



The Holocaust (Shoah) (1939-1945)

Genocide is a result of cascading radicalization of policy. It is rarely a premeditated design pursued from the outset. Policy incrementally evolves and adapts over time in the complex face of changing political, military, and social circumstances. Genocide emerges as a kind of Plan C after previous attempts to “solve” a perceived “threat” fails. Holocaust historian Karl Schleunes wrote about the “Twisted Road to Auschwitz” that explored how the Nazis ended up building camps of mass murder. It is a useful description as it allows us to blend together some of the myriad forces acting together to create a “perfect storm.” As survivor Emil Fackenheim writes, “The murder camp was not an accidental by-product of the Nazi empire. It was its essence.”

Nazi Germany was on a trajectory of mass murder and atrocity from its onset driven by Hitler’s obsessions. The unfolding of genocides in Europe is a complex phenomenon, but for our purposes we will focus on: Nazi “ideology” and the bureaucratic, competitive, feudal nature of the Nazi state; process and innovation; Hitler’s function as leader and individual initiatives of “working towards the Führer”; the influence of the unfolding wartime situation; and the influence of location, specifically Eastern Europe. The “final solution” must be connected to Nazi military campaigns. Historians such as Gerhard Weinberg and David Cesarani point out that making war the central mission of Nazi Germany and this understanding informs us about the unfolding genocides. Nazi preparations for war were “erratic” and its early victories owe more to the failures and poor decisions of their enemies. Nazi responses to both the changing circumstances of the war and, in turn, the Holocaust were inadequate. The war took precedence over the Holocaust, but the Holocaust was an integral part of Nazi goals. Although the Holocaust can be seen as a “low cost and low tech” “sideshow” (Cesarani), chaotic, ill-planned, and underfunded, its urgency and “breakneck speed” revealed the drive and will to destroy. Throughout, the exterminations were marked by sexual violence and rape as tools of genocide.

Ideology is not something that can be imposed “from the top.” Rather, ideology is a packaged expression of cultural symbols, desires, and perspectives that “make sense” to a public at large. Holocaust historian Doris Bergen sums up Nazi ideology with the phrase, “Race and Space.” Nazism was rooted in racial theory that had become popular within professional circles by the turn of the twentieth century. For the Nazis, “racial” survival was predicated on a social Darwinist view of natural competition and survival. Not only was it necessary to weed out “threatening” gene pools from the “Aryan” it was also necessary for the “Aryan” to find living space or *lebensraum*. This had a certain appeal to many Germans. Why not carve out our own empire in Europe the way other Europeans had done throughout the world? Why not secure land for the lifeblood of the “race” while also securing natural and economic resources that would leave Germany less vulnerable? The collective experience of World War I and its aftermath greatly shaped this desire. And so, echoing the mindset of the wartime leadership, racial continuation was tied to territorial expansion. The Nazis did not see political borders, but instead sought to create racial living space by colonizing the “wild east” (a reference to perceived American expansion to the “wild west”), clear out inferior races (Slavs, Poles...) and liberate “Aryan” racial stock. As Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “Europe is not a geographic entity; it’s a racial entity.” This bizarre racial theory fit nicely with German grievances. The Army, for example, had been developing war plans even before the Nazis came to power to bring East Prussia and the newly-defined Poland back under German control.

On September 1, 1939 Hitler launched his *Blitzkrieg* (“lightning war”) against Poland. The invasion satisfied the needs of the Army as well as the racial goals of the Nazis. “We are going to Poland to strike at the Jews”

written on the side of an Army transport (photo right) reflected the peculiar melding of these dual objectives. The devastation of Poles was the first genocide conducted by Nazi Germany. The goal was to eradicate Polish nationalism and identity, create slave labor, and open up farmland for colonizing “Aryans.” Poland fought valiantly, but was overwhelmed by both German forces and the Soviet Red Army who, in cooperation with the Nazis, invaded eastern Poland on September 17, 1939. This was the first complete triumph of the German military since 1871 and the victory freed Nazi leaders from previous restraints to deal with the “ethnic mush” of Poland. It was SS Chief Heinrich Himmler and his deputy, the head of the SD (Intelligence/security branch of the SS) Reinhard Heydrich who sought to give concrete shape to Hitler’s odd racial vision for the “wild east.” Heydrich was a well-educated, coldly calculating and brutal Aryan prototype who, it was rumored, was Hitler’s candidate to succeed him. He appointed Adolf Eichmann as his special advisor on Jewish policy.



Destroying Polish leadership and institutions had been part of the prewar planning. Within a week of the invasion, Nazi planners began to explore solutions to the Jewish question. It is important to note that Nazi leaders are engaged in a process of decision-making based upon self-imposed “problems” that they perceived had to be “solved.” As new ideas were tried, policies implemented and often failing, newer solutions were sought by ambitious individuals working within a Nazi culture that encouraged radical action.



Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe (German Air Force), Director of the Four Year Plan in the German economy, and, at the outbreak of war in Europe, Hitler's acknowledged successor, was the person in charge of Jewish affairs. He had appointed Heydrich to head the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Germany on January 24, 1939. Heydrich’s brief was to rid the Reich of as many Jews as possible. This was always a main focus of Nazi thinkers. On September 7, 1939, working for Himmler in Poland, Heydrich ordered special SS and police units to kill nobility, clergy, and Jews. It was under these orders that the first mass killings began.



On October 7, 1939 Himmler secured the right to handle return and resettlement as well as all matters relating to “strengthening Germanism” in the East! Adolf Eichmann became his top aide in creating the “Nisko Plan.” Himmler anxiously got to work in trying to ethnically cleanse this new territory. Four million Poles (of which 400,000 were Jews and 325,000 ethnic Germans) were living in the western part of Poland annexed to Germany. His fantasy was to transfer approximately one million people in four months both within and also into Poland. His goals were: to decimate Poles (and the Catholic church) to clear areas for *volkdeutsche* (ethnic German minority) living in what had been Poland; enact the “Nisko Plan” and ship Polish and Reich Jews and “Gypsies” east of the Vistula river (as far east as possible) to a reserve near Lublin to create a reservoir for slave labor in the General Government (what had been rump Poland); allow for the influx of German colonizers/settlers from the Reich; deport German Jews east to Lublin; and, via an agreement with Stalin, allow for the resettlement of Germans from the Baltic countries to Poland. Not only did this fantasy create a bureaucratic and practical nightmare, it was envisioned without consultation of the German Army which was working to secure its newly won territory.

The Nisko Plan, sending targeted groups to the swamps near Lublin was estimated to kill at least two million people due to inadequate living conditions. Illustrative of the nightmare realities of combining racial fantasies

with resettlement goals, Himmler was forced to table the Nisko Plan almost immediately. On October 15, 1939, the first wave of ethnic Germans arrived in Danzig from the Baltics. No space had been prepared for them and no advanced planning had taken place. These Germans, followed by others, suddenly took precedence over Jewish deportation to Poland. Although there were Jews sent to Nisko, the priority of the German military – now tasked with moving troops west to attack France – took precedence. The Nisko Plan withered and died and the Nisko reservation was shut down in April 1940.



Faces of horror (from left): Erna Petri and Gertrude Segel, who took the murdering into their own hands, and SS wives Vera Stahli and Liesel Riedel.

Meanwhile, almost every ambitious Nazi (social workers, teachers, nurses, adventurers, secretaries, bureaucrats...) rushed to Poland and sought to outdo each other in cruelty and brutality. All the while, SS troops were seeking racially valuable children. As many Poles were blond haired and even blue-eyed, it is estimated that more than 250,000 children were kidnapped, their parents murdered, and the children sent to Germany to be raised by SS families.

There were obvious and potentially devastating problems with Himmler's demographic engineering fantasies. Poland became a place of chaos, of overlapping jurisdictions and competing authorities. Consolidating *Lebensraum* and solving the "Jewish question" through resettlement were competing goals. Nowhere was that more evident than the competing goals of the Army and the SS. Local officers and officials intervened as they were overwhelmed with the numbers of resettled and deported. There were bottlenecks everywhere and the Army refused to release its rolling stock to help the SS with their work. Colonel-General Johannes Blaskowitz, commander of the Ober-Ost military region, compiled a long list of German abuses in Poland and sent them to Hitler. Such behavior, he pointed out, was unworthy of German men and undermined military discipline. Illustrating that there was still room for maneuver, Blaskowitz was disciplined by being transferred to Western Europe. He kept his rank and continued to serve throughout the war and no longer complained about massacres such as of the thousands of black French soldiers murdered in 1940. Himmler quickly learned that he needed to inform and involve the Army if he was ever going to actualize his fantasies. This was reinforced when an SS *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile action/killing squad) was actually forced to leave Poland under pressure from the Army.



Meanwhile, Himmler's project continued to face obstacles. On October 18, 1939 Hitler reiterated his previous directive to Himmler that "Jews, Polacks and riff-raff" were to be expelled from all German territories. Polish leaders were to be sent to concentration camps, the middle echelon of Poles were to be sent to rump Poland, and primitive Poles were to be used as forced migrant labor. On October 30, Himmler shifted back to the Nisko Plan and issued guidelines for 550,000 Jews to be expelled to Lublin. Hans Frank, the new head of the General Government in occupied Poland was overjoyed that Jews shipped to Lublin would perish: "...the more that die, the better." More Jews were arriving in the General Government than anticipated as, for example, incompetent Nazi officials in Łódź could not find enough Polish political prisoners to fill their quotas and decided to round up Jews. As more Baltic Germans arrived in newly conquered Poland, Göring, in charge of the war effort, decided that he preferred to exploit the potential for forced labor from the populations moving towards Lublin. Now, instead of allowing Jews to perish, they and others were to become a commodity for production. Hans Frank began to despair that the General Government could not absorb all these people. Scrambling among the

ruins, political futures depended on individual initiative. Failure to solve problems of their own definition and making, Nazi leaders embraced more radical ideas that amplified or even redefined their values.

What Poland had demonstrated was that fantasies are difficult to implement in the real world. German failure in demographic engineering based upon ideological goals began to reshape Nazi thinking from confused and competing resettlement plans, expulsions and murder into something more coherent.

It is in this context that the ghettos of Poland took shape. Ghettos for Jews were created as a reaction to the failure of the initial expulsions. There was no one coordinating Ghetto policy at this stage and the early ghettos, rooted in European and Christian medieval traditions were places of uncertainty, misery, and corruption. Some ghettos were “open” and others “closed.” They varied in size and operation. Heydrich ordered that all ghettos be established by rail lines. At this stage, this was so that people could be moved there. Early in 1940, the Nazis even ask Stalin to take some of the Jews off their hands.

The Holocaust would evolve from a variety of sources, motives, and initiatives. A significant development was the T-4 “Euthanasia” program established in October 1939 by Hitler. The goal of this German domestic initiative was to destroy “lives not worth living” or more precisely, those genes/lives deemed a threat to the Aryan body. This was a culmination of early Nazi sterilization policy now given a new energy with the victory in Poland. The Nazis utilized the German public health service to carry out its program of “racial hygiene.” Victims, those seen as physically or mentally unfit and incurable, were identified from hospital records by a panel at the Tiergartenstrasse 4 address in Berlin. By 1945 over 400 state-run medical facilities and their professional staffs were engaged in the killing process. Six German hospitals were equipped with gas chambers and crematoria. This was the first Nazi regime campaign of industrial mass murder against specific groups deemed inferior and threatening. It was here that willing accomplices developed genocidal expertise (organization, duties, processes, normalization of killing as accepted professional behavior) as well as deceptive practices (“showers,” “special treatment”) that would later be deployed to the “wild east.” Other significant things were learned. When the killing process escalated, Justice Franz Schlegelberger, State Secretary in German Ministry of Justice initially opposed the killings and asked the Chancellery either to issue a public law authorizing the killing, or to stop it. The following month he received a copy of Hitler’s secret authorization letter (backdated to September 1, 1939 to give it the appearance of a wartime measure) to Chancellery chief Philip Bouhler and Dr. Karl Brandt. For Schlegelberger, this made it legal and revealed the growing nature of Nazi Germany as focused on the charismatic authority of Hitler and the erosion of rational governing. For Hitler, obsessed with his public image, it was a mistake he would not repeat. Public discussion subsequently revealed that Germans worried about the program being applied to other Germans, and specifically soldiers, and the Catholic Church led a public protest. Hitler, who had put his name to the program, publicly canceled it in 1941. The program continued to operate underground throughout the rest of the war and after. The last known victim was four year-old Richard Jenne who was killed in Kaufbeuren on May 29, 1945, thirty-three days after U.S. troops had occupied the city. Although T-4 applied to Germany, it was sometimes used to clear space in the occupied territories for German settlers or troops.



From T-4, Hitler and the Nazis learned that if racial policies threatened Germans, public opinion would not tolerate it. Additional killing would need to take place far away from public eyes and Hitler learned the valuable lesson that he could never be associated with anything disreputable. Hitler would set the direction and verbally issue orders, but did not want to be directly involved (or implicated) in the future in order to protect his public image.

It is critical to examine shifting and evolving Nazi policies in the context of World War II. Events would now unfold that would complicate and open up new horizons for Nazi policy makers regarding the “Jewish question.” In the spring of 1940 the German army invaded the Low Countries and France. This invasion had numerous consequences, seen and unseen. Members of the German army command, frustrated with the mess in Poland and the devastation wreaked on the light panzer tanks by the Poles, had been plotting against Hitler in the winter of 1939. Hitler, unaware of this development and impatient to capitalize on his military success, ordered the invasion of France for the winter of 1939. This effectively curtailed the plot as military planners were tasked with the impossible: shift the German Army to a major war with France within weeks. Hitler was militarily incompetent and had no plans in place after the war in Poland and had not planned for increased economic or military production. The French invasion plan he had accepted was simply an unimaginative repeat of the “Schlieffen Plan” of 1914. Hitler’s dumb luck continued when the winter invasion was forestalled for a variety of reasons, including the French capture of the attack plans. In the interim, Hitler accepted a new invasion plan, not because of any competence, but that it seemed bold. Hitler was a gambler at heart.

When the invasion of France took place in the spring of 1940, Hitler’s tanks attacked from the Ardennes forest and raced to the English Channel in an attempt to cut off the French and English armies who, acting on the original captured German plans (which Hitler had changed on a whim in the winter), had advanced towards Belgium. As in Poland, the tanks outraced their infantry and supply lines and were vulnerable to a counterattack that would have significantly destroyed their momentum. The Allies were not prepared for such a counter-attack in force and eventually melted away. The Army plot to remove Hitler fizzled out with the euphoria of the successful conquest of France.

Victory in France now added momentum to radicalized thinking. Himmler was emboldened. He sent a six page memorandum to Hitler in May 25, 1940 with “some thoughts on treatment of alien population in the east.” His ideas included sifting through racially valuable stock, assimilating them into Germany, and shipping the rest to the General Government. There, a reservoir for slave labor would be created. Himmler wrote: “However cruel...this method is still the mildest and the best, if one rejects the Bolshevik method of physical extermination...as un-German...” Eighteen months later, Himmler would be ready to embrace the idea of extermination. Hitler wrote on Himmler’s memo, “Very good and correct” and gave Himmler permission to send the memo to Hans Frank, Hermann Göring, and the eastern gauleiters (regional party leaders) thus signaling the new will of the Führer. Hitler gave no orders, but let it be known that Himmler was fully in charge of the “Jewish question.”

The Jewish question was now also a Europe-wide problem. What to do now with Western European Jews? Within days of the Himmler memorandum, German planners revisited an idea that had surfaced in Poland after World War I. Why not ship Jews to the French colonial possession of Madagascar off the coast of Africa?

The German Foreign Office embraced this pre-existing plan and revealed the growing frustration and willingness to “think big” in order to solve the self-imposed problem. Heydrich, learning of the planning demanded that the SS be involved. Clearly the threshold towards genocide had been crossed as planners were fully aware of the lack of resources in Madagascar to support such a large population and had begun to calculate the potential deaths on route. Of course, the singular obstacle to the plan was figuring out how to transport millions of European Jews to an island off the east coast of southern Africa. With the imminent collapse of Great Britain the answer seemed obvious ... Great Britain had a large merchant marine fleet! Intensive planning took place from May to early September 1940. The Madagascar plan came to a shuddering halt when the Germans realized that Great Britain had fought the *Luftwaffe* to a standstill.



In 1940, with the unfolding events of the war, the Germans sealed the ghettos in Poland. The plan was for ghettos to exist for the next five or six years until final deportations to “a territory yet to be determined” in the east. This shift in policy reflected the new focus on the impending “War of Destruction” with the Soviet Union. In German thinking, the Soviet Union would fall rapidly with a German invasion and the “Jewish question” could be solved by shipping Jews east of the Urals when the war was over.

As planning for the invasion of the USSR intensified, the German Economic Staff East developed plans to feed the German army and Germany itself from captured food supplies. “...tens of millions” of “superfluous” people would either “die or emigrate to Siberia.” Not to be outdone by such thinking, Himmler commissioned General Plan Ost in which he envisioned “...20 to 30 million Slavs and Jews will perish through military actions and crises of food supply.” The plan targeted ethnic groups for elimination via killing and deportation to Siberia. *Lebensraum* (“living space”) would be consolidated with 8-10 million German settlers while 14 million forced laborers would remain as an SS work pool. Hans Frank was thrilled that Jews would be deported. In Himmler’s bizarre mind, the plan was to ethnically cleanse, but not yet systematically mass murder. Himmler began to obsess that in twenty years, the forced laborers (“ethnic mush”) would start to “breed” with the locals. Regardless, it is clear that mass murder and annihilation are inherent in these race and resettlement plans.

Geography is another significant factor in the evolution and acceleration towards the so-called “Final Solution.” Eastern central Europe had been the battleground between Germany and the Soviet Union. Both occupying armies had brutalized the Poles. Even further east, Ukrainians and others had already faced genocide through famine. Soviets killed as they consolidated territories and forcibly modernized economies according to the goals of the Communist Revolution. The Nazis, in contrast, would kill under the guise of war in order to de-modernize the captive peoples under its control. Antisemitism was a fixture not only of the perpetrators, but of the local populations who had learned to survive by shifting their loyalties and accommodating themselves to the invaders. A generation had grown up here during the world wars that had witnessed much dislocation, violence and killing. The region was conditioned for mass murder.

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany and its allies unleashed Operation Barbarossa, the land invasion of the Soviet Union. German planners labeled the invasion the “War of Destruction” pitting Nazi armies against their “Judeo-Bolshevik” foes. It was Hitler’s long-envisioned showdown. On June 6, 1941, the German Army, having learned its lesson in Poland in 1939, issued the Commissar Order. The Army was seeking to lead the racial war in the East and outmaneuver the SS. The order instructed regular army formations to murder captured Soviet

prisoners of war, civilians, and Jews. Jews were labeled as agitators, guerillas, and saboteurs. Hitler fantasized that the USSR would crumble in the coming months. As the invasion unfolded, it was Himmler and Heydrich who turned the situation to their advantage.

By mid-July 1941, perhaps in a moment of euphoria expecting the quick collapse of the Soviets, Hitler gave



Heydrich

signals to Himmler and Heydrich to commence with large scale killings. Heydrich, seeking official authorization and unable to turn to Hitler (who would not sign any documents pertaining to mass killing after T-4) asked and received Göring's signature (with Hitler's approval) on a "final solution" of the Jewish problem. The Nazis were quickly accepting the idea that it was easier (within their worldview) to murder people than to transport them. The SS, having learned their own lessons in Poland, had worked to create liaison officers with the Army. This time, four SS *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing forces) would work in coordination

with the Army that would provide logistical support for the SS killing operation. The Einsatzgruppen (4 battalion-sized units with a total core (German) operational strength of about 3,000 men) operated in rear areas secured by the Army and began the systematic execution of over a million Jewish families and other target groups authorized by the Army's Commissar Order. The Army often participated in the killing. A fifth Einsatzgruppen (E, Egypt) was assigned to Rommel's Afrika Korps with the goal of annihilating Jewish settlers in Mandate Palestine. Haj Amin al-Husseini guaranteed the cooperation of locally Nazified, Palestinian Arab groups once the Germans breached the Suez Canal.

For Jews, it was mostly men who were targeted and it was only later in the summer and early fall that the German units returned to annihilate Jewish women and children. It could be that the advance was taking place so rapidly that the killing units decided, rooted in their Nazi ideology, to generally target the males and move on. Women and children were perhaps seen as non-threats, especially given the destruction of the male members of their families. It could also be that the order to totally annihilate all of the Jews (the Holocaust/Shoah) was only issued from Berlin later that summer. Meanwhile, the war continued to radicalize policy.

In September 1941, Hitler agreed to ship Jews out of Germany. Pressure had arisen to do so when the British bombed Hamburg and the local Gauleiter (Nazi governor) sought housing for displaced German citizens. These German Jews were to be sent to the Łódź ghetto, but it was already overcrowded. Only 20,000 of the 60,000 Jews were sent. A new camp, Chelmno, was authorized in October 1941 to relieve the overcrowding in Łódź and went into operation on December 8, 1941. The Belzec killing camp was authorized in October 1941 to eliminate Jews in Lublin. It began operation on March 17, 1942. Both of these camps illustrate that the envisioned mass murder would be defined to specific target regions to create, as Hitler wished, a utopia in the east.

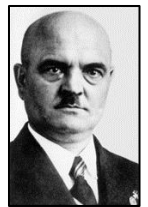
Still, there were problems. In August 1941, Clemens August Count von Galen, Roman Catholic Bishop of Münster publically opposed the killings of the T-4 operation as a violation of God's laws and the German Penal Code that made all Germans potential victims. Joseph Goebbels, was furious, but did not dare to openly attack the popular bishop – who remained in his position throughout the war. Instead, the Nazis respond by changing the program by decentralizing the killing operation. Focus shifted from the general German population to more vulnerable people: orphans, criminals, camp inmates unable to work, and the elderly.

In October 1941, Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, commander of the Sixth Army felt the need to explain himself to his troops perhaps in response to grumblings about the killings:

There is still uncertainty regarding the behavior of the troops towards the Bolshevist system... The main aim of the campaign against the Jewish Bolshevist system is the complete destruction of its forces and the extermination of Asian influence in the sphere of European culture. As a result, the troops have to take on tasks which go beyond the conventional purely military ones...Soldiers must show full understanding of the necessity for the severe but just atonement being required of the Jewish subhumans. It also has the further purpose of nipping in the bud uprisings in the rear of the Wehrmacht which experience shows are invariably instigated by Jews.

The Einstazgruppen executions had created problems for the killers. They were too public; the killing squads were wasting bullets; and the perpetrators were breaking down. Himmler himself, having become hysterical after witnessing one "aktion," asked if there were other ways to mass murder.

Heydrich now turned to "experts" such as SS Christian Wirth who had played a significant role in the T-4 murder program. After inspecting killing sites like Chelmno (already experimenting with gassing) Wirth ordered more camps in the remote and dark forests of Poland to murder the approximately two million Jews in the so-called General Government.



Christian Wirth

In December 1941 a conference was planned by the SS in Wannsee (suburb of Berlin) to discuss



the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question in Europe." The significance of the meeting was that: in November, 1941, a thousand German Jews (many were elderly war veterans) were accidentally sent to the Riga ghetto instead of Theresienstadt and were executed. Heydrich, worried about the news filtering back to Germany, realized that the SS needed to closely control what was happening. By December 1941 the first killing

(gas) center of Chelmno was already in operation; the meeting was postponed until January from its original December 8 date due to the attack on Pearl Harbor; and only select individuals were invited to attend. We do not know what the meeting agenda looked like in December and we only have Adolf Eichmann's edited version that described the January 29, 1942, ninety minute meeting. We do know that circumstances had changed. In the interim, Soviet forces had launched a surprising and massive counter-offensive outside Moscow that reversed the advance of the German army and signaled that the war would be longer than anticipated. Hitler had also declared war on the United States. Regardless, the goal of the meeting, authorized by Göring, was to reveal the now expanded SS killing operation to important Nazi party and government leaders who had not yet been informed and whose participation was crucial for final success. Amongst those invited to the meeting were fourteen government, SS and Nazi party institutions including the secretaries of the Foreign Ministry (who would have to negotiate with occupied countries to deport Jews) and Justice (who would have to deal with any legal consequences). Not invited to the meeting were the Armed Forces (already deeply involved in the killing) and the *Reichsbahn* (railroads) whose rolling stock was already being used and paid for. Thus, the Wannsee Conference did not initiate the Holocaust, but formally put it under SS (and not Army) control.

By the end of 1941, 500,000 to 800,000 Jews (including women and children) had been murdered. The killings had been aided by many willing collaborators in the east. It is estimated, for example, that 90% of the Lithuanian Jews would be killed by Lithuanians working with the Nazis. By the end of 1941, Soviet prisoners of war were dying at a slightly higher rate. By the spring of 1942, more than two million of the 3.5 million Soviet prisoners of war were dead. As a comparison of scale, total U.S. war deaths in history (through 2015) are just under 1.3 million.

In 2013, experts from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. researched the actual number of institutions used for persecution and murder in Nazi Europe and North Africa. They were shocked to document 42,500 locations. This was an enormous enterprise with many stakeholders.

The extermination camps operated in Poland from 1941-1945. Auschwitz (October 1941-January 1945)



became the largest concentration of a variety of camps including Auschwitz I, II (Birkenau) and Auschwitz III (Buna/Monowitz). A variety of factors came together to create this “technical step” in the Nazi killing process. One significant contributor was the effect of the T-4 program in Germany. After murdering many German citizens in German hospitals the public became increasingly aware of the killing and began to protest. By 1941, 70,000 “undesirables” had been killed and the subsequent

nation-wide protests made Hitler cancel the program. It was only a public gesture and the program continued secretly and would murder an estimated 200,000 people by 1945. However, the very public figures that ran death hospitals had to find new work. This coincided with the “problems” the perpetrators faced in the killing operations in the east. The killings had been public, it had taken a toll on the execution squads, and it was a waste of bullets. T-4 experts offered their expertise to the SS who then employed it in developing the killing centers in the east. These camps would later be named after SS Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), who was assassinated in Prague by a Czech partisan on June 4, 1942.

Himmler assigned SS General Odilo Globocnik, SS and police leader in the Lublin District, to supervise and direct the Operation Reinhard camps. Wirth applied his experience of killing with carbon monoxide exhaust fumes to the construction of the Operation Reinhard killing centers: Belzec (March-December 1942); Sobibor (May 1942-October 1943); Treblinka II (July 1942-August 1943); Majdanek (November-December 1942 (Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka II, and for a short period, Majdanek). Globocnik appointed Wirth the first Commandant of Belzec (which began operating in March 1942). Belzec’s mission began by murdering the Jews of the Lublin ghetto. Wirth later served as inspector of the camps. (Wirth was killed by Yugoslav partisans on May 26, 1944.)

The German SS men and the Ukrainian guards “counted 750 people for each gas chamber. Those women who tried to escape were bayoneted until the blood was running. Eventually all the women were forced into the chambers. I heard the doors being shut; I heard shrieks and cries; I heard disparate calls for help in Polish and Yiddish. I heard the bloodcurdling wails of women and the squeals of children, which after a short time became one long, horrifying scream ... This went on for 15 minutes. The engine worked for 20 minutes. Afterward there was total silence.”

– Rudolph Reder, one of only two inmates known to have survived Belzec

Globocnik's goals for Operation Reinhard were: to "resettle" (i.e., to kill) the Polish Jews; to exploit the skilled or manual labor of some Polish Jews before killing them; to secure the personal property of the Jews (clothing, money, jewelry, and other possessions); to identify and secure alleged hidden and immovable assets such as factories, apartments, and land.

The core manpower of the killing centers and labor camps guards gradually shifted from original SS units to the "Trawniki" men. Trawniki was a training camp in Poland that recruited at first from mostly starving and dying Soviet prisoners of war. They were given the choice of joining the SS or dying. They did not generally possess a unifying or overarching ideological or nationalist motive to serve the Germans. Unlike the earlier *Einsatzgruppen* killings, they were not locally recruited nor were they ethnically homogenous. Operation Reinhard killed approximately 1,700,000 Jews, an undetermined number of Roma, Poles, and Soviet prisoners of war. SS administrative reports claim to have stolen/looted 178,745,960.59 Reich marks. All this was done with roughly 5,000 Trawniki men. Globocnik's staff was fewer than 200 men.



Between 1941 and 1943, Jewish underground resistance movements developed in about 100 ghettos in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. The Jews knew that uprisings would not stop the Germans and that only a handful of fighters would succeed in escaping to join the partisans. Still, Jews made the decision to resist. Jewish prisoners succeeded in initiating resistance and uprisings in some Nazi concentration camps and even the killing centers of Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz-Birkenau.



Rachel Margolis
Lithuanian partisan

Many factors conspired to create the Holocaust. Much of the radicalization of Nazi policy and practice can be traced to Hitler. Hitler was a lazy and uninterested head of government. He set direction, but was uninvolved and detached from the practicalities of implementation. Bureaucratic competition, rivalry, duality of roles and corruption were fostered at every level. Hitler was the linchpin of the entire system, the unifier of ideology, the activator and enabler of policy. However, radicalization was often rooted in individual initiative by others "working towards the Führer." Opportunities for radicalism presented themselves constantly and were readily grasped as civilized values and rational governance were eroded.

The administrative and governmental disorder and corruption in Nazi Germany reinforced Hitler's sole authority. Obsessed with his image and his instinctive Darwinism, he was unable or unwilling to take sides until a clear winner emerged. Everyone was responsible directly to him and for those who did not report directly to him believed that their duty was to act as they imagined he wanted them to. There was no collective decision-making process and Hitler rarely tapped into others' expertise. The old bureaucratic system was not replaced but rather a jungle of competing and overlapping jurisdictions was superimposed over it. Those who could struggle to get to the top did so by invoking the Führer's name. Hitler, as Kershaw writes, "needed to do nothing to force the pace of the rapidly escalating barbarism." Rooted in the cult of Hitler and driven by the Nazi dynamic of endless radicalization the perpetrators moved along a very twisted road of their choosing.