The “Auschwitz Experience” and Other Settings of Mass Death and Devastation

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Week 7 Unit Learning Outcomes

ULO 1. evaluate in a reflective and critical manner the consequences of racism and prejudice

ULO 4. recognise important linkages between the Second World War and the Holocaust, and question Hitler’s role in these events

Introduction

Almost three million innocent and defenceless Jews were gassed to death in Nazi extermination camps. It is an extraordinary statistic, accounting for close to half of all Holocaust victims. At the height of their operation, Auschwitz’s gas chambers murdered 6,000 Jews every day. The camp killed around 1.1 million victims in total, of whom the overwhelming majority were Jews. Most people deported to Auschwitz were murdered within hours of their arrival, but anyone not immediately selected for gassing were sent to labour camps where many succumbed to malnutrition, illness, the harsh conditions, or arbitrary violence. Overcrowded cattle cars used to transport Jews to killing centres often proved fatal as victims suffocated or died from dehydration as they endured long journeys in stifling conditions. Finally, as camps were dissolved in the face of approaching Allied forces, prisoners were forced back into Germany in “death marches,” and many died within weeks of liberation.

Concentration camps, forced labour camps, transit camps, and extermination camps all formed part of a vast network the Nazis used to imprison, exploit, and murder. In attempting to understand the Holocaust, it is important to grasp the coverage and proliferation of these camps, their various purposes, and roles they came to play as part of the “Final Solution.” At the same time, historical understanding must not come at the cost of neglecting to acknowledge the experiences and immense suffering of those who survived these places of extermination and violence. In the case of Auschwitz, the relatively large number of survivors and their testimonies add not only a human element to the Holocaust, but represent important pieces of historical evidence.

Section 1 of this learning module examines the Nazi camp system within the context of the “Final Solution” and the Nazis’ attempt to exterminate all European Jews in gas chambers. It marks out the important delineation between concentration camps and...
the purposefully-constructed killing centres. Section 1 also outlines the process of deportation faced by Jews who already had been confined by the Nazis in ghettos or transit camps. Section 2 focuses specifically on Auschwitz as the iconic camp of the Holocaust, charting its evolution and outlining its multifarious operations. Section 2 also engages with the complexities surrounding the testimony of those who survived Auschwitz, in particular by touching on some of the evidentiary challenges associated with Holocaust survivor testimony. Section 3 rounds off this week’s module by briefly exploring other setting of mass death: ghettos; transit camps; labour camps; and the so-called death marches. It is important to recognise this topic, for roughly a third of all Holocaust victims — that is, approximately two million individuals — died in heinous settings other than the mass shootings by the Einsatzgruppen across eastern Europe and the gas chambers of the Nazi extermination camps.

By completing this learning module, you will continue your evaluation, in a reflective and critical manner, of the consequences of racism and prejudice. You also will continue to recognise linkages between the Second World War and the Holocaust, and question Hitler’s role in these events.

**Section 1. Nazi Camps**

As last week’s learning module stressed, there are important differences between Nazi concentration camps (*Konzentrationslager*) and extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*). Within weeks of Hitler becoming chancellor, the Nazis established their first concentration camp (Dachau) in March 1933. Throughout the duration of the Third Reich, an extensive system of various kinds of camps developed and proliferated. Depending on time, circumstances, and priorities, inmates were variously political opponents, social “undesirables,” and other enemies of the Nazi state including Jews. As Germany expanded its control over other parts of Europe, the Nazi camp system concurrently grew, including slave labour and transit camps. Part of this wartime evolution involved the development of the six main centres of extermination located in occupied Poland.

**a) The Nazi Concentration Camp System: Revisited**

Even before the war, the Nazis established an extensive system of concentration camps across Germany (including Austria following the *Anschluss*). Originally they had been designed for the temporary incarceration of political prisoners, but their purpose evolved quickly. From the mid-1930s, the Himmler’s SS assumed control of the concentration camp system and included among its captives not only political prisoners but those designated as “anti-socials”—the unemployed or work-shy, homosexuals, habitual criminals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and, after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, Jews. In line with the Reich moving to a war footing through the introduction of the Four-Year-Plan (Vierjahresplan) in 1936, by the late 1930s the organisation and purpose of the camps had fundamentally changed and there was a strong economic dimension to how they were run. The inmates were utilised as a large — and free — slave labour force who contributed to the Four-Year-Plan generally and helped to enrich SS enterprises in particular.
(l) February 1939 edition of the long-running Nazi propaganda magazine used to promote the (rolling) Four-Year-Plan. This edition’s front cover celebrates VW cars utilising the Third Reich’s new Autobahn road system. (r) Buchenwald inmates constructing roads. The forced labour of concentration camp inmates was conspicuously absent from such publications.


Himmler and his entourage inspect the quarry at Mauthausen concentration camp, Austria, where inmates were forced to perform slave labour towards the German war effort.

Source: “Reichsfuehrer SS Heinrich Himmler and his entourage inspect the Wiener Graben quarry during an official tour of the Mauthausen concentration camp,” USHMM. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa23087 [Accessed 11 April 2017]
Concentration camps, then, were not originally devised to deal with the “Jewish Question.” Rather, the concentration camp system was gradually adapted for this purpose while still continuing to serve a far broader function. Following the invasion of Poland, the influence of the SS was extended into newly occupied territories where further concentration camps were established. Nazi camps also were located in Slovakia and the occupied Balkan states. From late 1941, construction commenced for extermination facilities in three territories that had been part of interwar Poland: the Warthegau and Upper Silesia (both incorporated into the Greater German Reich); and the Generalgouvernement.
Martin Broszat observes that the Nazis’ camp system grew exponentially in the last years of the war. From 1943 onwards, the numerical development of the concentration camps took the form of a steeply rising curve because of new waves of arrests and the admission of ethnic Poles, compulsorily evacuated Russian civilian workers, Jews, and other targeted groups. In December 1942, there were roughly 88,000 inmates. By August 1943, the number had risen to 224,000 (that is a 2.5 times higher figure in eight months). At this stage of the war, some 74,000 individuals — approximately a third of all camp inmates — were interned within the various parts of Auschwitz, which was by far the largest of all camps. The next largest camps at the time all were located back in Germany: Sachsenhausen (near Berlin) with 26,000 prisoners; and Dachau and Buchenwald, each of which housed around 17,000 inmates. It is estimated that, a year later, the Nazi concentration camp system had more than doubled again with 524,286 inmates. Broszat concludes that, although figures are incomplete, “the total number of prisoners who died in the concentration camps during the war from weakness and disease must be put at not less than half a million.” As Raul Hilberg reminds us, furthermore, not counted among the “inmates” of the wider camp system were the almost three million Jews who, from late 1941 onwards, were systematically killed within that part of the exponentially expanding infrastructure of the camps that had been designed for that very specific purpose: the gas chambers and crematoria at the extermination camps.

Map depicting the main sub-camps of Buchenwald concentration camp. It shows how thousands of satellite camps, spread across Germany even before the outbreak of war, supported the main camps.

Source: “Buchenwald Subcamps, 1938-1945,” USHMM.

### b) Killing Centres

The Minutes of the Wannsee Conference (held in January 1942) could confidently plan for the extermination of Jews from right across Nazi-controlled Europe because, by late 1941, a system to capture and murder Jews en masse was being put into place. By adapting the procedures and methods used earlier in the Aktion-T4 “euthanasia” project, Jews were gassed and their bodies cremated in a system of purpose-built extermination camps.

Last week’s learning module noted that there were six main extermination camps constructed: Chelmno (Kulmhof); Belzec; Sobibór; Treblinka; Majdanek; and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Not all of them, however, operated at the same time. Hilberg observes that the construction of killing centres occurred within the broader context of a massive expansion of SS-operated forced labour camps, camouflaging their unique function.


As mentioned in the previous learning module, the first death camp was established at Chelmno (Kulmhof) located in the Incorporated Territory near Łódź ghetto. Killing at Chelmno commenced in December 1941, and over 100,000 Jews from nearby ghettos were liquidated in “experimental” fashion through the use of three mobile gas vans.


![Postwar inspection of an abandoned German van believed to be similar to the three mobile gas vans employed at Chelmno.](http://www.jewishgen.org/ForgottenCamps/Camps/ChelmnoEng.html) [Accessed 11 April 2017]
Three extermination camps, **Belżec**, **Sobibór**, and **Treblinka**, were constructed along the Bug River in early 1942. These three camps were originally built for Operation Reinhard — the liquidation of all Jews residing in the Generalgouvernement. Their facilities were extended later in the year with Jews from other parts of Europe also exterminated at these camps.

**(l)** Belżec train station, where Jews arrived without knowing the true nature of the camp to which they had been deported. **(r)** The site of Belżec extermination camp after it had been closed down and razed to the ground to hide evidence, 1944.


**(l)** Small hut adjacent to the Sobibór train station. The extermination camp was hidden behind the wooded area next to the train station. **(r)** Sobibór extermination camp.


**(l)** The real Treblinka train station. A fake station also was constructed at the extermination camp to deceive Jews upon arrival. **(r)** Digital reconstruction of the Himmelstrasse or “Road to Heaven” that led Jews to the gas chambers at Treblinka.


The Reinhard camps Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka are commonly referred to as “murder factories” due to their singularity of purpose: they were designed, constructed, and operated exclusively to exterminate hundreds of thousands of victims as part of the “Final Solution.” It is estimated that, in little more than a year, a combined total of at least 1.3 million (and perhaps as many as 1.6 million) Jews were gassed in these three camps alone. After being operational for only a relatively short period of time, Belżec (15 months), Sobibór (17 months), and Treblinka (15 months) all were closed down and completely dismantled as camps once the ghettos in the Generalgouvernement were liquidated.

Operation Reinhard, under the command of a heinous Austrian SS and Police figure Odilo Globocnik, also saw Majdanek, an existing concentration camp located in Lublin, converted into a larger multi-purpose camp. From 1942, in addition to housing forced labourers in its former Polish army barracks, the Majdanek camp also incorporated a killing centre. According to the state museum established at Majdanek, almost 80,000 victims were murdered of whom approximately three-quarters — or 60,000 — were Jews.4

Auschwitz, like Chelmno, was located just inside the section of prewar Poland that was incorporated into the Greater German Reich (whereas the other four extermination camps were located in the Generalgouvernement). Auschwitz is the German name for Oświęcim, the small Polish town where the largest and most infamous of all Nazi camps was located. Auschwitz was identified as the ideal site due to a number of reasons, including most noticeably: this region of Upper Silesia was conducive to conversion into becoming highly industrialised; there were army barracks already in existence, which could be utilised for housing large numbers of inmates as the camp complex was expanded; and, as one of the major rail junctions of central Europe, it could easily serve as a transportation hub for deporting Jews there from all over continental Europe.

Auschwitz was a massive complex that consisted of three main camps (Stammlager) supported by over three dozen sub-camps (Außenlager) scattered across the surrounding region. The three main camps were:

- Auschwitz I, the main camp (encompassing the original army barracks) that served as the administrative headquarters;
- Auschwitz II, or Auschwitz-Birkenau, which housed the killing centre located around 3 miles away from the main camp;
- and Auschwitz III, also known as Buna or Auschwitz-Monowitz, which served as the main forced labour camp.

Map of the three main Auschwitz camps surrounding the town of Oświęcim.

Auschwitz commenced killing operations with “provisional” facilities in 1942. Its gas chambers and crematoria were further extended at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943. Initially, gas chambers at the other extermination camps had adopted the method first developed during Aktion-T4 and utilised carbon monoxide to suffocate the victims. Auschwitz-Birkenau made use of the far more “efficient” method of Zyklon B, a brand of prussic acid. Auschwitz-Birkenau continued to operate until November 1944, more than a year after the Reinhard “murder factories” had been dismantled. By the time Himmler ordered the gas chambers at Birkenau be demolished, trains full of overcrowded cattle wagons had been arriving frequently for several years. Jews from more or less every country in Nazi-controlled Europe (including from several fellow Axis Powers on Germany’s side in the war) were deported to Auschwitz.

Hungary was one country that had resisted against deporting its local Jewish population to Nazi extermination camps. When Hungary deserted Hitler and the other Axis Powers in 1944, however, Hitler immediately ordered the Wehrmacht to occupy his erstwhile ally. It was at this stage of the war that Auschwitz-Birkenau was working to its fullest capacity. In the remarkably short period of around ten weeks, between late April and early July 1944 approximately 440,000 Hungarian Jews were rounded up and deported. It is calculated that, upon arrival at Auschwitz, some 320,000 Hungarian Jews were sent directly to the gas chambers (the remaining 110,000 were placed in forced labour). Overall, it is estimated that 1.1 million Jews were deported to Auschwitz, of whom around 960,000 did not survive (mostly through gassings, but also arbitrary acts of violence and succumbing to disease or the brutal conditions). Additional deportations to Auschwitz include: 147,000 ethnic Poles (74,000 died); 23,000 Roma (21,000 died); 15,000 Soviet POWS
(none survived); and around 25,000 from other nationalities (12,000 died). Only Treblinka rivalled Auschwitz in its capacity to kill.

Compared with Auschwitz and Lublin, which had significant labour camp components, organisationally Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka were relatively simple. At these camps trainsloads of Jews were stripped of their possessions, gassed, and their bodies were disposed of through cremation. The old and ill often were separated for shooting rather than gassing. Only a small number of Jews were kept alive to work in the camps’ Sonderkommando units, which not only covered the menial jobs but also filled the important role of helping to deceive their fellow Jews upon arrival so that the killing process unfolded as smoothly as possible.

Much of the responsibility of the everyday operations of the camps was devolved to the Sonderkommandos — those specially selected Jews who, except for very rare exceptions, were themselves eventually gassed and replaced by fitter and stronger newly arrived Jews. In addition, Arad describes how the Operation Reinhard camps functioned. Whereas the original purpose of Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka was to facilitate the murder of Polish Jews in the Generalgouvernement, later on western European Jews were deported there as well.

By contrast to the camps that acted purely as extermination centres, a “selection” process occurred at both Majdanek and Auschwitz. The “fittest” were chosen to work in forced labour camps attached to the killing centres, while the remainder of new
arrivals — by far the majority — were gassed immediately. Those who survived the first selection process were subjected to appalling living and nutritional conditions, sadistic violence, rape, and, with constant “selections” on a daily basis, the horror of the death awaiting them if they could no longer work.

(top left) Hungarian Jews arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau and are assembled for the selection process. 
(top right) Notice the role played by Sonderkommandos (in striped uniforms) in dividing a new arrival of Hungarian Jews into columns of males and females in preparation for the selection process. 
(bottom left) SS doctors ran the selection processes at Auschwitz-Birkenau. If directed to the left, you were being sent to the gas chambers. Here the SS doctor is pointing toward the right, which meant forced labour. 
(bottom right) Jewish women as new arrivals to Auschwitz in May 1944 from Subcarpathian Rus, at that time part of Hungary, marching toward their new barracks after being selected for forced labour. (Notice their heads have been shaved as part of the disinfection process to thwart lice.)


READING EXCERPT: Now please refer to Randolph Braham’s piece entitled "The Destruction of Hungary's Jews." (n.b. It is the second extract in a group of multiple readings.)
In concluding our coverage of how the six main killing centres of the Nazis’ “Final Solution” functioned, note how seamlessly the earlier processes of identification and marking of Jews, then ghettoization, followed by the expropriation of property, merged into deportation and eventually state-sanctioned mass extermination on an unprecedented and industrialised scale.

(top left) Secret photo taken of a group of newly arrived Hungarian Jews selected for immediate death who unknowingly wait patiently in a wooded area near one of the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

(top right) The extermination of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews in a matter of weeks during mid-1944 was so intensive that Auschwitz-Birkenau’s gas chambers and crematoria struggled to cope with the increased workload. Rather than disrobing in the room adjacent to the gas chambers (set up to look like a “shower room”), these women were forced to get undressed in the wooded area nearby. A Sonderkommando clandestinely took a photo of the women forced to walk naked to their deaths.

(bottom left) Jewish Sonderkommandos forced to perform an open-air cremation of gassed victims during the height of operations against Hungarian Jews in mid-1944, a period in which even Auschwitz-Birkenau’s extensive crematoria could not cope with the demand.

(bottom right) Crematorium IV at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The light-coloured mounds in the foreground are piles of human ashes scattered there at a time when the Sonderkommandos could not keep up with disposing of the victims following gassing and cremation.

“Birkenau,” The Holocaust Education Foundation’s Eastern European Study Seminar. [Accessed 11 April 2017]
Section 2. The “Auschwitz Experience”

For the general public, the name “Auschwitz” has become synonymous with the Holocaust. This is partly because of the size of Auschwitz, which was not only an extermination centre where hundreds of thousands of Jews were gassed in a seemingly factory-like process, but also the site of a massive labour camp where Jews as well as considerable numbers of non-Jews worked as slave labourers. Those who were able to survive lived to bear witness to the camp’s multifarious operations. Auschwitz was deserted by the Germans in late 1944 (before it was finally liberated by the Russians on 27 January 1945), at a time when the camp was attempting its last major projects including the extermination of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews. This meant that a significant number of Auschwitz prisoners survived.

Many of these survivors subsequently shared their stories after the war, helping the “Auschwitz experience” to become one of the metanarratives of the fate of European Jews during the Second World War. Equating the Holocaust to Auschwitz, however, is highly problematic. Around five out of every six — over 80 percent — of Holocaust victims died elsewhere. Approximately 10 percent of Europe’s 11 million Jews stepped foot inside Auschwitz during the war. Internment, or death, specifically at Auschwitz clearly was not the “typical” Holocaust experience. Indeed, there was no such thing as the “typical” experience and we always should be wary of such generalisations because the memory of millions of individual victims demands far more historical empathy from us.

In pointing out that it was not where the majority of Jews were exterminated during the Holocaust, the British historians Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner place Auschwitz in its wider historical context:

Auschwitz, in Eastern Upper Silesia, an area of south-western Poland annexed to the Reich in 1939, may well have become the epicentre of the Holocaust by 1943-44. However, the peak killing period of the genocide had already passed by that time. As Dieter Pohl reminds us, the seven weeks from the end of July until mid-September 1942 witnessed the most extensive killing of all. During that period, primarily in shooting massacres and in the Reinhard centres, daily death tolls regularly approximated to the nearly 34,000 in the infamous Babi Yar massacre in Kiev over two days in late September 1941. The eleven months from mid-March 1942 to mid-February 1943 accounted in total for over half the Jewish death toll.6

Clearly, then, the Holocaust cannot and should not be reduced to Auschwitz. Nonetheless, some 960,000 of the 1.1 million Jews deported to Auschwitz died there (as did significant numbers of ethnic Poles, “Gypsies” or Roma, and Soviet POWs). Indeed, as Randolph Braham demonstrates in your reading excerpt, by the time of the arrival of Hungary’s Jews in mid-1944, Auschwitz had “perfected” the selection and extermination

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process. Yet, over 100,000 Jews survived Auschwitz and they have produced some of the classic memoirs of Holocaust literature. Moreover, there is much valuable material on the internet related to Auschwitz and you are encouraged to access the links provided throughout this section in order to further expand your historical knowledge and understanding of this central aspect of the Holocaust.

This part of the learning module discusses how Auschwitz operated, with particular emphasis placed on the treatment of Jews. It also explores first-hand accounts by survivors, and introduces you to some of the controversies surrounding the use of such materials.

a) The Evolution of Auschwitz

The SS developed the Auschwitz concentration camp on the site of former Polish military barracks in 1940-41, initially to intern ethnic Poles because all the prisons in the region were overcrowded. It was then planned for it to operate as a forced labour camp for Soviet POWs, but so few survived the brutal conditions on the Eastern Front that only around 15,000 were transported across Poland to Auschwitz. In 1942, Auschwitz was further expanded into a combined labour camp (taking in forced labourers from across Nazi-controlled Europe) and an extermination camp specifically for Jews (though some 21,000 Roma were gassed at Birkenau, too). To keep up with the demanding task of mechanised mass murder, the gassing and crematoria facilities underwent a series of expansive developments until the camp reached its maximum extermination capacity during 1944. At the time when hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were exterminated within the space of just 10-12 weeks, around 6,000 victims were being gassed at Auschwitz-Birkenau every day. (It is calculated that at the height of operations at Treblinka more than 10,000 Jews were murdered daily, leading to its epithet as the Nazis’ quintessential “murder factory.”)

READING EXCERPT: In “Auschwitz and the Final Solution,” Raul Hilberg outlines the camp’s development in relation to Jews.

[Accessed 11 April 2017]
Now visit the official website of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum for an excellent outline of the camp’s history.

(top) Entrance to Auschwitz I. n.b. The infamous gate-sign “Arbeit macht Frei” (“work makes one free”) was not in this position during the camp’s operation. It was relocated to its current spot to have optimum impact on visitors who enter via this gate.

(bottom) The main SS guardhouse tower at the front entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This photo was taken from inside the camp. Notice how the tracks run all the way inside the camp’s perimeter so that new arrivals were already inside Birkenau when they alighted from their train and underwent the selection process.

Photos: Tony Joel, November 2011.

The barracks for Jewish prisoners selected for forced labour also were located within the environs of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Being housed in close proximity to the gas chambers and crematoria meant that Jews who survived their first selection process soon became aware of the fate that awaited any friends and family who had not been selected for forced labour.
Besides remaining the administrative centre for the entire Auschwitz complex, the smaller camp Auschwitz I also served as the centre of medical research including the experiments conducted by the notorious “Angel of Death” Dr Josef Mengele. Non-Jewish prisoners were imprisoned — and murdered — at Auschwitz I.

SS captain and chief doctor at Auschwitz Josef Mengele, infamous for his ghastly experiments on prisoners and in particular twins.


The massive Buna industrial camp, which got its name from its primary product synthetic rubber, was situated at nearby Monowitz. Run by the SS, its development was principally funded by some major German companies that wanted to exploit slave labour for manufacturing a variety of chemicals and other products. (These included IG Farben, a conglomerate that included separate companies still well-known today such as BASF, Agfa, and Bayer; also Siemens-Schuckert, a forerunner of Siemens, one of Europe’s largest manufacturing and electronics conglomerates today, was involved in utilising slave labour via its sub-camp Bobrek under the umbrella of Auschwitz-Monowitz.)

The expansive factories run by IG Farben using forced labour at Auschwitz-Monowitz.

Prisoners at forced labour constructing aircraft parts at the Siemens factory in Bobrek, a sub-camp of Auschwitz-Monowitz. Most forced labourers at Bobrek were Jews, but there were some ethnic Poles, too.

Source: USHMM. [Accessed 11 April 2017]

b) Auschwitz in Operation

Jews deported to Auschwitz were subjected to a series of humiliations. First, they had been seized from intermediary camps (such as Drancy in Paris) or violently rounded up from ghettos. Second, they had been crammed into cattle cars with inadequate food, drink, and hygiene. Many died en route during a journey that could last for several days. Finally, once they reached Auschwitz, Jews were brutally herded off the trains and lined up in columns for selection by SS doctors to “legitimise” the process (cf. the earlier discussion of the role played by doctors in the Aktion-T4 “euthanasia” program). The elderly and women with children were automatically selected for immediate gassing (unless the mothers were willing to be separated from their children). Adults considered fit for work were selected for forced labour. Often this meant that they would be replacing other Jews already pressed into forced labour, who would be selected for gassing several months after first arriving at Auschwitz. (Prisoner records from Auschwitz-Monowitz often contained a note simply stating “nach Birkenau,” which meant that they had been sent across to Auschwitz II for gassing.)

Yad Vashem’s online [Auschwitz Album](https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1097555) includes photographs of Carpathian Jews as they went through the various stages of arrival, selection, and forced labour in 1944. (Lidia Rosenfeld Vago, the author of one of this week’s readings, came from Carpathia, a mountainous area ceded to Hungary following the occupation of Slovakia.)
Jews not immediately gassed were divided by sex, their heads were shaved, their forearm was tattooed with a serial number (replacing their names for official identification purposes and thereby adding another layer to the dehumanisation process), and they were issued an ill-fitting striped uniform. They were housed in primitive and overcrowded barracks lacking any semblance of hygiene. Inmates were subjected to random and sadistic acts of violence at the hands of camp personnel. Jews were placed at the bottom of the hierarchical pecking order among their fellow prisoners, too. Despite being required to undertake arduous physical work, they received wretched food supplies that did not even meet the minimum daily calorie intake (this meant that before too long inmates essentially wasted away as they tried to perform their work duties, hence the emaciated prisoners synonymous with the Nazi camps).

Disease and illness were rife, too. For instance, omnipresent lice transmitted typhus. Cholera was endemic. Anyone who succumbed to illness knew they were at high risk for selection to the gas chambers if deemed unfit for work. Such selections were a constant danger, too, because camp authorities demanded that the gas chambers operated continuously: if trains did not deliver sufficient numbers of new arrivals for daily gassing quotas then extra selections would be made from the existing camp inmates; if large numbers of Jews arrived then it was likely that many would be deemed as fitter than the existing forced labourers (who had been living off little more than starvation rations for weeks or months while undertaking hard labour). Indeed, in this sense Auschwitz created a crude “survival of the fittest” environment. Hanging over Birkenau was an eternal haze from the smoke of crematoria, hence the title of Elie Wiesel’s famous “novel” Night.

**PRESCRIBED TEXT:** Please read Ulrich Herbert’s chapter entitled “Forced Labor,” pp. 315-30.

With the advance of Soviet forces in late 1944, the Auschwitz prisoners (except for those too ill to leave the camp hospital) were evacuated in a forced march back into Germany. Along the way thousands perished during these so-called “death marches.” (Again, see Lidia Rosenfeld Vago’s description in the reading referred to below.)
A group of newly arrived Hungarian Jews, including men and women deemed “unfit for work” as well as mothers with their children, are unknowingly walking towards their death in the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, May 1944. The photo was taken by an SS photographer.


c) The Experience of Individuals in Auschwitz

No more than a handful of Jews who arrived at Treblinka survived the Holocaust, and survival rates among the hundreds of thousands sent to Chelmno, Belżec, and Sobibór were not much better. Even the multi-purpose camp Majdanek had comparatively few of its Jewish inmates survive the war. By contrast, Auschwitz continued to receive large numbers of new arrivals on a daily basis well into 1944. Consequently, over 100,000 individuals survived to share stories about their “Auschwitz experience.” Some of the most remarkable accounts of the Holocaust have been produced by Auschwitz survivors and in many respects these works have come to epitomise the meaning of the Holocaust.
for an international reading community. While it is important that you do not assume that descriptions of life in Auschwitz equate to the Holocaust as a whole, personal accounts of Auschwitz nonetheless provide some truly profound insights into what Jews experienced at the hands of the Nazis and their accomplices.

**Tales of Survival**

The [Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies](https://fortunoff.yale.edu/) curated by Yale University holds one of the world’s major collections of personal accounts by Holocaust survivors.

Edith P’s retelling of her story through a fog of confusion and disorientation reflects survivors’ feelings decades after their “liberation.” Close proximity to the gas chambers and the relentlessness and irrationality of the treatment of Jews has resulted in Auschwitz accounts taking on an especially surreal quality. Whereas survival was primarily dependent on luck, inmates who wanted to survive soon recognised that the morality that had applied in the “normal” world was immaterial inside Auschwitz. The capacity to “organise” one’s meagre resources to best effect was a prerequisite for those who wished to avoid further “selections” for gassing. Any prisoners who failed to cope with life in the Lager (German for camp) were referred to as *Muselmänner* (German for Muslims) because they looked like Muslim pilgrims who had renounced all contact with the real world and had descended into a state of unresponsiveness until they simply died of starvation.

**PREScribed TEXT:** Please read Primo Levi’s chapter entitled “Camp Labour,” pp. 506-12.

Primo Levi, an Italian chemist who had little contact with Judaism or politics prior to the war, was captured by German forces when he joined the Italian partisans. Perversely, rather than being shot on sight due to his partisan activities, due to his Jewishness Levi was deported to Auschwitz. His profession saved Levi from selection and even gave him a
better-than-average chance of survival due to the relatively light work (he was dispatched to a laboratory in IG Farben’s synthetic rubber factory at Monowitz). Levi subsequently authored some of the most influential literary accounts regarding Auschwitz. In doing so, with the possible exception of his friend and fellow Auschwitz survivor and author Elie Wiesel, Levi became arguably the best known of all Holocaust survivors. He died in mysterious circumstances after a fall in his multi-storey apartment building in Turin, Italy, in 1987. Levi’s death was officially ruled a suicide, but there is conjecture whether it was an accidental fall. Upon hearing the news Wiesel poignantly remarked: “Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later.”


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Vago’s account, with its references to sexual abuse and the tragedy of pregnant women whose babies were doomed at birth, indicates how gender also shaped experiences. She also emphasises the importance of personal relationships in assisting survival – perhaps an attribute more prevalent among women than men in Auschwitz. Indeed, the relevance of gender to the analysis of the Holocaust is highly controversial.⁹

Possibilities of Telling
Consciousness that one’s own survival was so often at the expense of someone else has resulted in many Auschwitz survivors suffering from intense feelings of survivor guilt. Those who survived were left with an intense sense of obligation to inform the world of the crimes of the Nazis who had hoped to obliterate European Jewry under the cover of warfare without anyone realising it was happening. And yet survivors frequently comment that no words can adequately convey the true nature of their experiences to others (i.e. anyone else who is not a survivor). They are haunted by a fear that no one will listen to their stories or, if they listen, they will not be able to comprehend.

There has been and continues to be considerable debate over the “reliability” of Holocaust testimony, dependent as it is not only on memory but also on memory shaped by trauma. The extreme horror of their Auschwitz experiences would then render them, in Saul Friedländer’s words, beyond the “limits of representation.”¹⁰ For some analysts, what is conveyed in such testimony is not historical fact, but rather psychological truth.¹¹ While this approach throws light on the problematic nature of telling about the Holocaust, there is a danger that they risk mystifying what, in the end, still are accounts of actual historical events no matter how inconceivable.

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Your task as students is to tread the fine line between unquestioning acceptance of first-person accounts of Auschwitz (and the Holocaust in general) and sensitivity to the complexities of recounting such traumatic experiences.

Section 3. Other Settings of Mass Death and Devastation

The multifaceted functionality of camps such as Majdanek and Auschwitz, as both sites of forced labour and extermination, add much complexity to the Nazi camp system. These sites could be variously used for transit, labour, or mass death. To further complicate matters, some sites could perform all three functions at various stages. Ghettos, for instance, served to concentrate Jews within a controlled area and so on the one hand they acted as valuable sources of forced labour for the German war effort, while on the other hand they kept Jews ready for deportation to extermination camps. Moreover, concentration camp inmates were frequently subjected to forced labour, while many camps were designed more or less to work Jewish labourers to death. The essential point to remember here is that, while millions of Jews were murdered in mass shootings conducted by the Einsatzgruppen or in the killing centres of the “Final Solution,” around one in every third Holocaust victim — approximately two million individuals — died in other settings.

Ghettos

As we discovered in Week 3, the Nazis established over 1,000 Jewish ghettos throughout Nazi-controlled Europe. All ghettos were designed to be temporary, and some existed for only a matter of weeks whereas others last for several years. There were some 750,000 Jews concentrated within seven of the largest ghettos alone (Warsaw, Łódź, Lublin, Kraków, and Białystok in Poland, Vilna and Kovno in Lithuania). It is estimated that overall around two million Jews were deported to their deaths from ghettos to extermination camps. It is important to stress, however, ghettos were themselves places of mass death. While there were arbitrary acts of murder committed against Jews, there was also deprivation, starvation, and disease that claimed many more Jewish lives.

Designed to hold Jews within controlled areas, ghettos typically became overcrowded. The inhumane conditions meant that, from a Nazi perspective, ghettos became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: antisemitic propaganda had depicted Jews as filthy and disease-ridden; now the ghetto inhabitants resembled such characters. But, of course, it was not because they were Jewish. Rather, any humans would have succumbed to such wretched living conditions.

Ghettos became the largest single sources of Jews destined for deportation to the extermination camps, most notably Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau. As well as playing this transit role, ghettos were a source of forced labour. In Łódź, for example, there were as many as 96 plants and factories that produced war goods and relied on ghetto inhabitants for their labour force. Even so, living conditions in the ghetto were appalling. According to
the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, over 30,000 and 80,000 Jews died as a result of the horrendous conditions in the Łódź and Warsaw ghettos respectively. These victims never even lived long enough to be deported to the extermination camps.

(top left) Beggars, one of whom is wearing nothing other than a shirt despite the cold weather (notice the man passing by is wearing a heavy coat), in the Warsaw ghetto on 19 September 1941.

(top right) A destitute girl comforting her unconscious little sister on a footpath in the Warsaw ghetto.

(bottom left) A young child left dying on the footpath in the Warsaw ghetto, 19 September 1941.

(bottom right) Emaciated bodies piled onto a cart awaiting burial in the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street inside the Warsaw ghetto, 19 September 1941.

These photos were among the 140 shots taken inside the Warsaw ghetto during a single-day visit by non-commissioned Wehrmacht officer Heinrich Jöst, who kept them secret until the 1980s when he allowed some of them to be published in the West German newsmagazine Der Stern. Jöst’s collection were published in book form in 2001.

Source: USHMM.


12 “Łódź,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.


Transit Camps
By contrast to eastern Europe, the Nazis did not generally establish ghettos in Western Europe (with Amsterdam an obvious exception). In their place, and as we have already noted, transit camps imprisoning Jews prior to their “resettlement in the East” were established. These included Drancy in suburban Paris, Mechelen in Belgium, and Westerbork in the Netherlands. From these camps, Jews were transported by train across Nazi-controlled Europe into occupied Poland, ultimately arriving at a death camp. From the three camps mentioned above, there were 65,000 (Drancy), 25,000 (Mechelen), and 97,000 (Westerbork) Jews deported eastwards to camps. Though most Jews only stayed at these transit camps for a short time preceding their deportation, the conditions were harsh and unsanitary, with little food plus threats of arbitrary violence from both German and local guards.

Labour Camps
As explored earlier in this week’s learning module, two of the six main extermination centres – Majdanek and Auschwitz – also operated as sites of forced labour. Additionally, there were many hundreds of Nazi labour camps across occupied Europe as well as extensive slave labour within concentration camps themselves. Millions of people from throughout Europe, most of whom were not Jewish, were enslaved as labourers to drive the German war effort. One infamous example was the forced labour camp Dora-Mittelbau, a vast subterranean camp located in central Germany, and devoted to constructing aircraft and V-2 missiles. Conditions were horrendous, and forced labourers were given little sustenance. Of the 60,000 people forced into labour at Dora-Mittelbau, at least 20,000 died.13


Paradoxically, the harsh conditions endured by prisoners meant that, since so many prisoners died as a result of the appalling living and working conditions, labour utilisation was inherently inefficient. The SS was never quite able to relinquish punishment in favour of rational economics as a motive for imprisonment/enslavement. As was the case with Jewish ghettos, the running of concentration and forced labour camps frequently became a contest between SS administrators who advocated policies of “extermination through work” (attritionists) and those who recognised the valuable source of productive labour (productionists). In Peter Longerich’s view, the extensive use of slave labour and atrocious rates of death by exhaustion were merely “a horribly consistent anticipation of the barbaric methods of rule intended for the East,” once Nazi Germany defeated the Soviet Union.14 Indeed, within the camps the treatment of prisoners varied according to their perceived racial status: the harshest treatment was reserved for ethnic Poles, Russians, and Jews, all of whom suffered dreadful physical and psychological abuse.

**Death Marches**

Many prisoners and forced labourers who had survived incarceration, and escaped extermination, ultimately succumbed during the Nazi death marches. As military defeat loomed in on both fronts in late 1944 and early 1945, orders were given for labour and concentration camps to be closed, and for survivors to be forcibly marched hundreds of kilometres towards Germany rather than be liberated by the enemy. Anyone too exhausted to march was immediately put to death. Tens of thousands of those who somehow survived the death marches were immediately forced back into labour in camps inside Germany. At least 200,000 died on the forced marches, or in the overcrowded and disease-ridden “reception camps” that awaited them in Germany such as Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Buchenwald.15 Take, for instance, the most famous of all Holocaust victims Anne Frank. After surviving Auschwitz, she died after contracting typhus while interned at Belsen.

These “reception camps” in Germany were transformed from either a POW camp (Belsen) or concentration camp (Dachau and Buchenwald) into holding camps for Jews and non-Jews who had survived the ordeal of forced labour. Most of the victims in these camps, however, were not Jews. Liberated by British and American forces, the images of and reportage from these camps, which understandably focused on the piles of corpses, indescribable living conditions, and sight of emaciated survivors, have led to some longstanding incorrect conclusions about the camps’ role in the Holocaust.16 Tens of thousands perished at these “reception camps” — the ultimate destination of

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the death marches — but they were not sites that contributed to the mass extermination of Jews during the “Final Solution.” Nonetheless, for many Jews who survived, the death marches and liberation at these camps are intrinsically part of their overall Holocaust experience.

(top left) Clandestinely taken photo of prisoners during a death march to Dachau near the war’s end.
(top right) Another photo secretly taken of armed guards walking alongside prisoners during a death march in Bavaria, 29 April 1945.
(bottom left) Mass grave at Bergen-Belsen around the time of liberation. Note that these are not victims of a purpose-built Holocaust extermination camp. Indeed, most of the victims at Belsen were not Jewish. They succumbed to starvation and disease in remarkably high numbers as the camp became overcrowded due to the death marches toward the war’s end. Belsen had never operated as a killing centre.
(bottom right) Symbolic headstone for Anne Frank and her sister Margot, erected at the site of the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where they died of typhus after surviving Auschwitz. They were buried in a mass grave at the camp. Ironically, this meant they were buried in Germany (and in relatively close proximity to their birthplace Frankfurt) after fleeing the Nazis and resettling across the border in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Conclusion

The Nazis developed an extensive camp system, first across the Third Reich and then throughout occupied Europe during wartime. The function of the camps and the make-up of their prisoners were shaped by Nazi priorities. The first intakes of prisoners can be characterised as political opponents and social “misfits.” The war and conquest of territory in the East, however, saw a proliferation of both camps and the mass imprisonment of Jews. Within this remarkably complex system, six main killing centres were established, two of which (Majdanek and Auschwitz) also operated as forced labour camps. While approximately half of all Holocaust victims never set foot in a Nazi camp of any kind, roughly the same number perished in the gas chambers of Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the other extermination camps. Over time, the method of murder — adopted and adapted from the earlier Aktion-T4 “euthanasia” program — was perfected, expanded, and carried out on a devastating, industrial scale. The arrival of Jews by train, their selection, preparation for gassing, and their cremation, made up a process that resembled an assembly line, at centres that Leni Yahil appropriately terms “the death factories.”

If Jews survived the initial selection process, they faced starvation, disease, and slave labour. Some 200,000 perished on “death marches” back to Germany and in so-called “reception camps” shortly before they were liberated by allied armed forces in the final weeks and months of the war.

While essential for our historical knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, the description of mass killing as “industrial” and “factory-like” may appear to offer an anesthetised version of the Holocaust. Those who survived the camps have proven able to convey (or, at least, attempt to convey) the horrors they experienced. Tormented and tortured, survivors grieved lost loved ones, some felt guilt for having survived, and others a compulsion to record their experiences. The resultant survivor testimony is not only a human element that can be missing from historical studies of the Holocaust, but it represents some of the most critical pieces of historical evidence, and has produced some profoundly influential memoirs and other literary works. For death camps such as Treblinka, for instance, at which some 900,000 people were murdered, there were very few survivors. While survivor testimony is not an unproblematic source of evidence, it is also no coincidence that far less is known about Treblinka than has been ascertained about Auschwitz. Where only a handful survived Treblinka, the more than 100,000 survivors of Auschwitz represent a rich source of historical knowledge. Their testimonies, and the prodigious body of literature to which many survivors have contributed, reveal in remarkable detail how the camp operated over time. Furthermore, we are given invaluable insight into how they endured what Filip Müller, a former Jewish Sonderkommando who somehow managed to survive working in Birkenau’s crematoria for over three years, later described as the “Auschwitz inferno.”