

**THE
HOLOCAUST
AND
HISTORY** The Known,
the Unknown, the Disputed, and
the Reexamined

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Auschwitz Concentration Camp

HOW IT WAS USED IN THE NAZI SYSTEM OF TERROR AND GENOCIDE AND IN THE ECONOMY OF THE THIRD REICH

Creation of the Camp, Its Physical Development and Methods of Extermination

Millions of human beings in occupied Europe perished as a result of the purposeful activities of different agencies of the Third Reich. The Nazi extermination policy rested on far-reaching plans for the Germanization of Eastern Europe and demographic restructuring of the rest of Europe.¹ The implementation of these plans was supposed to lead to the complete annihilation of the Jews and Gypsies and to the partial elimination of Slavs, most especially the Poles. Concentration camps, and death camps for Jews, along with an extensive system of court and police institutions were the tools for implementing these plans. The concentration camps in particular were the central instrument of terror against the nations of occupied Europe. In the last phase of the war they were one of the places where hundreds of thousands were exploited for slave labor.

The largest of these was the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. Established by the Nazis in occupied Polish territory, it combined in one complex both types of these camps.

The concentration camp in Oświęcim (renamed Auschwitz by the Germans) was set up in May 1940 at the initiative of local German police authorities in Silesia, where mass arrests of Polish nationals had been carried out since the beginning of the German occupation. As was the case in other parts of occupied Poland, the prisons quickly became so overcrowded that they could not house all of those whom the Germans had rounded up. The need for speed precluded building a camp from scratch, and so the German authorities made use of the prewar Polish army barracks located on the outskirts of Oświęcim at Zasole.

From its creation in 1940, the facility was systematically expanded so that by 1945 it was a complex of about forty camps and subcamps situated around the original camp. The area of the so-called "camp businesses" (Interessengebiet) was administered directly by the commander. It included the original camp and that at Brzezinka (Birkenau in German), covering forty square kilometers. During the period of its fastest growth, in the summer of 1944, there were 135,000 people in all the camps that formed the Auschwitz complex. Because of its rapid growth, as early

as November 1943 the camp was divided into three closely interrelated organizational units: Auschwitz I, including the original camp; Auschwitz II, including the Birkenau camp and subcamps at agricultural and breeding farms; and Auschwitz III, with its headquarters at Monowice, including subcamps at industrial enterprises.

In the first two years of the camp's operation, malnutrition and exhausting labor were the main causes of mass death. Individual murders also played a significant role at that time, although for the most part they were intended to maintain draconian discipline and absolute obedience. The efficacy of such conventional methods of killing is best illustrated by the fate of 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war who were transported to the camp in October 1941. After five months of starvation, hard labor, beatings, and outright killings, only 945 were still alive on March 1, 1942.²

On July 28, 1941, the first selection of diseased and disabled was carried out; 575 prisoners were to die in the gas chambers of the "euthanasia" center in Sonnenstein (Germany). Shortly thereafter, experiments began with various kinds of poisons; these were injected into prisoners to cause death. Finally, it was found that the quickest killing agent was phenol, injected directly into the heart, so this method was subsequently used in the camp hospital.

In August and September 1941, several experiments were carried out with Zyklon B (hydrogen cyanide) gas. Previously used as an insecticide, it now was used to carry out mass murder. In this way several transports of Soviet prisoners of war were killed in a mortuary adapted for that purpose at Crematorium I in the main camp.

In Birkenau, in the first half on 1942, two provisional gas chambers with a capacity of 800 and 1,200 people were put into operation in two houses taken from expelled peasants. Until September 1942 the bodies of the gas victims were buried in mass graves; subsequently, corpses were burned in the open air. From March 22 to June 25, 1943, four modern gas chambers and crematoria were put into operation at Birkenau to replace the earlier gas "bunkers." The official capacity of these four crematoria was 4,416 corpses every twenty-four hours.³ According to survivors of the Sonderkommando, the prisoners who were obliged to work in these facilities, the actual daily capacity was increased to 8,000 by shorter cremation times and incomplete incineration of the bones. From 1942 onward, the majority of Auschwitz victims died in the gas chambers. Most were Jews gassed as families—men, women, and children. Upon their arrival, Jews were subjected to selections, conducted mainly by SS doctors. At first these selections were conducted sporadically; after July 4, 1942, they became routine. Young and healthy people were chosen for labor from the new arrivals; the rest, including almost all the children, were sent directly to the gas chambers. Prisoners able to work were placed in barracks and then registered. After a period of quarantine they were put to work maintaining the camp or in industrial enterprises such as mines, armament factories, and other plants. The prisoners so employed outside Oświęcim were moved to subcamps located close to their work sites. If they became seriously ill, they were returned to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Non-Jewish prisoners were not subjected to a preliminary selection; as a rule all of them were registered. Between July 1941 and April 1943, after registration, they underwent selections as did the Jews, and those who were weak or otherwise unfit for work were killed by phenol injection or in the gas chambers. Selections of non-Jews, however, were less frequent and less strict.

Characterization of Victims by Nationality, Numbers, and the Proportion in the Balance of Casualties

Jews

Although from 1942 onward Auschwitz-Birkenau remained the place of deportation for Poles and small numbers of representatives of other nationalities, the camp functioned mainly as a center for the mass murder of Jews. The choice of Auschwitz was made in the summer of 1941, shortly after Hitler gave the order to completely annihilate that people. The first phase of this gigantic crime with five to six million victims was the mass execution of Jews by Einsatzgruppen, special execution squads of the German security police and security services in the wake of the German armed forces entering the Soviet Union. Near Mińsk, Kovno, and Riga, the Jews deported from Germany, Austria, and the Protectorate in late 1941 were shot en masse or killed in mobile gas vans.

In line with the plan presented on January 20, 1942, at a conference in Berlin-Wannsee, all the Jews in Europe, numbering over 11,000,000, were to be murdered. Included were those of countries such as Britain, not yet conquered by Germany, of Germany's allies, and of unoccupied neutral countries. Apart from the killing center in Chelmno, in use as of December 1941, the Nazis built three new such centers—Treblinka, Sobibór and Belzec—in 1942 at the eastern border of the General Government of Poland to shorten transport routes. These centers were equipped with special gas chambers designed for the mass killing of thousands. These camps were first and foremost places for the massacre of Polish Jews; Jews from other countries constituted a small percentage of the victims.

A small number of Jews were transported to Auschwitz as soon as the camp opened. Several Jews were in the first transport of 728 prisoners from Tarnów. According to the so-called "registers of newcomers," in the period from May 21 to December 22, 1941, of the total 9,415 arrivals, mostly from Poland, 1,079 were Jews. As objects of special persecution and torment by SS-men and camp functionaries, Jews died quickly. Otherwise, they were hardly noticeable as a separate national group in the camp.

Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler's order from the summer of 1941, several months after his March 1, 1941, inspection of Auschwitz, included that camp in the annihilation campaign against the Jews. To avoid leaving any evidence in writing, Himmler called camp commandant Rudolf Höss to Berlin and verbally informed him of his plan, without the usual presence of the Reichsführer's aide-de-camp. The SS chief's reasons for employing Auschwitz in the operation were that "the existing death centers in the East cannot cope with actions on a large scale," Auschwitz was in a good location for transport, and "the area can be easily isolated and concealed." Since many such sites could have been identified, it seems that the decisive factor was that at Auschwitz there was a preexisting concentration camp with a functioning administrative and technical base.

It can also be hypothesized that in locating the center for the mass killing of the Jews in this relatively new but existent concentration camp, Himmler tried to use the camouflage of the well-known camps of the 1930s to hide the radical purposes of Auschwitz. From 1942 onward, Auschwitz, an actual place on the map, not some

abstract place called "East," became the destination for hundreds of transports of Jews dispatched from all over Europe.

The exact date when the slaughter of Jews began in Auschwitz is not known. In their accounts and testimonies former prisoners and SS-men describe a number of cases in which transports of Jews were killed in the gas chambers at Crematorium I, but only in one instance was the autumn of 1941 cited as a date of the arrival of a transport. In a postwar deposition, Commandant Höss stated that he was unable to give the exact date; once he wrote that it may have been in December 1941 or January 1942, in another place he claimed that it was in the spring of 1942, or before the women's camp was established, that is before March 26, 1942.

The first transport of Jews for which the exact date of arrival at the camp is known is the transport of several hundred Jews brought from Bytom, then in Germany, on February 15, 1942.⁴ Mass inflow, however, began with the first registered transport of Jewish women from Slovakia, who arrived on March 26, 1942.⁵ It was followed by transports from France, the first on March 30, 1942; from Poland on May 5, 1942; the Netherlands on July 17; from Belgium, on August 5; Yugoslavia, on August 18; Theresienstadt in the Protectorate, October 7; Norway, December 1; Greece, March 20, 1943; Italy, October 23; and Hungary, May 2, 1944. According to the minutes of the Wannsee Conference, in January 1942 about five million Jews lived in those countries, excluding the western Ukraine, Byelorussia, and unoccupied France; they were potential victims of Auschwitz.

The territories of Europe involved in the deportation and mass murder of Jews fell, in effect, into four zones:

1. the lands east of the Bug River (Einsatzgruppen zone);
2. the General Government (Central Poland—zone of operations of the death camps of Treblinka, Sobibór, Belzec, and concentration camp Lublin-Majdanek);
3. Polish lands incorporated into the Reich, the so-called Warthegau (Wartheland) (zone of operations of the Chełmno-Kulmhof death camp);⁶ and
4. the remaining parts of Central, Western, Southern, and Northern Europe (Auschwitz-Birkenau camp operation zone).

This division did not result from a preconceived schema; rather, it reflected certain practices that allowed for numerous exceptions. The fact that the majority of Austrian, German, and Slovakian Jews were deported to the Soviet Union (Mińsk, Kovno, Riga), to the ghetto in Łódź (Litzmannstadt), or to a number of places in the Lublin area may serve as an example. Moreover, although Auschwitz was, above all, the place where Jews from outside occupied Poland were massacred, a substantial number of Polish Jews (300,000) from the central (General Government), western (Upper Silesia, Zagłębie Dąbrowskie), and northern (Ciechanów and Białystok) regions of occupied Poland also died there.⁷ The genocidal role of Auschwitz expanded when, in 1943, other killing centers ceased operations: Chełmno in April, Belzec in June, Treblinka in September, and Sobibór in October. After Operation Erntefest (Harvest Festival), the last mass execution at Majdanek, on November 3, 1943, the Auschwitz camp essentially became, for a time, the only center specifically oriented toward the mass murder of the Jews. An exception was the three weeks the

death camp at Chełmno subsequently resumed operations. Until spring 1944 the concentration camps inside the Reich were excluded from the annihilation campaign against the Jews; before that, under Himmler's order of October 1942, Jewish prisoners were to be sent to Auschwitz or Majdanek in order to leave other camps "free of Jews" (Judenfrei).

In the spring of 1944, as a result of economic difficulties and especially a depleted work force, enforcement of the principle of a "Jew-free Reich" was interrupted and Jewish labor was increasingly used in German industry. From that same time, Auschwitz was not only a site of mass murder. Simultaneously it exploited prisoner labor in its subcamps—mainly in Silesia—and it served as a transit point for the Jewish work force withdrawn from the territories threatened by the Red Army offensive. A huge sifting of human material took place there; those who were fit for work were left alive and sent to industrial plants, the rest were murdered and burned. In this way 600,000 people, including some 438,000 Hungarian Jews, 60,000 to 70,000 Jews from Łódź, and prisoners of Majdanek, Płaszów and the Jewish labor camps in the General Government passed through Auschwitz.

Jewish citizens of almost all the countries of Europe, and even from other continents, were in the transports to Auschwitz. Of at least 1.1 million Jews sent there, about one million lost their lives.

Poles

Although the initial reason for creating Auschwitz was the local police problem in Silesia, from the very beginning the camp's reach extended to almost all of occupied Poland. It was one of the main deportation sites for Poles who were sent to concentration camps. The first transport of Polish prisoners—728 of them—arrived from Tarnów on June 14, 1940. Other transports followed: 313 prisoners from Wisnicz on June 20; 23 from Katowice on June 22; 160 prisoners from Kraków on July 18; and 1,666 from Warsaw on August 15. By the end of that year, 7,879 prisoners had been incarcerated, almost all of them Poles. The great majority of them were imprisoned for political reasons, usually in revenge for real or suspected resistance activities. Some of them were arrested preventively as "undesirable" persons known for their patriotism, for their specific prewar social or political activities, or because their social status or education defined them as members of the Polish leadership. Large numbers of these individuals were rounded up in the mid-May to mid-June Extraordinary Pacification Operation (Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion), commonly known as the AB-Aktion.

In addition to the political prisoners, Auschwitz also received persons who were caught during so-called round-ups—actions aimed at intimidating the civilian population—as well as the hostages who were shot from time to time in reprisal for resistance actions in the areas they came from. Poles who were sentenced to death by courts-martial or on the basis of police decisions in the course of so-called "special treatment" procedures (Sonderbehandlung) were also executed at the camp. A separate group of prisoners were Poles who were placed in the camp for "reeducation" after violating labor regulations. Unlike other prisoners incarcerated indefinitely, the "reeducation prisoners" were to be imprisoned no longer than eight weeks; even so, about 10 percent of them did not survive. Others had their term of

imprisonment prolonged or status changed, and they were held in the camp for an unlimited time. A small number were arrested for ordinary criminal offenses. After the Warsaw Uprising, in August and September 1944, 13,000 men, women and children from Warsaw were confined in that camp.

To the unfulfilled annihilation project against Poles should be added the intended deportation to Auschwitz of tens of thousands of men, women, and children from Zamojszczyzna, a region selected as one of the first bridgeheads of Germanization in eastern Poland. According to this plan, from the beginning of November 1942 three trains, each with one thousand people in category (Wertungsgruppe) IV, the "worst" racial status—were to be sent to Auschwitz weekly.⁸ At the last moment, the Nazis abandoned this plan, although at least thirteen hundred prisoners in this group were sent to Auschwitz.

According to our estimates 70,000 to 75,000 Poles of the 140,000 to 150,000 deported to Auschwitz died in the camp.⁹

Gypsies

The third most numerous national group was the Gypsies. As with the Jews, the Germans planned the total elimination of all Gypsy tribes except the Sinti and Lalleri (many members of these tribes were killed later, too). In the territory of the Soviet Union, the Gypsies were shot by the Einsatzgruppen. About 30,000 were killed in Nazi occupied Poland when they were shot on the spot or murdered together with the Jews at killing centers. Gypsies from Western and Central Europe were transported to killing centers and ghettos. Deportations to Auschwitz were based on Himmler's order of December 16, 1942, and the implementation regulations of January 29, 1943, of the Reich Security Main Office. In total, 23,000 Gypsies—men, women, and children—were placed in a separate section of Birkenau, the "family camp," from February 1943 to August 1944. Most of them died of hunger and disease. On August 2, 1944, after the last group of 2,897 was gassed, the Gypsy camp at Birkenau was liquidated. It is estimated that about 20,000 Gypsies perished there.¹⁰

Soviet prisoners of war

Against international law, prisoners of war were also placed in Auschwitz. In order to keep up appearances, they were initially kept in a separate part of the original camp, called the "POW labor camp." Within the first five months of their stay, from October 1941 to March 1942, of a total 10,000 Soviet POWs, more than 9,000 died of hunger or were killed. By the end of the camp's existence, another 2,000 Soviet prisoners of war had been incarcerated there. Selected prisoners from POW camps were executed at Auschwitz; these prisoners were not registered but were shot or killed in the gas chambers immediately after arrival. It is estimated that at least 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war lost their lives at Auschwitz.

Members of other nationalities

On a smaller scale, Auschwitz also eliminated prisoners of other nationalities: Czechs (including members of the Sokół organization), Byelorussians (5,000 persons, including children, from the area of Mińsk and Vitebsk caught in the anti-partisan operation known as the Flurbereinigung), Yugoslavs, French, Germans,

and Austrians. Among these last two were political prisoners (including members of the international brigades in Spain), as well as criminal offenders. The latter served as Capos, prison block seniors, and other trusties. It is estimated that 10,000 to 15,000 of 25,000 people other than the Jews, Poles, Gypsies, and Soviet POWs died in the camp.

Considering the dominant proportional victimization of Jews and Poles, the history of Auschwitz can be divided into two periods: the Polish period (1940 to mid-1942), when the majority of the deportees killed were Poles, and the Jewish period (mid-1942 to 1945), when the great majority killed were Jews.

Functions of Auschwitz: Concentration, Hard Labor, and Murder

From 1940 to mid-1942, the Auschwitz camp mainly fulfilled the role of a concentration camp, that is, here the prisoners were killed off only gradually, the main instruments being hunger and hard labor. Execution by shooting, by poison injection, and, from 1941, by gas chamber took place on a relatively small scale.

The use of prisoners as a workforce included assignment to construction detail, industrial enterprises, and the agricultural and breeding farms attached to the camp.

From mid-1942 to 1944, the camp retained its function of concentration, but in addition became the center of the mass annihilation of Europe's eleven million Jews, whose impending murder was announced at the Berlin-Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942.

The killing center at Birkenau and the concentration camp, as well as all other components of the Auschwitz complex, were interrelated organic parts of one structure. The concentration camp was an administrative and economic base for the killing center, providing the workforce for servicing the ramps, gas chambers, crematoria, storage areas for the stolen property, and for concealing the traces of the crime as well as for various economic enterprises. In turn, Auschwitz as a death center received exhausted prisoners from camp hospitals and slave labor subcamps for final disposal.

Because of its labor and killing potential, Auschwitz played a central role in the Nazi camp system. From summer 1942 to summer 1944, about 20 to 30 percent of all concentration camp prisoners were handled at Auschwitz.

From 1942 onward, a process of specialization can be observed throughout the whole Auschwitz complex. In November 1943 this was institutionally sanctioned when the camp was divided into three organizational units:

1. Auschwitz I (the main camp) served as administrative center for the camp complex. It was the seat of the chief of the local SS garrison, the garrison doctor, the political and employment departments; the main storage areas, workshops, and most enterprises were located there. The prisoners were employed mostly in these units and at the Union Armament Factory.

2. Auschwitz II (Birkenau and farm subcamps) was the center for annihilating the Jews and for killing sick and exhausted prisoners from the whole complex and even other camps.

From the first selections of Jews brought in mass transports, that is, from

spring 1942, the camp was to become the main labor reserve and transit point for the whole network of concentration camps. After the POW camp concept was abandoned, these very plans were the justification for expanding the camp on an enormous scale, with a projected limit of 200,000 people. Because the camp had its own needs, and the camps inside the Reich from October 1942 had been closed to Jewish prisoners, whose numbers were constantly increasing in the total workforce, and because of other organizational problems (quarantine, epidemics, security considerations), between 1942 and 1943 the camp fulfilled this role only to a very limited extent.

During that time, Polish prisoners were the only group transferred to camps in the Reich to avert the possibility of contact with other Poles. Employment in the Upper Silesian industrial area was avoided. Therefore, the main contingent of Jewish prisoners was directed to Auschwitz subcamps or employed on the spot operating the execution facilities, sorting the stolen property of the victims, or working at the camp farms or the Union and Zerlegebetriebe armament factories (half of the prisoners remained unemployed or unfit for work). Not until 1944, when Germany found itself in a very critical military and economic situation, were the earlier objections overcome, and Jewish prisoners too were transferred to employment in the Reich.

3. Auschwitz III had as its basic task exploitation of the prisoner workforce; all subcamps at industrial plants in Upper Silesia and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were grouped under it. Despite the importance of the prisoner workforce, Auschwitz III did not occupy a dominant position within the Auschwitz complex. During the period of its fastest growth, the number of Auschwitz III prisoners did not exceed 30 percent of the Auschwitz camp total. This rose to 50 percent only in the camp's last months as a result of the partial evacuation of Auschwitz I and Birkenau to the Reich; the subcamp prisoners were evacuated just ahead of the Soviet army.

Auschwitz was the most important Nazi death center and concentration camp. Of at least 1,300,000 deportees to Auschwitz, about 900,000 were killed immediately after arrival. The other 400,000 were registered as concentration camp prisoners and given numerical identification. About 200,000 of these died of hunger, disease, and slave labor; many of the remainder were killed by injection or in the gas chambers. Thus at least 1,100,000 died in the camp. Ninety percent of them were Jews. The second largest group were the Poles, followed by Gypsies and prisoners of other nationality. Thus, accepting Raul Hilberg's estimate that 5.1 million Jews died in all camps, ghettos, and execution sites, Auschwitz accounts for 20 percent of Jewish victims. The special nature of Auschwitz is due to its role in the Final Solution and its dual task as a center for immediate mass execution and concentration camp.

This was visible in the treatment of prisoners. If in other camps limits were placed on killing the sick (Glück's regulation of April 27, 1943, limiting "euthanasia" to the mentally ill), and if living conditions were improved by allowing food parcels to be received, in order to prevent too great loss of manpower, in Auschwitz human life had no value. The labor force was maintained through continuous replacement of

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Central Office for Economy and Administration. These files, however, were largely destroyed since they could have been used in prosecutions after the war.

Auschwitz started to destroy files in July 1944, soon after the concentration camp Lublin–Majdanek, which was located 200 kilometers away, fell to the Russians. The Auschwitz card index, correspondence, and reports to the supreme authorities were taken to the crematoria and burnt. The most valuable documents destroyed included the name lists of Jewish transports, most files of particular camp departments, and registers of incoming prisoners (only records from 1941 and fragments from 1942 and 1943 escaped). Only three documents sent to SS headquarters describe selections from Jewish transports and record both the number of those registered as prisoners and the number sent directly to the gas chambers. The absence of such documents was among the causes of the incorrect estimates of the number of victims of Auschwitz (up to 4 million) after the war. These numbers could be corrected only after copies of the lists of transports and other documents were found in the archives of countries from which Jews were deported to Auschwitz, permitting estimates of the number of deportees as well as information on individual transports. Yet no such lists of Polish Jews were found. On the basis of other documents and the accounts of witnesses to the process of extermination, one may assume that in most cases lists were not written at all during the liquidation of ghettos and transit camps in German-occupied Poland. The transports were formed at random, including anyone the Germans managed to capture at a particular moment. Studies of the liquidation of particular ghettos and Jewish communities are one of the few bases on which the number of Polish Jews deported to Auschwitz can be roughly estimated. The inmates' secret register of assigned camp serial numbers plays an exceptionally important role. The number of 300,000 Jews from Poland deported to Auschwitz is supported by both the research of Frank Golczewski, Martin Gilbert's *Atlas of the Holocaust*, and Danuta Czech's *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945*. The incomplete documents of the Construction Office permit us to trace with some precision the stages of the building and expansion of the camp, as well as the construction of crematoria and gas chambers, but that is all. In all likelihood, the number of surviving files is only some 5 to 10 percent of the camp's registry (records, documentation, archives).

While the Germans were covering up the traces of their crimes, they left those documents that could testify to their "law and order" and to their "solicitude" for camp inmates. It is striking that they left an extensive set of analyses of blood, urine, saliva, and stool—documents prepared by the Institute of Hygiene in Rajsko. On the surface these might seem evidence of care for the health of inmates. In fact they were a manifestation of formalism and bureaucracy indicating as well the fear that infectious diseases might spread to the SS-men. Analyses revealing infectious diseases often resulted in the gassing of the sick inmates.

It is also surprising that the SS left individual death certificates for the period from July 1941 to December 1943, which testified to the deaths of 87,000 people (4,500 in 1941, 45,616 in 1942, and 36,991 in 1943). There is only one explanation: the documentary citation of disease as the cause of death of all of these people was to be a kind of alibi. Most of all it was to conceal the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people—deaths that were never recorded. The death certificates were written only

for prisoners who were registered (i.e., assigned one of the 400,000 serial numbers), and not even for all of them. Death certificates were not prepared for Soviet prisoners of war, and for many Jews, especially after March 1943.

Thus, the researcher has to employ, much more frequently than is otherwise common, indirect sources, including materials of the camp resistance movement (i.e., all kinds of notes and copies of documents illegally written out by prisoners), as well as reports, memoirs, and testimonies by inmates and other eyewitnesses.

Such sources have three functions for research on the history of the camp: they fill gaps in existing camp files; they help to interpret and correct the files; and they constitute the only source of information about certain sides of camp life such as everyday bullying, the psychological life of the inmates, and acts of resistance or self-defence.

Materials of the camp's resistance were closely connected with the fact that Auschwitz was seen by both inmates and the Polish resistance organizations within the occupied country, as historically unique because of the technique of killing, the scale of the crimes committed there, and their ideological motivation. That gave rise to inmate efforts to reveal the crimes to the world and to preserve the memory of the victims. One of the first accounts was Witold Pilecki's report smuggled from the camp to one of the Resistance organizations in Warsaw in November 1940. Other inmates who rallied to the conspiratorial organization "Kampfgruppe Auschwitz" led by Poles Józef Cyrankiewicz and Stanisław Kłodziński, and the Austrian Hermann Langbein. This organization regularly smuggled reports out of the camp; the most important reached the Polish Government-in-Exile in London; others were distributed in occupied Poland or placed in conspiratorial archives "pro memoria."¹¹

One of the most valuable documents is the fragmentary newcomers' list containing the date of arrival of the transport, numbers assigned to people from the given transport, and, in many cases, notation of where the transport came from. Thanks to this data, the chronology, course, and to some extent the proportions of deportations to Auschwitz can be reconstructed. Other materials confirm important events such as the first attempt to kill people with Zyklon B and the employment of gas chambers for mass extermination of Jews. Despite some inaccuracy, these materials combined with other sources are a valuable supplement to our knowledge about Auschwitz.¹² Reports of escapees are another valuable source of knowledge. The best-known are accounts of four Jews who escaped in April and May 1944—W. Rosenberg, A. Wetzler, A. Rosin, and C. Mordowicz—as well as the Pole J. Tabeau. The reports were published, in Europe and the United States, during the war.¹³ The notes of Jewish members of Sonderkommando working at the burning of bodies are another precious source of information about Auschwitz. Buried in the ground and found after the war, these manuscripts provide unique evidence of the crimes committed in the camp.¹⁴

As was mentioned above, one of the functions of all these sources is to provide a context in which to interpret the German documents. Nazi usage created a jargon to camouflage their crimes. Murder was called "Sonderbehandlung" (special treatment), "Sonderunterbringung" (special housing), or "Evakuierung" (evacuation). Gas chambers were called "Leichenkeller" (cellars for corpses), shooting was called "umlegen" (overturning), partisans "Banditen," and "Zyklon B" was called "Materialien für Judenumsiedlung" (material for Jewish resettlement). Deciphering the

cryptonyms is possible only because of the information included in the memoirs and prisoners' reports.

Subjective aspects of research

The postwar image of Auschwitz was created by Jewish and Polish survivors and scholars—members of two groups who lost most in this camp. The lack of an objective picture of the national structure of the victims of Auschwitz undoubtedly influenced the dissemination of different images of the camp. The number of victims of particular nationalities was not even approximately known until Wellers' work, and that only very divergent, general estimates had been known. The number of Jews was estimated as between 1 and 2.5 million, while estimates of the number of prisoners called "non-Jews" ranged from 100,000 (Gerald Reitlinger), to 300,000 (Raul Hilberg). Undoubtedly, the lack of impeachable sources and, above all, proper statistical comparisons was the main reason for the wide divergences. Both Jewish and Polish researchers were also under the pressure of their own environments. This ethnocentricity influenced their research, sometimes leading them to violate the rules of objectivity.

For Jewish researchers, Auschwitz was the center for immediate extermination of Jews; Auschwitz as concentration camp was treated as a marginal topic, in spite of the fact that half of 400,000 registered inmates were Jews. One can get the impression that for some Jewish researchers the introduction of other nationalities into the history of Auschwitz somehow diminished the genocide of Jews. For Polish researchers, however, Auschwitz was most of all the place of martyrdom of "citizens" from all of Europe with the matter of nationality remaining in the background. The divergence of these two understandings of Auschwitz was intensified by the lack of free access to information, the infrequency of discussion and exchange of opinions among Jewish and Polish scholarly and cultural circles, the rupture in relations between Poland and Israel in 1968, and the anti-Jewish repression that followed in Poland. Jews did not—and often still do not—realize the scale of crimes committed against Poles during the war. They also do not understand the significance of Auschwitz in the consciousness and history of the Polish nation. On the other hand Poles were not—and to some extent are still not—aware of the enormity of the crimes committed against Jews in this camp and what Auschwitz means as the symbol of the Holocaust in the consciousness of Jews all over the world.

All of this has repeatedly given rise to misunderstandings, controversies, acrimony, and accusations. The controversy about the location of the Carmelite Convent in Oświęcim was a symptom of this mutual misunderstanding. So, too, the three years of discussion about the short text of the inscriptions on the monument in Birkenau. However, the results of both discussions, heated and emotional, resolved the controversies satisfactorily for all the participants, changed mutual misperceptions, and brought both sides closer to the objective truth. The rapprochement between members of Jewish and Polish social, religious, political, and cultural circles was made possible, in part, thanks to a far-reaching consensus among scholars who proved in this instance more objective about the subject of their research, in particular research on the national composition of the victims published for the first time by Wellers and the present writer.

For many, the results were a great surprise because they violated the accepted stereotypes. They contributed to a decline in the tension over the Carmelite Convent, and ultimately to its cessation. This was duly noted by one Polish publicist who wrote in 1991:

The figures . . . have revealed the great quantitative disproportion of the two groups of victims: Jewish victims of Auschwitz 960,000 [and] Poles 75,000. . . . It's time to end disputes and polemics.

Scholarship objectively representing the past can contribute to better understanding between peoples inheriting that past, which is especially important today when revival of animosities built on past myths, misconceptions, and prejudices represents an unacceptable tragedy.

Goals and methods for further research and education

Fifty years of research have established Auschwitz's importance as a historical event. Nonetheless gaps and sometimes even contradictions and discrepancies still survive in the literature, exploited by Holocaust deniers whose goal is to question the very nature of this camp as a center for genocide. This is why research should continue, with the following goals:

1. Locating still-unknown primary sources, especially in archives of the former socialist countries: a survey of such materials should be drawn up and, if possible, computerized. The Auschwitz Museum has made substantial progress in this regard. Since 1991, archival materials have been entered systematically into a data base to protect their contents in the event the documents are damaged and to facilitate their study. The lack of published archival inventories hampers research. The largest quantity of such lists is published in Israel, but they are not always available outside that country.

2. Studies on new subjects or subjects heretofore only superficially examined: detailed work on arrests, deportation, selection, and registration of prisoners of different countries should be carried out, in particular, on Polish, Slovakian, Hungarian, and Yugoslavian Jews. Studies should focus on decision-making, cooperation among various levels of German and local collaborating administrations, and implementation by local authorities. Polish prisoners at Auschwitz still await treatment; the issues here require investigation at many sites—mostly prisons—into the causes and implementation of the deportations. This subject requires surveys of prison archives and analyses of the so-called group transports (*Sammeltransporte*). There are few histories of the prisons under Nazi rule. The same applies to the Gypsies and prisoners of other nationalities. Lists of the largest possible number of names of prisoners should be included in such works. Data on the less numerous nationality groups—Czechs, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Germans, Austrians, Yugoslavs, and others—should be assembled precisely. About 70,000 death certificates the Russian authorities have recently transferred to the Auschwitz Museum will play an extremely important role in such research. Another issue that has not been sufficiently clarified is the extent to which communities in various countries, including the

victims—and especially the Jews—were aware of the truth about Nazi intentions.

3. Resolving existing discrepancies: one such question is the number of victims. J. C. Pressac's recently published figures indicate that this question should be discussed further.¹⁵ Discrepancies concerning the murder facilities—the gas chambers and crematoria—and especially their origins, capacity, operational period, and role in the killing process demand serious attention. There is still no consensus on the role of the Polish resistance in informing the world about the crimes being committed at Auschwitz. Over-reliance on outdated works instead of more recent literature, such as the *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945* by Danuta Czech, or the works the State Museum Auschwitz publishes in its “*Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*” (“*Hefte von Auschwitz*” in the German edition) suggests that a permanent distribution system should be created for publications about Auschwitz, including (at a minimum) the Yad Vashem Memorial Museum in Israel, the State Museum at Oświęcim, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Countering Holocaust deniers

The work ahead requires sensitive attention to the tragedy of the victims and forbids reduction of genocide to a technological process. A minor corollary is that studies of secondary phenomena such as spiritual and cultural life should always be grounded in camp reality, that is, the process of genocide; failure to stress their marginality risks falsifying the historical truth.

Another issue is the question of relativizing Nazi crimes by comparing them with those of Stalinism. Discussion of Nolte's views made this current again, as did discussion of commemorating the victims of the Stalinist camps established at sites of former Nazi camps in Germany. In Poland, the overuse of the name Auschwitz has magnified the scale of repression in the Stalinist camps established at the sites of Auschwitz-Birkenau and its subcamps at Świętochłowice and Jaworzno. In fact, such comparisons relativize German crimes. The same applies to the Gulag in the former Soviet Union. But even in the absence of new research on the Gulag, we may categorically state an important difference between the natures of the Stalinist and Nazi crimes. Stalin's policies repressed or immobilized real or imaginary political opponents, whereas Nazi crimes were based in ideology and their fundamental motivation was the nationality not only of the victims but even their ancestors. They sought to murder the whole target population regardless of age, political views, religion, language, or activities. At least in this respect the crimes against the Jews and the Gypsies had no parallel in all of history.

Responsibility for progress rests upon all researchers. Among institutions, this is a duty primarily of the Auschwitz Museum. In spite of the fact that this is not an academic research institution in a strict sense and the activities of its staff reach far beyond its research work, the museum can boast of a large number of works that have made important contributions to research on the camp's history. In 1995, the Auschwitz Museum published the five-volume monograph, *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Wezłowe zagadnienia z dziejów obozu* (Auschwitz 1940–1945: The most important

problems from the history of the camp). Volume 1 presents the establishment and organization of the camp; volume 2 the life and work of the prisoners; volume 3 extermination; volume 4 the resistance movement; and volume 5, the epilogue: liquidation of the camp, prosecution of Auschwitz criminals, and the medical consequences of imprisonment. Currently researchers from the museum are studying the deportation and extermination of Jews from occupied Poland, deportation and extermination of Poles, the life and extermination of women and children, and the activity of IG Farbenindustrie in Auschwitz.

NOTES

1. Alan Bullock, *Hitler: Eine Studie über Tyrannei* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Bücherei, 1964), vol. 2, p. 739.
2. Archives of the State Auschwitz Museum (ASAM), D-Au-2, Stärkebuch.
3. Archives Domburg (Germany), ND 4586, letter of June 28, 1943, from Zentralleitung Auschwitz to SS-WVHA. ASAM. Microfilm no. 1034. The capacity of the crematorium was projected to reach 60 bodies per hour \times 24 = 1440/day.
4. *Kommandant in Auschwitz, Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen von Rudolf Höss* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1961), p. 123 note 3.
5. Sources in the Auschwitz Museum Archives prove that from September 1941 to March 1942, few Jewish transports arrived at Auschwitz. We know exactly the date that one such transport arrived, having left February 15, 1942, from Bytom (Beuthen). The number of 100,000 Jews buried in mass graves, given by Höss, relates to the period from the beginning of mass destruction to September 1942. Compare Yehuda Bauer, "Auschwitz," in *Der Mord an den Juden im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1985), p. 168.
6. Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
7. Franciszek Piper, *Die Zahl der Opfer von Auschwitz: Aufgrund der Quellen und der Erträge der Forschung, 1945 bis 1990* (Oświęcim: Verlag Staatliches Museum in Oświęcim, 1993). The same number of Polish Jews was established by German historian Frank Golczewski in his essay "Polen," in *Dimension des Völkermords: Die Zahl der Jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Oldenburg, 1991), p. 411-97. A higher number—600,000—was established by G. Wellers; see Georges Wellers, "Essai de détermination du nombre de morts au camp d'Auschwitz," *Le monde juif* 112 (1983): 125-59. Jean Claude Pressac's calculations, on the contrary, diminish the number to 150,000; see Jean Claude Pressac, *Les crematoires d'Auschwitz: La Machinerie du meurtre de masse* (Paris, 1993).
8. *Periodical of Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland* 13, Document No. 2, pp. 6ff., telegram of October 26, 1942, from Günther to Krumej relating the deportation of Poles to Auschwitz and Berlin.
9. According to Wellers, of 146,605 Poles and "others," 86,505 died; see Wellers, "Essai," pp. 153, 155; Piper, *Die Zahl der Opfer*, pp. 103, 151, 167.
10. *Memorial Book. The Gypsies at Auschwitz-Birkenau* (London: K. S. Saur Verlag, edited by State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1993). In the book, 11,843 deaths in the Gypsy camp are given, the number of death marks in the Gypsy camp register. About 3,000 Gypsies were also killed during the liquidation of the Gypsy camp (the register had already been hidden by the prisoners); another 1,700 Gypsies were killed without registration on March 23, 1943, and approximately another 1,000 Gypsies who had been transferred to Germany were sent back to Auschwitz and gassed; see Danuta Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im*

Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939–1945 (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1988), 448, 903, 910.

11. Henryk Swiebocki, "Die Lagernahe Widerstandsbewegung und ihre Hilfsaktion: die Häftlinge des KZ Auschwitz," *Hefte von Auschwitz* 19 (1995).

12. "Obóz koncentracyjny Oświęcim w świetle akt Delegatury rządu RP na Kraj," *Oświęcimskie*, special number 1 (1968).

13. "Raporty uciekinierów z KL Auschwitz," *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*, special number 1 (1992).

14. *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime. Manuscripts of Members of Sonderkommando* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcim, 1973).

15. See Pressac, *Les crématoires*. There are some problems in Pressac's book, including the date of the early gassings, the number of Polish Jews deported to Auschwitz, the total number of deported, and others. Many inaccuracies mar the information supplied by compiler Kenneth N. McVay (1993), "HOLOCAUST FAQ: Auschwitz-Birkenau: Layman's Edition," Usenet news, answers.