

Roman Catholics Confront the Holocaust, Part II



Auschwitz Main Entrance

The Final Solution to the Jewish Problem, 1939-1945

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, which formally began the Second World War. Soon after the initiation of hostilities Great Britain declared war on Germany. As the triumphant *Wehrmacht* raced through half of Poland the Nazis began their campaign to destroy Polish culture and to enslave Polish citizens for forced labor. During this campaign the Nazis killed professors, artists, writers, politicians and several Catholic clergy. Thousands of Jews and Poles were imprisoned.

In 1940, German forces invaded much of Western Europe, easily defeating Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. Propelled by his easy victories in the West, Hitler turned his attention and ambitions to the East. Hitler viewed Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as the necessary landmasses for the expansion of the German culture, or "living space," for the German people. On June 22, 1941, the Nazis began the invasion of the Soviet Union in *Operation Barbarossa*.

In the months following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, Jews, political leaders, communists and many Gypsies were killed in mass executions. Most of the people killed were Jews, Polish intelligentsia, and priests. Members of special *killing squads* known as *Einsatzgruppen*, conducted these killings authorized by Hitler and managed by S.S. Reichfuhrer Himmler and head of the RHSA, Reinhard Heydrich. Heydrich noted:

...that everyone should be sure to understand that in this fight Jews would definitely take their part, and that in this fight everything was set at stake, and the side

which gave in would be ...overcome. For that reason all measures had to be taken against the Jews in particular. 1

Among the most infamous of the mass killings at that time were the mass executions at Babi Yar, near Kiev. **2** It is estimated that about 33,000 people were murdered at this site. Such mass executions were carried out by first having the victims dig a large pit and then having them stand around the pit while members of the killing squads fired machine guns at the victims, or pistols to the back of the neck.

At this time the Nazis began to confine the Jewish people in ghettos in the large Polish cities of Warsaw and the like. This allowed the Nazi SS to confine the Jewish people until they would be sent to *extermination camps* being set up in Eastern Poland. The ghettos also provided the Nazis with a labor pool for road construction and hard labor.



Reinhard Heydrich

In 1941 and 1942 the "Final Solution" to the Jewish question was made official policy at the Wannsee Conference held by high Nazi officials. The men responsible for carrying out this policy were Reinhard Heydrich and Adolf Eichmann. "Operation Reinhard" began in late 1941, and continued in implementing the mandate of the Wannsee Conference. The main tasks of Operation Reinhard were:

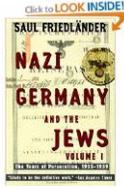
- **to plan the overall deportations and extermination activities of the entire operation;**
- **building the death camps;**
- **coordinating the deportations of the Jews from the different districts to the death camps;**
- **killing the Jews in the camps; and**
- **seizing the assets and valuables of the victims and handing them over to the appropriate Reich authorities. 3**

Operation Reinhard led to the establishment of the extermination camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. In Belzec more than 600,000 persons were killed between May 1942 and August 1943. The Sobibor camp killed 200,000 people by gassing, and almost

800,000 people were killed at Treblinka. Almost all of the people killed at these camps were Jews. Most of the victims were murdered soon after arriving at these camps

The Wannsee Conference held on January 20, 1942, sealed the fate of the Jews in Europe. Not only would it mean the establishment of death camps in the recently conquered territories in Poland and the Soviet Union, all Jews were marked for extermination as the *Final Solution of the Jewish Question*. Clearly, the overcrowding of the ghettos and the logistical nightmare this created for Hans Frank and others, the arrival of the U.S. in the war, and the stall Nazi offensive created the need, in the minds of Hitler, Goring, Himmler, Heydrich and others that a “total solution to the Jewish question had to be effectuated. The notion of expulsion to Madagascar was dropped in favor of extermination, with Hitler himself making known his wishes to do so through Goring, Himmler and Heydrich (cf. *The Origins of the Final Solution*, Browning, pp. 425-435.) The extermination of the Jews had been going on already for about six months, but now a new method would be used to carry out the Final Solution, gas. Those who participated in the euthanasia practices of the T4 program would help to establish the killing centers and consult on the use of gas for killing. Also, the logistics were agreed upon as to how to effectuate this new method. Trains would be used to transport Jews from all over Europe to the killing centers. This would be the means by which there would result a Jew free Europe. This was clearly the intent of the conference. This can be deduced by the list of the number of Jews in each of the European countries provided to the participants of the conference.

In all there were some 11,000,000 Jews in Europe; all marked for death to complete the Nazi program of the Final Solution. We can also conclude that Germany’s conquest of Europe would not be complete until it brought all Jews under their control, Also, it was expressed to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem that even Palestine would eventually come under Nazi control and hence the elimination of the Jews there, if Germany could count on Arab support during the war. One thing we can be sure of, Hitler was committed to the extermination of the Jews in Europe as he prophesied in January of 1939 in the Reichstag, and came to see as the course open to him just prior to Operation Barbarossa, right to the time he took his own life. For historians like Christopher Browning the *Final Solution* is not something that was planned as far back as 1939, rather it evolved over time within the exigencies of experience; the functionalist school. For others like Lucy Davidowicz, this was in the mind of Hitler from the beginning and was finally able to come to fruition; the intentionalist school. In the mind of Hitler, who often made his feelings known through discussion but apparently no written order, this had to be done to accomplish the goal of a Jew free Europe. This could be termed, in the words of Saul Friedlander, as Hitler’s view of *redemptive anti-semitism*. Salvation from Judeo-Bolshevism and the success of the Aryan-Master race could be better assured by the annihilation of the Jews of Europe.



Among one of the most diabolical chapters in human history surrounds the manipulation of language in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. In this case language was used to mask the sinister designs of the Nazi Final Solution. Such misuse of language began prior to the decision to kill all the Jews of Europe. Already words such as, *Aktion, relocation, special treatment, resettlement to the East* were part of Nazis art of deception to their victims. With the establishments of the death camps of Chelmno, and then Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka from Operation Reinhard, the language of extermination was carefully crafted to promote a smooth process of killing people by the thousands at a time. Even upon boarding the trains that would take Jewish people to the camps all the victims were told to mark their luggage with their names on it so it would not get lost on their way to the *transit camp*.

When the Jewish people arrived at the camps they were reassured that the camp was only a transit camp and that they needed to be *disinfected* by taking showers. Often enough this was a great relief to those who feared something more ominous was going to happen.

We heard word for word how SS-Oberscharfuehrer Michel, standing on a small table, convincingly calmed the people; he promised them that after the bath they would get back all their possessions, and said that the time had come for Jews to become productive members of society. They would presently all be sent to the Ukraine where they would be able to live and work. The speech inspired confidence and enthusiasm among the people. They applauded spontaneously and occasionally they even danced and sang. (cf. Arad)

This was only the beginning of the sinister ruse. Women were sent to a *hairdresser* to have their hair cropped before going into the *showers*. In the camps signs were posted that instructed the new arrivals what to do in order to be *disinfected* and after they would be given clean clothes following their shower and could reclaim their money and valuables from the *Cash store* if they had their ticket! They were to tie their shoes together, put their clothing on hooks and so on. The gas chamber rooms even had bathroom tiles that would be typical of a shower room. Clever indeed! Also, the gas chambers were hidden from view and often camouflaged. In Treblinka, one of the chambers had a drape from a synagogue on it and on one a Star of David shield, all meant to assure the victims that everything would be alright. The gas chambers themselves were fitted with shower heads, and in some camps attached to pipes, to create the illusion that real showers were to be had. No water was delivered from these shower heads;

instead, carbon monoxide was used to kill those in the chamber. These forms of deception not only were used to deceive the victims, but also the perpetrators. People in such extreme situations will often delude themselves about their behavior because they cannot bring themselves to admit they are doing evil, in fact, like one soldier wrote home, he was killing Jewish children so that his own children would have a better future. If one speaks in euphemisms enough, then sooner or later one believes the propaganda oneself—as human beings we can and do lie to ourselves. The victims of all three camps totaled 1,700,000 people. Experimental uses of Zyklon B gas or Prussic acid, was employed at Auschwitz-Birkenau on Russian prisoners in block 11 in September of 1941; something witnessed by Adolf Eichmann that he noted at the Wannsee Conference.



Other camps served as slave labor and death camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau was such a camp and became the killing center in which the largest numbers of European Jews and Gypsies were killed. It is estimated that 1.25 million people were killed at Auschwitz in Poland. Between May 14 and July 8, 1944, 437,402 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz in 48 trains! A similar system was instituted at Majdanek where at least 275,000 persons were killed in the gas chambers or died from malnutrition, brutality, and disease. **5**



As the fortunes of war turned against the Nazis, and Russian and Allied forces converged from both East and West, the SS decided to evacuate the outlying concentration camps. The Germans first tried to cover up the evidence of genocide and deported prisoners to camps inside Germany to prevent their liberation. They also moved

people out of the camps in long marches back to Germany. Many people died on these *long death marches*.

By the time Germany surrendered in mid-May 1945, the *Final Solution* had claimed close to six million Jewish lives, thousands of Gypsy lives, millions of Russian lives, and many more lives approaching eleven million deaths altogether. Yet more than killing went on at these camps. Many people were used for inhuman experiments carried out by the Nazi doctors, often without painkillers. So ghastly were many of these experiments that even battle hardened Allied soldiers wept when they heard what had happened to those interred in these camps.

Notes

1 Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), p. 16.

2 Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust A Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Boston, Toronto, London: Little and Brown 1993), p. 62-65; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York, London: Holmes and Meier 1985), pp. 200-238.

3 Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.17

4 Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish policy, September 1939-1942* (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 428-433; Lucy s. Davidowicz, *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945* (New York: Holt Rinehart, and Winston, 1975. Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume One* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

5 Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, eds. *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 61-80