazi Camp System, 2019). Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association and assembly, and the privacy of mail, telegrams, and telephone calls were among the rights that were suspended. Homes could be searched without a warrant, and property could be seized (Świebocka & Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2001).

Additionally, the Nazis instituted "protective confinement" (Schutzhaft), on the fictitious pretext that Nazi opponents needed to be segregated from the rest of German society to provide them with "protection" (Schutz) from hostile public opinion (History.com Editors, 2009). This amounted to imprisonment without a charge. The initial inmates of the Schutzhaftlager were communists, socialists, and labor union activists (Wünschmann, 2010).

The Establishment of Auschwitz

The first concentration camp run by the Nazis in occupied Poland was Auschwitz (Megargee et al., 2009). According to the *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945* by Danuta Czech, the SS dispatched a delegation to Oswiecim early in 1940 to assess whether a complex of barracks built outside the town during World War I and used by the Polish military in the years between the wars might be utilized as a concentration camp. Despite the original report being unfavorable, a further examination found that the change of use would be feasible with a little construction. On April 18 and 19, 1940, a different commission, led by SS-Haupt-Sturmführer Rudolf Höss, paid a visit to Oswiecim. Since SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler approved the building of a concentration camp in Oswiecim on April 27, 1940, and selected Rudolf Höss as its commandant on May 4, it appears that Höss's testimony was given the most weight.

The National Origins of Auschwitz Victims

Auschwitz was designed to be a concentration camp and a site of slow death for other Poles and Polish political prisoners (Megargee et al., 2009). Over time, it evolved into the principal hub for the methodical killing of those the Nazis saw as human vermin, particularly Jews and Gypsies. More than a million people died in this one location alone as a result of the Nazis' pseudoscientific notions about the supremacy of the Aryan race (Czech, 1997).

On June 14, 1940, 728 political prisoners from Poland, among them, a few Jews, were the first captives to be transported to Auschwitz. In June 1941, A convoy of Czechs was the first sizable group dispatched to Auschwitz from a country other than Poland (Moldova 3, 2020). Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, parties of Yugoslavian prisoners of war began to arrive a month later. Initially, only male prisoners were brought in but by July 1942 they were joined by female prisoners. Among the latter were women partisans in uniform who requested to be treated as prisoners of war and resisted having their heads shaved (Czech, 1997).

Auschwitz became the primary camp where Jews were sent to be killed within a short period after the Wannsee conference in January 1942. During this conference, the plan for how to carry out the murder of the Jews in Europe was presented as the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" (History.com Editors, 2009). The very following month, the first cargo known to be fully made up of Jews arrived. Until November 1944, such transports came from all over Nazi-occupied Europe (Czech, 1997).

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum records the killing of Gypsies in Auschwitz by the Nazis in 1943. They first transported Gypsies from seized Poland and then transferred Gypsies to Auschwitz from other nations. These nations included the Reich, Bohemia, and

Moravia. As a result, Jews, Poles, Gypsies, and citizens of the Soviet Union all ended up at Auschwitz.

In addition, a large number of Germans, Austrians, Czechs, Yugoslavs, and other nationalities were detained and killed there. A very diverse spectrum of socioeconomic origins, political viewpoints, and religious convictions were combined with differences in country origin, language, and dialect. Thus, there were a wide variety of people held as prisoners at Auschwitz.

Conditions in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp

People were transported to Auschwitz from nearly every country throughout Europe. They were typically transported in cramped freight cars or cattle trucks. They frequently traveled for days without access to toilets, food, or drink. The trains initially arrived at sidings close to the camp. However, beginning in May 1944, they continued on a specially built spur inside Auschwitz II-Birkenau proper (Megargee et al., 2009). Unfortunately, it is exceedingly impossible to pinpoint exactly how many were sent in these shipments because the majority of the passengers, notably the Jews, were gassed as soon as they arrived (Watts, 2008).

Instead of being immediately executed, those who the SS deemed suitable for employment were forced to work as slaves. Those forced to work were given an identification number and striped prison clothing. Starting in 1943, some prisoner groups and the majority of prisoners had their identification numbers tattooed on them, usually on the left forearm. Over 400,000 people in all, representing all the aforementioned national and ethnic groupings, were assigned numbers (Czech, 1997). Over half of them passed away. Few people survived for more than six months due to either being killed quickly by being shot or hanged. Many others died from sickness, famine, hard labor, beatings, and torture.

Once in the camp, prisoners in Auschwitz 1 were housed in brick-built barracks. They initially slept on the ground, but as the camp's population increased, bunk beds with two and three levels were put in. In Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the prisoners were confined in shelters made of masonry or wood (Megargee et al., 2009). Up to 800 inmates would occasionally be crammed into a space meant for fifty-two horses because the wooden houses were built to copy that of SS stables.

In terms of hygiene, lavatories were rarely available and in few numbers. Washing facilities were unsanitary and in unsuitable conditions. This often made the conditions of living worse as they were given changes of clothing and undergarments every few months. If clothing was provided to them, prisoners would find them to be infested with lice. Numerous additional patients arrived at the already-crowded camp as a result of this delousing. Furthermore, the infirmary at these camps was commonly called the 'crematorium waiting room' since prisoners would get phenol injections or be sent to the gas chambers if their recovery was too slow. The only real medical treatment was scarce and limited to aspirin and charcoal pills (*Medicine in Auschwitz*, n.d.).

The meals provided to the prisoners were just as horrific as their living conditions. For breakfast, the prisoners would receive half a liter of lukewarm liquid that the SS called coffee. After the evening roll calls, a small piece of bread (300 grams), some lard or margarine, and occasionally 100 grams of salted pork were counted as their noon meal. Those who missed their noon meal due to working later would receive cold turnips or cabbage soup (Świebocka & Państwowe, 2001).

Conclusion

Once it became clear that the soviet troops were approaching, the Nazis tried to evacuate the camp by sending 60,000 prisoners on a death march. During the forced departure from Auschwitz, prisoners were cruelly tortured and many were killed. Anyone who fell behind was shot by SS soldiers. Finally, on January 27, 1945, the Soviet army invaded Auschwitz freeing the prisoners who remained after the camp was evacuated (Czech, 1997).

In Auschwitz, nearly 1 million Jews were murdered during its short existence. Between 70,000 and 74,000 Poles, 21,000 Roma (Gypsies), and perhaps 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war were among the other victims (History.com Editors, 2009). We remember these numbers and the cruelty they faced after so many years as an homage to the victims. As an Auschwitz survivor, Elie Wiesel once said, "One Jew was put to death in Jerusalem 2000 years ago and the non-Jewish world has not ceased to speak of his death. Do we [Jews] not have the right, the duty, to keep alive the memory of 6,000,000 dead?"

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