WEEK 6
The Nazis’ “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem”:
Decision-Making, Planning, and Implementation

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Week 6 Unit Learning Outcomes
ULO 1. evaluate in a reflective and critical manner the consequences of racism and prejudice
ULO 3. synthesise core historiographical debates on how and why the Holocaust occurred
ULO 4. recognise important linkages between the Second World War and the Holocaust, and question Hitler’s role in these events

Introduction
The Holocaust was a continental-wide program of genocide, the end goal of which was the extermination of Europe’s 11 million Jews. Once decisions were made and the killing practices and facilities had been established, Nazi Germany and its collaborators annihilated millions of Jews in an astonishingly short period of time. As students of history it is our objective to build knowledge and understanding of the past, even when the subject matter is as confronting as genocide on an unprecedented and unparalleled scale. Yet, it is not simply the staggering number of victims nor the brutal and often barbaric nature of the killing process alone that make it difficult for historians to comprehend the Holocaust. For all intents and purposes, the Judeocide was a clandestine operation that involved as few perpetrators as possible. Orders and official discussions, if recorded or documented at all, contained euphemistic language — on this point, we need only to consider the Nazis’ use of the term “Final Solution” (Endlösung) in reference to their decision to establish extermination camps and exterminate Europe’s Jews in gas chambers.

Due to the secrecy that shrouded the Nazis’ wartime extermination of Jews, we do not know when certain decisions were made. Most importantly, we do not know when they made the decision — that is, when Hitler along with Himmler and other leading Nazis decided that they would attempt to kill every Jew living in Europe. Subsequently, with access to only fragmentary evidence historians face the challenge of establishing when the “Final Solution” was authorised, as well as facing questions around the role of intent, structure, and agency. Whereas sufficient evidence exists for us to establish the main contours around what took place, plenty of questions nonetheless remain open as far as when, how, and why the “Final Solution” was planned and operated.
This learning module examines the decision-making processes around, and the implementation of, the “Final Solution.” First, by scrutinising multiple historians’ views section 1 explores the core question of timing: when did Hitler authorise the Holocaust? The critical point it considers is the relationship between the mass shootings of Soviet Jews that were perpetrated from mid-1941 onwards, and the decision to exterminate all European Jews. Second, the significance of the Wannsee Conference — a meeting of high-ranking Nazis held on the outskirts of Berlin in January 1942 — is examined with respect to the “Jewish Question.” Finally, section 1 outlines the most influential historiographical debate in Holocaust studies: intentionalism and structuralism/functionalism. This dispute provides you with a theoretical framework to draw on throughout your engagement with this unit, enabling you to continue forming and consolidating your own historical interpretation on how best to understand how the Holocaust was possible.

Section 2 focuses on the planning and implementation of the “Final Solution.” It marks out the key distinctions between concentration camps, multi-purpose camps, and extermination camps. Section 2 then provides an overview of the six main, centralised killing centres at which millions of Jews were gassed. This section concludes with a brief overview of non-Jewish victims in the Nazi camps.

Through completing this learning module, you will continue to evaluate, in a reflective and critical manner, the consequences of racism and prejudice. Furthermore, you will grapple with and synthesise core historiographical debates on how and why the Holocaust occurred. Along the way, in recognising linkages between the Second World War and the Holocaust you should question Hitler’s role in these events.

SECTION 1. Decision-Making and Planning

This section focuses on the question of timing surrounding decision-making and planning. There was a period of transition from the decentralised mass shootings that were conducted in the Soviet Union from June 1941 onwards to the centralised killing through the use of gas chambers at extermination camps that commenced in earnest from mid-1942. Many historians contend that it was at some point during this period that Hitler formally authorised the “Final Solution,” while other historians argue that he had already approved such an action months, or years, earlier. Two schools of interpretation will be introduced that stress the role of intent on the one hand, and structure or functionality on the other hand, as the most effective means of explaining the Holocaust.

a) Transition from Mass Shootings to Gas Chambers

Historians generally accept that Hitler did not issue a written order for the Holocaust — or, at least, that no such written order survived the war. Nor did any such written order by any other high-ranking Nazi decision-maker such as Himmler or Heydrich ever surface after the war.¹ For several reasons, this absence of any concrete documentary evidence is not really surprising: the

¹ Peter Longerich, The Unwritten Order: Hitler’s Role in the Final Solution. (Tempus, Stroud, 2001.)
Nazi régime destroyed countless documents during the final months of the Third Reich (though countless others fell into Allied hands at war’s end); their genocidal attack on Jews (and other victim groups) were enveloped in secrecy; and the complex nature of Nazi power structures raises questions about how orders for such a program may have been disseminated. For students of history, however, it leaves open two critical questions. First, who initiated such a plan? (As the Führer, Hitler must have approved of the extermination process; but he may or may not have been the person who actually conceptualised it or even delivered the initial authorisation for it to commence.) Second, when was the decision made to implement the “Final Solution”?

Though the question of timing and Hitler’s precise role in this authorisation process remain open to dispute, historians do manage to agree on some important points. Hitler must have known about, approved of, likely expressed his personal authorisation for, and certainly provided inspiration and impetus to the “Final Solution.” Furthermore, historians accept that the mass killing of Soviet Jews was a systematic process by September 1941 at the latest. (Put another way, the mass shootings of Jews in the East may or may not have been systematic from the start of Operation Barbarossa in June when only adult males were targeted initially, but they certainly were formalised into a coordinated assault by the September at which time all Soviet Jews were being massacred.)

Beyond these vague points of agreement, however, historians disagree over when and how Nazi decision-making led to the transition from killing only Soviet Jews through mass shootings during the Barbarossa invasion to the extermination of Jews from across all of Europe in death camps. Holocaust scholars thus are forced to join a significant number of dots—and this is what leads to such discrepancies in interpretation. Helmut Krausnick, for instance, contends that the decision to murder male Soviet Jews (made in March 1941 during the preparations for Operation Barbarossa) effectively constituted authorisation for the entire continental-wide program of genocide. Christopher R. Browning, conversely, argues that it was not until July 1941 at the earliest but perhaps as late as September 1941 that the “Final Solution” was authorised. It was during this period, as German war planners began to realise the campaign in the East would not be a short one as they had envisaged, that the mass shootings were extended to cover all Soviet Jews. Other historians emphasise that the relationship between the mass shootings in the Soviet Union and the “Final Solution” is far less clear-cut. The decision to kill all Jews from the rest of Nazi-controlled Europe in purpose-built gas chambers located in death camps perhaps was not made concurrently with the systematic killings of Soviet Jews. For historians who hold such views, the decision to commence the “Final Solution” was not made until late 1941 at the earliest. In the case of Hans Mommsen, one of the leading structuralist historians, the decision arguably can be traced to as late as April 1942 when Adolf Eichmann toured the killing facilities of the

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Operation Reinhard extermination camps and reported back to his superiors on the hitherto untapped potentialities at their disposal.

Neither the incomplete historical evidence, nor by extension the expert historians who devote their careers to analysing it, can answer these questions definitively. As students of the Holocaust, then, it is up to you to develop your own informed view on the relationship between the mass shootings in the Soviet Union and the “Final Solution” — the decision to kill all Jews from the rest of Nazi-controlled Europe in purpose-built gas chambers located in extermination camps.

As evidenced by last week’s learning module, the role of the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union certainly demonstrated that mass murder was possible. The mass shooting of hundreds of thousands of innocent, unarmed civilians also lessened any residual moral or emotional inhibitions about killing Jews. Yet, if extermination were to be extended across Europe then the murder of Jews in the East raised some serious issues. The method of mass shooting deployed in the Soviet Union was extremely “inefficient” and resource intensive, requiring significant manpower, weaponry, and ammunition during a time of total war. Moreover, conducting mass shootings on such a relentless scale created psychological problems for perpetrators, many of whom resorted to alcohol to anaesthetise their psyche. Finally, no matter how secluded the sites of murder were, it was impossible to maintain secrecy when shootings occurred on such a vast scale. The remoteness of the Soviet Union meant that the truth could be concealed somewhat, but if similar events were to be perpetrated in western Europe then the news could not have been suppressed for long.

Gassing, already devised in the Aktion-T4 “euthanasia” program, was adapted for a new purpose. This was no mere coincidence. Reinhard Heydrich, deputy leader of the SS and in charge of anti-Jewish policy, had kept in close touch with the instigators of the T4 program throughout 1939-40. According to Charles W. Sydnor Jr., in keeping updated about the developments of Aktion-T4 Heydrich realised the possibilities offered by this killing technology.4 Recognition that the war against the Soviet Union would not be won as quickly as anticipated (if at all), and that the plan to deport all of Europe’s Jews east of the Urals thus became impracticable, dovetailed with the search for a far more “efficient” and centralised method that enabled immediate mass murder far closer to Germany.

The Turning Point in Decision-making: The Northern Autumn 1941

From September to December 1941, a significant escalation in preparations for murdering Jews took place and this process was not limited to the Soviet Union.

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Deportation of German Jews from Bielefeld to Riga, Latvia, 13 December 1941. By this stage, these Jews had lived in Hitler’s Germany for almost nine years. They would never return to their Fatherland.


Critical developments, according to Peter Longerich, included:

- the deportation of German Jews still living in the Third Reich to ghettos in the Baltic states and to the Warthegau (territory of interwar Poland incorporated into the Greater German Reich, which included the Łódź ghetto);

- the extension of mass shootings of Jews from the area of Galicia (previously in the Soviet Union) into the adjacent Lublin provinces (part of interwar Poland);

- shooting of Jews in Serbia (see the Week 4 learning module);

- and, most significantly, the association of the extension of murders with experimentation in the use of gassing technologies (for instance, plans were developed to establish a gassing facility in a mental hospital in Mogilev, Byelorussia).

Ian Kershaw argues that the final development listed above reflected the radicalisation of anti-Jewish policy, culminating in the decision to deport Jews from the Reich. First, in response to the Western Allies’ strategic bombing offensive against Germany, from September 1941 onwards German Jews were required to wear the Star of David. Then, once Jews were more visible in public, momentum quickly grew for their expulsion, which occurred from October. To make way for German Jews deported to the Łódź ghetto, Polish-Jewish inhabitants were sent to neighbouring Chełmno (also known in German as Kulmhof) and killed in mobile gas vans from December 1941.5 In Kershaw’s view, then, the October

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1941 decision to expel German Jews in turn radicalised measures against Polish Jews who were systematically murdered by gas for the first time. Until November 1941, radicalisation of policy had remained confined to the regions of Serbia, Poland, and the Soviet Union and mostly involved shootings. With the advent of gassing Jewish victims, a significant shift occurred in December 1941.

**PRESCRIBED TEXT:** Please read Mark Roseman’s chapter entitled “Deciding to Kill,” pp. 430-46. Roseman offers a concise summary of the various historiographical questions that surround the decision to authorise the extermination of all European Jews.

b) The Wannsee Conference

The villa, located at Wannsee on the outskirts of Berlin, in which the Wannsee Conference was held. The House of the Wannsee Conference now operates as a Holocaust museum and memorial site.

Source: "Wie die Nazi-Spitze den Judenmord vorantrieb," Zeit-Online. [Accessed 5 April 2017]

The United States’ entry into the war in December 1941, according to Christian Gerlach, removed any lingering thoughts that may have limited German behaviour towards Jews — most notably the possibility of using Jews as hostages in exchange for possible favours from Washington.\(^6\) Perhaps, then, the decision to murder all Jews throughout Europe must be contextualised within the wider global course of the Second World War.

Indeed, Reinhard Heydrich had received a letter from Hitler’s deputy Hermann Göring dated 31 July 1941 in which he was charged with carrying out “a total solution to the Jewish problem in the territories of Europe under German influence” (“…eine Gesamtlösung der Judenfrage im deutschen Einflußgebiet in Europa”). In earlier correspondence dated 24 January 1939 (i.e. eight months prior to the invasion of Poland and the start of the war), Göring had suggested to Heydrich that he oversee planning for Jewish “emigration or evacuation” (“Auswanderung oder Evakuierung”). By mid-1941, clearly the situation had changed and so too had the Nazis’ plans for Jews living in territory they controlled. On 29 November 1941, Heydrich dispatched invitations to representatives of major sectors of the Reich government to convene at Wannsee, located between Berlin and Potsdam, on 9 December 1941 in order to determine the “Final Solution.” When the United States entered the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, however, the meeting was cancelled and rescheduled for the following month because many of the attendees were required to focus on these new developments in the war (a few days later Hitler reacted by pre-emptively declaring war on the United States on 11 December 1941).

Sources: “Göring’s Letter to Heydrich regarding the ‘Final Solution,’” Holocaust Research Project. [Accessed 5 April 2017]

If Hitler and his inner circle had been planning on winning the war before turning their attention to the extermination of all European Jews, their mindset changed around this time as the American entry into the war coupled with the failure to defeat the Soviet Union before the onset of the Russian winter culminated in the realisation that the war had no end in sight. Hitler apparently made his intentions clear when he met with his leading party officials at a meeting on 12 December 1941 in which he declared that Europe’s Jews were to be annihilated.

Accordingly, the Wannsee Conference eventually took place on 20 January 1942. It was here that Heydrich, on behalf of Hitler and Himmler, led the discussion on how to put in place arrangements for the “Final Solution.” The results of these deliberations at the Wannsee Conference are captured in the detailed minutes taken by Adolf Eichmann. The Wannsee Conference was not where the decision was made, then, but rather where the blueprint for how to proceed was drafted. This involved the “evacuation of the Jews to the East” — part of the euphemistic language used to describe the establishment of extermination camps. At the Wannsee Conference, furthermore, a remarkably detailed table was drawn up listing the number of Jews still living in Europe according to each country. It identified approximately 11 million Jews divided into two categories: a) countries under direct Nazi control; b) countries that were either neutral, unconquered enemies, or German allies who maintained autonomy. Jews living in countries in Category A were in direct danger, whereas the fate of Jews living in countries listed under Category B varied considerably. The minutes stipulate that only Jews by faith (Glaubensjuden) were counted as there was no scope to determine the number of Jews “according to racial principles” residing in other countries.

List of Jews estimated to be living in each country at the time of the Wannsee Conference, January 1942. The Nazis calculated that an overall total of 11 million Jews still lived in Europe at this stage of the war.

[Accessed 5 April 2017]
Even the Wannsee Conference — which appears to mark clearly a point at which the decision to commence the “Final Solution” had been made and transmitted — is interpreted in various ways by historians. The transition from mass shootings in the East to genocide through gassing may have involved a single-decision by Hitler or Himmler (acting on Hitler’s authorisation). Or was it, as Mark Roseman suggests in his earlier reading, that “the program outlined at Wannsee [was] more of a retrospective codification of a process already under way?” Roseman argues that, by September 1941, the dividing line between a “territorial solution” that involved the gassing of a set number of Polish Jews in order to make room for deported German Jews and the transition to a much wider program of genocide was “becoming very thin indeed.” By way of contrast, Hans Mommsen argues that neither the Wannsee Conference nor the murder of approximately a half-million Jews up to that stage of the war suggest that a decision to destroy all European Jews had been made yet. Wannsee did not represent a planning stage for the Holocaust, according to Mommsen, but rather the jurisdictional question of extending the Nuremberg Laws and their definition of “racially Jewish” to affect all of Europe’s Jews at a time when the idea of removing Jews to somewhere beyond the Ural Mountains remained viable.7 Mommsen hastens to point out that any such plans also held murderous characteristics inasmuch as the living conditions would have been terrible, but even so it was not until the later realisation that any thoughts of defeating the Soviets had been crushed that the Nazis turned their attention to liquidating Jews while they still had the chance.

c) Intentionalism vs. Structuralism

Previous weekly topics in general, and this learning module in particular, make it clear just how much historians can differ in how they interpret key questions surrounding how the Holocaust unfolded. The fundamental questions of authorisation and timing — who conceptualised and ordered the extermination of Europe’s Jews? And when was this decision made? — are part of a wider historiographical debate that dominated Holocaust studies for several decades and continues to shape how we approach the subject to this day.

Known as the intentionalist/structuralist (the latter used interchangeably with “functionalist”) debate, it was a heated dispute that erupted among leading Holocaust historians in the late 1970s and raged for more than a decade. As the name of the dispute suggests, historians who advocate these two positions argue that the Holocaust can be best understood through explanations that emphasise the primacy of either intent or structure respectively. For intentionalists, the Holocaust was a program of extermination that was intentionally pursued from a time that predated at least the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, if not the Second World War (and for some, arguably even much earlier). Intentionalist historians stress that the ideological zeal and virulent antisemitism of leading Nazis — and above all Hitler himself — resulted in Germany initiating another world war with the mass extermination of Europe’s Jews one of the Third Reich’s primary objectives. For an arch-intentionalist such as Lucy Dawidowicz, the decision to exterminate European Jewry can be traced back to the rage

Hitler felt in the immediate aftermath of Germany’s loss in the First World War. According to Dawidowicz, it was at this time that Hitler embarked on a political mission to seize control of Germany, to launch another war, and to murder those who in Hitler’s view had caused Germany to lose the previous conflict. The Second World War, as encapsulated by the title of her seminal book, was launched in Dawidowicz’s view as The War Against the Jews.8 For Dawidowicz, Hitler’s antisemitic statements of genocidal intent that he made as early as 1919 and continued to express in Mein Kampf and speeches throughout the 1920s and beyond are to be taken at face value — in other words, that he implicitly declared what he intended to do in future once in a position of power.

For structuralists, the Holocaust is best understood through an explanation of Nazi power structures, which resulted in the incremental radicalisation of measures against Jews and ultimately culminated in genocide. Writing in 1977, historian Martin Broszat set out an argument against intentionalism, one that stressed the ad hoc nature of the killing process, emphasising its gradual escalation, and evolution into systematic extermination.9 The “Final Solution,” in Broszat’s view, was not properly defined, and it shifted from initial vague plans to deport European Jews to an unspecified location to eventually involve mass annihilation once such an undertaking emerged as a feasible option. For Broszat, then, the Holocaust was merely “an ‘escape route’ out of a dead-end into which the Nazis had manoeuvred themselves.”10 In the view of Hans Mommsen, Hitler was in fact a “weak dictator” — meaning that he was heavily influenced by his closest confidantes (such as Himmler) and prone to leaving his trusted lieutenants to act on his behalf rather than making all decisions himself — and as part of this style of leadership he casually approved of anti-Jewish measures in a process of “cumulative radicalisation”.11 The Nazi system of power, according to Mommsen and other structuralists, was a chaotic entanglement of agencies competing for Hitler’s approval. For Broszat and Mommsen, the Holocaust is not best explained by Hitler’s personal intent and antisemitism, but as a result of the structure (and function) of the Nazi system of rule, which typically was initiated not from above but from below through middle-ranking functionaries dealing with ever-increasing numbers of Jews coming under German control. For structuralists, the road to Auschwitz, to borrow from the title of Karl Schleunes’ classic study, was not straight but “twisted.”12

Intentionalists and structuralists, of course, have had much to say about the competing interpretations offered by each other. For structuralists, the idea that Hitler held in his mind

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10 ibid. pp. 752-53.
12 Karl Schleunes, The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy Toward German Jews, 1933-1939. (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1970.)
a grand scheme of genocide from perhaps as early as 1919 is difficult to fathom. Structuralists, furthermore, emphasise that if there were such a long-term “plan” in existence (for 10-20 years, depending on when intentionalists supposed that Hitler conceptualised the Holocaust) then it was very poorly designed and executed, remaining improvised and unsystematic until at least mid-1941 and arguably well into 1942. For structuralist historians, taking Hitler at his word in *Mein Kampf* and relying on obscure and vague comments made in speeches as hard evidence of long-held intention to exterminate Jews leads to unreliable conclusions. It is simply too easy to connect Hitler’s early antisemitic ramblings to the later European-wide extermination of Jews that unfolded under his wartime leadership.

For their part, intentionalists argue that the structuralist mode of interpretation inappropriately pushes Hitler to the periphery of the historical picture, discounts the virulence and prevalence of his antisemitism in driving Nazi policies, and reduces mass scale genocide down to a system. From an intentionalist perspective, structuralism’s emphasis on lower-ranking bureaucrats as the initiators of genocide in a bid to solve localised “problems” of overcrowding fails to explain how such a program rapidly became an all-pervasive, European-wide drive to kill every last Jew. That the Nazis and their collaborators managed to kill approximately 4 million Jews in a 12-month period (March 1942–February 1943) suggests a deadly efficiency and the degree of Hitler’s murderous intent — not an indifferent dictator and a poorly organised system of power.

The heat of the intentionalist/structuralist debate started to dissipate considerably towards the end of the 1980s. Whereas the dispute had been incredibly polarised at its height, synthesised interpretations began to emerge that recognised the importance of both structure and intent — most notably from Christopher Browning but also other leading experts on Nazism including Ian Kershaw. For Browning, the decision to exterminate Europe’s Jews emerged in response to changing circumstances, but it was driven by the desires of Hitler and Himmler to constantly radicalise anti-Jewish measures.13 In Kershaw’s view, the Nazi system was a bureaucratic mess of authorities each competing for Hitler’s attention: what he terms “working towards the Führer.”14 In this context, proposals for actions against Jews were suggested to Hitler in a bid to gain personal favour, suggestions that, invariably, became more and more extreme. Though synthesised and accounting for the influence of Hitler and his intent, with the primacy of structure and function the views of Browning and Kershaw could be considered to be that of “moderate” structuralists. By way of contrast, Peter Longerich recognises the piecemeal approach of Nazi anti-Jewish policy even as he stresses the primacy of Hitler’s antisemitic worldview in driving every aspect of his decision-making. Longerich’s position might be considered that of a “moderate” intentionalist. To add further complexity to this debate, the opening up of hitherto inaccessible archives in the 1990s following the collapse of communism


has enabled historians to gain new insights into how genocide was perpetrated on the ground in the Soviet Union, the Baltic states, and other regions of eastern Europe. These historiographical developments have allowed additional knowledge and understanding that was not possible at the height of the intentionalist/structuralist debate in the preceding decades.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the intentionalist/structuralist debate is effectively over, for students new to the Holocaust the two categories remain a highly useful means of categorising various historiographical explanations of how the Holocaust was possible. Even the most synthesised approaches — such as the nuanced interpretations advocated by Browning, Kershaw and Longerich — tend to emphasise the importance of structure over intent, or vice versa. With this debate and these categories in mind, you are invited — indeed, encouraged — to use the intentionalist/structuralist paradigm as a framework to question the secondary sources and interpretations that you engage with as you work through this unit and to develop your own informed opinion. Are you more compelled by the argument that \textit{intent} or \textit{structure} offers the strongest interpretation for explaining the Holocaust? Even when they examine the same sources of evidence, some of the world’s leading historians disagree, often vehemently, on this question: and so should you. The conclusions that you reach may shift as you work further through the unit. But how you interpret the unfolding nature of the Holocaust is completely up to you!

Indeed, we have already explored a number of topics in this unit that can be re-examined through the intentionalist/structuralist framework. The Nazi “euthanasia” program, for instance, might be seen by intentionalists and structuralists respectively as a deliberate “trial run” for the Holocaust or as being linked only incidentally to the subsequent Judeocide. The invasion of Poland was launched as a “war against the Jews” (Dawidowicz) or as a conventional military campaign without a pre-determined end goal specifically for Jews (Broszat).\textsuperscript{16} The invasion of the Soviet Union was a ruthless ideological and racial war of annihilation that offered the pretext for and signalled the murder of Europe’s Jews (intentionalism), or it was the largest and costliest conflict in human history in which Jews were initially but one target amongst many (structuralism). Take a moment to consider what you have studied so far, and reflect on whether, in your mind, an interpretation that emphasises intent or structure offers the best means to understand how the Holocaust was possible. It is fine to see much merit in both perspectives, of course, and you may prefer the nuanced shades of grey created by blending together key arguments from both sides. Even so, when reflecting upon the stark black-or-white nature of the historiographical debate’s origins you should find either intent or structure a more persuasive explanation than the counterview.

\textsuperscript{15} For example, see Dieter Pohl, \textit{Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944}. (Oldenbourg, Munich, 2008); Christoph Dieckmann, \textit{Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944}. (Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2011); Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, \textit{Buch der Erinnerung: die ins Baltikum deportierten deutschen, österreichischen und tschechoslowakischen Juden}. (K.G. Saur, Munich, 2003.)

\textsuperscript{16} Martin Broszat, \textit{Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik 1939 – 1945}. (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1961.)
Section 2. Implementation

The Nazis and their collaborators obviously could not have “succeeded” in exterminating approximately six million Jews without ever making a concrete decision to purposefully commit to such an undertaking. A decision in and of itself, however, does not make something happen. This section focuses on the means that were employed in order to accomplish the “Final Solution” — a genocidal mission that was not only unprecedented but bordering on unimaginable.

How the “Final Solution” was implemented is a multifaceted topic that will be addressed at various stages of the coming weeks. Here, we shall commence this process by briefly tracing the establishment of extermination camps. Before delving deeper into the extermination of Jews in these death camps from next week, here we also should acknowledge that there were considerable numbers of non-Jewish victims who were murdered at these ghastly sites.

First, an illuminating way to introduce yourself to the overarching topic of the implementation of the “Final Solution” by establishing extermination camps is through the following two documentary extracts.

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a) Death Camps

You already will be familiar with the fact that the Nazis established an extensive system of camps. Incredibly, over 40,000 concentration camps were set up in the Greater German Reich and throughout Nazi-controlled Europe. Two of the largest and most notorious concentration camps Dachau and Buchenwald, both constructed in Germany during the prewar period, became sites of tens of thousands of deaths during the war years. The majority of victims,
however, were not Jews but rather political prisoners and foreigners pressed into forced labour. There is, then, an important distinction to make between these kinds of concentration camps and the extermination camps purposefully constructed for the “Final Solution”: there were tens of thousands of the former, which housed millions of inmates across most of Europe; there were just six of the latter, all of which were located in secluded parts of occupied Poland. We shall devote more attention to how these six death camps functioned next week. Here it suffices to outline when they were constructed and became operational, playing their vital role in the “Final Solution.”

![Map of the six Holocaust extermination camps established for the “Final Solution.”](http://www.theholocaustexplained.org/ks3/the-final-solution/the-death-camps/#.WOxwClJEqi4)

**Chełmno (Kulmhof)**

The first Holocaust extermination camp was Chełmno, also known as Kulmhof to the Germans as it was located in the interwar Polish territory incorporated into the expanded Reich as part of the Warthegau. Situated in a secluded spot but only about 30 miles (50 kms) northwest of the region’s major city Łódź (and its large ghetto), Chełmno became functional on 8 December 1941. This “camp” differed considerably to the other five sites, most noticeably because it used specially-designed mobile gassing vans rather than stationary gas chambers and the victims’ bodies were disposed of in mass graves in a nearby forest. Chełmno operated from December 1941 to March 1943, and was later reopened in June-July 1944 to help liquidate Jews from the Łódź ghetto as the Red Army advanced. A precise number of victims is unknown. An officially commissioned report in 1947 estimated that 340,000 Jewish “men, women and
children, from infants to old folk,” were murdered at Chelmno.\textsuperscript{17} Subsequent estimates have been more conservative and state that at least 150,000 victims can be confirmed.\textsuperscript{18}

**The Reinhard Camps: Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka**

Operation Reinhard (which derived its name in “honour” of Heydrich after he died from complications following an assassination attempt by Czech partisans in 1942) was the codename subsequently given to the secret action to exterminate all Jews residing in the Generalgouvernement. As part of Operation Reinhard, the three extermination camps Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka were constructed and operated under the overall command of Odilo Globocnik. Bełżec was built from November 1941 to March 1942, and was operational from 17 March 1942 to June 1943. Sobibór, which was constructed from March-May 1942, became operational on 16 May 1942 and was closed down in October 1943. The extermination camp at Treblinka was built from April-July 1942, and remained operational from 22 July 1942 to October 1943. Whereas estimates for each camp’s overall death toll vary significantly, the minimum number of victims are 500,000 for Bełżec, 150,000 for Sobibór, and 700,000 for Treblinka. The actual number of victims presumably is considerably higher. In the case of Treblinka, for instance, it is widely accepted that between 870,000-925,000 Jews were murdered at this site during its intense phase of operation that lasted just seventeen months.\textsuperscript{19} The three Reinhard camps, and Treblinka in particular, have come to be known as “murder factories” because they served no other purpose than the extermination of Europe’s Jews (and a comparatively small number of other victims).

**Multi-Purpose Camps: Majdanek and Auschwitz**

It was a different case for Majdanek and Auschwitz, both of which were multi-purpose camps inasmuch as they combined a forced labour camp along with an extermination camp. Majdanek, near Lublin, first operated as a forced labour camp from October 1941 onwards, and some 2,000 Soviet POWs counted among its first victims. Majdanek was expanded to incorporate a gassing facility in March 1942. It is estimated that between 74,000 and 90,000 Jews were liquidated at Majdanek by its closure in July 1944.\textsuperscript{20} Compared to all other extermination camps, the total number of victims at Majdanek was relatively small. By contrast, the other multi-purpose camp, Auschwitz, was unrivalled in its scope. As discussed in greater detail in next week’s learning module, Auschwitz consisted of not only three main camps but also a strong satellite systems of more than three dozen large sub-camps. Auschwitz II, better known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, was the extermination camp. Its first gas chambers became operational in March 1942, and it continued to function as a death camp until January

\textsuperscript{17} Central Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, “German Crimes in Poland (Warsaw 1946, 1947): Extermination Camp Chelmno (Kulmhof),” \url{http://pages.ucsd.edu/~lzamosc/gchelmno.html} [Accessed 2 April 2017]


1945. Jews were by far the main victim group, but significant numbers of ethnic Poles, Roma, Soviet POWs, and other nationalities also were killed at Auschwitz. Again, estimates of victims vary, but it is widely accepted that around 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz (I, II, III, or one of the sub-camps), of whom approximately 1.1 million were murdered. Roughly 960,000 of these victims were Jews.21 On the one hand, this makes Auschwitz comfortably the most murderous camp overall. On the other hand, when focusing on Jewish victims the overall total of victims at Treblinka rivalled Auschwitz-Birkenau despite being operational as an extermination camp for well under half the amount of time.

Combined, the six extermination camps that were established in line with the “Final Solution” accounted for approximately 2.7 million Jews — or almost half of the overall total number of victims of the Holocaust.

PRESCRIBED TEXT: Please read Raul Hilberg’s chapter entitled “Bringing Jews to Death,” pp. 463-80. Hilberg famously depicts Nazi death camps as “murder factories” and describes the process of killing as having parallels with a factory’s production-line and associated levels of efficiency.

b) Non-Jewish Victims

Although the focus of this unit is on Jews as a victim group, it is important to note that Jews were not the only group to be murdered in large numbers by the Nazis. You already will have noted (in Week 2) that some of the Nazis’ first experiments in mass killing were carried out against German and Polish “handicapped” persons, in which tens of thousands were murdered. Ethnic Poles suffered terribly during the war, with around 2 million deaths from deliberate acts of murder and forced labour spread across five years of brutal occupation from September 1939 to late 1944. Many Poles were themselves sent to concentration and labour camps, including Auschwitz. Additionally, around 3.3 million Soviet POWs died in German captivity, most of whom were the victims of deliberate starvation. Moreover, some 600 Soviet prisoners became the first victims of experimental gassing using Zyklon B (prussic acid) at Auschwitz-Birkenau in September 1941. So-called “gypsies,” or Sinti and Roma, were classified by Nazi Germany as “racially inferior” and subjected to genocidal measures. At least 200,000 Sinti and Roma were murdered, through mass shootings in the Soviet Union, ghettoisation in Poland, and mass gassings at Chelmno and Auschwitz-Birkenau — the latter of which had a designated “Gypsy Family Camp” (Zigeunerlager).22 There is scholarly debate


over whether Nazi policies towards Sinti and Roma constitute genocide — that is, whether it was Nazi Germany’s intent to systematically exterminate all of Europe’s Sinti and Roma, as it undeniably was where it came to European Jews. The difference between non-Jewish victims is not merely a numerical one, nor one of method. Soviet civilians and soldiers, Sinti and Roma, ethnic Poles and others were victims of mass shootings and gassings at the same sites of murder, sometimes even at the same time, as Jews. As historian Richard J. Evans states, however, it was nevertheless somehow altogether different for Jews. Evans argues: “These other unfortunate victims of Nazi mass murder were obstacles to get out of the way… [whereas] all Jews everywhere were [seen as] engaged in a vast plot to destroy the German ‘race’. Wherever Jews were encountered they had to be killed.”

Roma (“Gypsies”) interned at Belzec prior to their extermination.

Source: “Non-Jewish Victims of the Holocaust: Roma,” Jewish Virtual Library.  

PREScribed TEXT: Please read Yehuda Bauer’s chapter entitled “The Fate of Gypsies,” pp. 495-505.

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Conclusion

Questions concerning when the “Final Solution” was authorised, or whether it came about primarily as a result of Hitler’s intention or Nazi power structures, may seem trivial and insignificant compared to the acts of genocide themselves. One of the key challenges facing Holocaust scholars is that, as a discipline, History demands that its students and practitioners attempt to understand (and, by extension, convey an understanding) of past events. This difficulty is particularly acute when the places in question are Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz, at which cumulatively almost three million human beings were systematically murdered. While the fate of so many innocent victims always needs to be kept in mind, there is a concurrent need to undertake dispassionate analysis — and the questions of “when” and “how” and “why” loom large in any such exercise. The very question nominated in the title of this unit’s set text — How was it Possible? — continues to fascinate and consume Holocaust scholars and students alike.

The mass shootings of Soviet Jews that occupied our focus in the previous learning module represent a momentous point of escalation in Nazi anti-Jewish policies. Depending on your historiographical interpretation, these killings may have revealed a willingness of the Nazis to physically destroy tens of thousands of eastern European Jews as part of the assault on the Soviet Union, or perhaps the role of the Einsatzgruppen signalled the beginning of the “Final Solution” and an imminent attack on all European Jews. Historians variously contend that Hitler authorised the Holocaust some time between November 1919 (Dawidowicz) and April 1942 (Mommsen), with dozens of interpretations pinpointing particular dates within this extensive period. For some historians, Hitler conjured a plan to destroy European Jews and set about putting that plan into action. For others, the “Final Solution” was driven by pragmatism above ideology, and borrowed its impetus from the disconnected Nazi system of bureaucracy that flourished under Hitler’s style of “weak dictatorship.” Clearly, there is much room for interpretation between these two schools of thought. Those historians who argue that it need not be a question of “either/or” — that is, the primacy of intent or structure in explaining the Holocaust — nonetheless invariably emphasise one factor more than the other. As you continue with the unit, you are encouraged to engage with these questions, to critically analyse historians’ interpretations, and to continue to develop your own arguments for how, in your mind, the Holocaust was possible.