

Roman Catholic Confront the Shoah III

In the previous article of this series we traced out how the Final Solution came to be and to be implemented by the Nazis. All told, about 11,000,000 people died at the hands of the Nazis, including priests, ministers, Roma and Sinti gypsies, Russian POWs, the Polish intelligentsia and 6 million Jews. Many were killed in the camp system established by the Nazis. The concentration camp system began soon after Hitler rise to power in January of 1933.



Buchenwald Concentration Camp

The camp system of Nazi Germany was a logical and inherent aspect of Nazi ideology, and hence, a rational extension of the Nazi program. Falk Pingel summarized the concentration camp system by stating, that *political persecution, economic coercion and ideologically based extermination were firmly linked in the National-Socialist system*. By this I mean that the Fascist State of Nazi Germany, as a one party state, could not and would not allow for any opposition. Soon after taking power in 1933, Hitler moved quickly to consolidate his power. With the passage of the Enabling Act, permitting the State to act in the *defense* of the nation, all those deemed a political threat to Nazi power were imprisoned or taken into *protective custody* following the mysterious Reichstag fire. This included Socialists, Communists and others who may have been able to be *reeducated* to embrace the Nazi ideology. For a time it was felt that the camps from 1933-35 served their purpose and could be closed. But for those who advocated such things they did not understand the fundamental link of the concentration camps and the Nazi vision. This is what it means to live in a State founded upon the ruthless application of terror.

It is essential to understand that the Nazi ideology rested on the quest for absolute power, its commitment to a Jew free Europe, and the quest for Lebensraum for the Germanic Aryan race. Any method that could achieve that end would be utilized; in 1933-1935, that meant seeking out and removing the regime's enemies. But as things developed in the area of purposeful persecution of the Jews in Germany and the November 9, 1938, *Kristallnacht* pogrom, the camps took on a different focus. Now, combined with political prisoners were some 30,000 plus Jewish men. So a new phase in the camps began 1936-1941. The effects of the war, the need for slave labor and capture of foreign prisoners led to a new role for the camps but based on the inner logic of the Nazi program. All inferior races were to be enslaved for the work of the German Reich.



All enemies of the State, this especially included Jews, were to be removed from German society and used for forced labor to contribute the war effort, or banished to ghettos to die off until a plan was found to expel Jews from German territory. If these were the objectives then the camps certainly were a rational means to accomplish these ends.

The Third phase of the camp system, 1942-1944 took on a new and deadly focus. The camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka were extermination camps for the Jews. This was a consequence of the developments that led to the Wanssee Conference in January 1942. Overcrowded ghettos, the capture of large pieces of Soviet territory resulting in the capture of 5 million more Jews, the visceral and murderous hatred of the Jews, and the realization that the war would go on for some time led to the *Final Solution of the Jewish Question*, offered by Heydrich (coming from Hitler and Goring) and agreed to by all those attending the Wannsee Conference. The other camps such as Auschwitz and Majdanek were both work camps and extermination centers. All this was the rational outgrowth of Nazi policies. But it also smacked of sheer fanaticism.

Germany was involved with a two front war and a *war against the Jews!* Hitler had violated his own belief that Germany must not fight a two front war, now he was fighting on three fronts. In order to support the war effort, many in the concentration camps were used in slave labor for war production, yet the killing centers were going full blast, requiring the tying up of rail lines and immense logistical efforts that hindered the prosecution of the war against the Allies! Often enough the Final Solution objectives were deemed more important to Hitler and the S.S. than the war effort! In early period of the Einsatzgruppen, Germany was willing to spend a great deal of ammunition, and later fuel for gas vans, to kill the Jews.



Heinrich Himmler

The life in the camps themselves were characterized by the most brutal and sadistic treatment of the prisoners, especially if they were Jewish, with a fanatical zeal that beggars the imagination. Often the guards and *kapos* inflicted a steady buffet of beatings, torture and eventually death for many.

While still standing there, the SS amused themselves by slapping and kicking us indiscriminately. Near me stood a very big, strong man, a professor of mathematics. When an SS man punched him, he hit back, causing the SS man to roll on the ground. When the commander of the camp saw this, he ordered the man arrested. At his orders, a tree stump was brought and the professor was tied to it. Four men were needed to overpower him. Then we were told to form a circle around him and the camp commander announced very loudly that the Jew, Itzik, was sentenced to 25 lashes. I was then witness to the worst outrage against human dignity I ever saw in my life. A huge SS man whipped the bound man 25 times with a bullwhip. He screamed and shrieked in pain, and blood spurted in all direction. By the time the final lash fell, he appeared to have lost consciousness because he no longer screamed. Then he was untied and salt and pepper were ground into his wounds, and the unconscious man was dragged away. We never saw him again."

It was the daily diet in the camps endured by the prisoners. Many of the women SS guards were more sadistic than their male counterparts to demonstrate their great zeal for the cause. One has only to mention Ilse Koch, not a guard but the wife of the camp commandant at Buchenwald, and others to conjure up images of fanatical brutality. The policy to exterminate all the Jews in Europe no matter the cost, even up to the very end of the war bespeaks an ideological fanaticism that has no peer in history. This fanaticism was so deeply embedded into the Nazi perpetrators that *Final Solution* killings of the Jews went on up to the last day of the war, including the infamous death marches that claimed over 1 million Jewish lives.



Ilse Koch

The word cosmos refers to an ordered environment of a world. We speak of cosmos as our experience of the creation, of the universe. The camp system could be seen as a certain type of cosmos. Though it should be stated at the outset that this cosmos is like none other human history has experienced. It is a cosmos in which human language fails to explain or truly describe. It is a cosmos, in that if one could conjure hell on earth, this was it! Yet, it had a logic and coherence to it. It was a logical, coherent, systematic and

somewhat efficient organization of political repression, torture and extermination. Given the Nazi ideology it made a great deal of sense. It was the logical consequence of the murderous and barbaric ethos of Nazi Germany. But as concerns the normal way we understand the world, human beings, civilization, morality and the like, it was sheer brutal evil. So many have tried to understand why all this happened. Despite the profound historical insights, sociological analysis, philosophical and theological discussions, no words really capture this reality of the camp system of the Holocaust. Perhaps the only words that come close are *diabolical evil*.

In this cosmos the most extreme forms of bestial behavior was given expression by the perpetrators against a people who really had no real power to offer significant resistance. In this cosmos the normal moral values that are the foundation of any civilization were turned on their heads. Fanatical hate and commitment to that hate was given full range of expression in wanton cruelty in creative forms of torture, starvation, terror, beatings and killings; all in the name of some grotesque theory of racial supremacy, national mission, and *blood and soil* superstition. In this cosmos some people were judged by the Nazis human and some were not, therefore, those who were not considered human could be used for the benefit of the Master Race, and/or as Jews, exterminated. It was a nightmare system, the camps.

It could be argued that cosmos is not the right word; at least not the word as it is usually understood. A better word would be chaos. Chaos is disintegration and confusion. The spiritual, moral and human moorings of a society dissolve into a system of dehumanization of the victims and the perpetrators. What is means to be human is rejected for the demonic. People no longer see themselves as connected to others and hence one can no longer feel the pain of the victims because one has hardened oneself against the pain in oneself. This camp system rejected one of the most fundamental characteristics of being human, compassion. To reject compassion, mercy, kindness, love and generosity is to be merely clever animals where the *beast* can be let loose given the right conditions. How easy it can happen. And one wonders, if it could happen in a culturally developed society like 20th century Germany, could it happen some place else in the future on this magnitude of horror? I can think of no other words to describe the camp system of the Nazi Terror State. But here it is important to note. In every instance every perpetrator had a choice to make, to affirm life or participate in cult of destruction of the Nazi system. They could choose true cosmos or chaos; many chose the latter.

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