

Reading 7

Establishing the Killing Centers

After watching the murders of 100 Jews by his unit in fall 1941, an Einsatzgruppen commander said to Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, “Look at the eyes of the men in this *Kommando*, how deeply shaken they are! These men are finished for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages!”¹ The mass murder of Jews by shooting had begun to have a strong psychological effect on many of the men who did the shooting. Some of these men called that effect *Seelenbelastung*, a “burdening of the soul.”² It threatened the soldiers’ morale and undermined their effectiveness. By the end of 1941, Nazi leaders were planning to annihilate all Jews in Europe, but they realized that they would need to use different methods that would increase the distance between the perpetrators and their victims.

Some Nazis had already begun experimenting with these alternate methods of mass murder. Two years earlier, the Germans had used poison gas (carbon monoxide) as part of their program to kill people they considered “unworthy of life” (see “Unworthy to Live” in Chapter 8). In summer 1941, Rudolf Höss, the commandant at Auschwitz—then a prison camp for Polish resisters and Soviet prisoners of war—began to experiment with a different poison gas, a pesticide called Zyklon B (hydrogen cyanide), on 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 250 other inmates considered “unfit for work.”

By the end of 1941, the Germans were using poison gas to kill Jews at a camp in occupied Poland near the town of Chelmno. Chelmno would be the first camp to be transformed into a “killing center.” Killing centers were different from concentration camps. While many were murdered in concentration camps, those camps were designed primarily for the imprisonment and forced labor of those targeted by the Nazis. But killing centers, also called “death camps” or “extermination camps,” were designed exclusively for the mass murder of human beings as efficiently and quickly as possible.³ The map “Main Nazi Camps and Killing Sites” that follows shows the locations where millions were imprisoned and killed by the Nazis, including the sites of massacres by mobile killing units, facilities where medical murders occurred as part of the Nazi “euthanasia” program, concentration camps, and killing centers.

1 Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 159.

2 Nestar Russell and Robert Gregory, “Making the Undoable Doable: Milgram, the Holocaust, and Modern Government,” *American Review of Public Administration* 35, no. 4 (December 4, 2005): 336–37.

3 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Killing Centers,” last modified July 2, 2016, accessed July 8, 2016, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007327>.

Main Nazi Camps and Killing Sites



Facing History and Ourselves

Between 1933 and 1945, the Nazis established more than 40,000 camps for the imprisonment, forced labor, or mass killing of Jews, Sinti and Roma, Communists, and other so-called “enemies of the state.”

At Chelmno, on December 7, 1941, the Germans herded 700 Jews, in groups of 80, into vans previously used in the Nazis’ “euthanasia,” or so-called mercy killing, program. By the end of the day, all 700 were dead from carbon monoxide poisoning. Six weeks later, in January 1942, the Nazis ordered 1,600 Jews in the Polish town of Izbica Kujawska to assemble in the town square. Suspicious of the reason for the order, the community’s Jewish Council urged people to flee to the nearby forests. Hundreds did so, and in retaliation, the Nazis killed all members of the council and then sent every other Jew they could find to Chelmno. One of them, Yakov Grojanowski, described a vehicle that was unlike any he had seen before:

The inner walls were of steel metal. There weren’t any seats. The floor was covered by a wooden grating, as in public baths, with straw mats on top. Between the driver’s cab and the rear part were two peepholes. With a [flashlight] one could observe through these peepholes if the victims were already dead.

Under the wooden grating were two tubes about fifteen centimeters thick which came out of the cab. The tubes had small openings from which gas poured out. The gas generator was in the cab, where the same driver sat all the time. He wore a uniform of the SS death's head units and was about forty years old. There were two such vans.

. . . The leader of the guard detail was a high-ranking SS man, an absolute sadist and murderer.

He ordered that eight men [not including Grojanowski] were to open the doors of the lorry [van]. The smell of gas that met us was overpowering. The victims were Gypsies from Lodz. Strewn about the van were all their belongings: accordions, violins, bedding, watches, and other valuables.

After the doors had been open for five minutes orders were screamed at us, "Here! You Jews! Get in there and turn everything out!" The Jews scurried into the van and dragged the corpses away.

The work didn't progress quickly enough. The SS leader fetched his whip and screamed, "The devil, I'll give you a hand right away!" He hit out in all directions on people's heads, ears, and so on, till they collapsed. Three of the eight who couldn't get up again were shot on the spot.⁴

Grojanowski and several other men were kept in a special barracks at night and then bused to the location of the gas vans each day to bury the dead. One day while on the bus, Grojanowski realized that he and the other men in his group would be the next to die. He decided to escape by jumping out of the window of the bus in which he was being held.

When I hit the ground I rolled for a bit and scraped the skin off my hands. The only thing that mattered to me was not to break a leg. I would hardly have minded breaking an arm. The main thing was that I could walk in order to reach the next Jewish settlement. I turned round to see if they had noticed anything on the bus but it continued its journey.⁵

Chelmno, which opened in December 1941, was the first "killing center" the Germans created to kill Jews, but it was not the last. They built three more in parts of Poland conquered from the Soviet Union: Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibór. Those camps were at the heart of Operation Reinhard—the code name for a plan to murder all the Jews in Poland. The operation began in earnest in 1942 and ended in 1943. During those two years, 1.7 million Jews were removed from ghettos in Poland and taken to gas chambers. Only a few people are known to have survived Belzec and Chelmno. Fewer than 70 lived through Treblinka, and about the same number survived Sobibór before the four camps were closed in 1943. By then the vast majority of the Jews of Poland were dead.

4 "Grojanowski Report" (1942), quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987), 255–56.

5 *Ibid.*, 256.

Connection Questions

1. How did the murder of Jews in mass shootings affect the men who did the killing? What do you think they meant by the phrase “burdening of the soul”?
2. Why did the Nazis turn to more industrial methods of murder? What advantages did they perceive in replacing mass shootings with gas chambers?
3. How do the results of the Milgram experiments (see Reading 4, “A Matter of Obedience?”) help to explain why gas chambers, rather than mass shootings, may have made it easier for Germans to participate in mass murder?
4. Look closely at the map “Main Camps and Killing Sites during the Nazi Era.” What patterns do you notice in the locations of the camps and killing sites? Where did the Nazis build most camps and killing centers? Why do you think they chose these locations?