



Holocaust Camps and Killing Centers

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IMPORTANT EVENTS OF THE HOLOCAUST



1920

The Nazi Party publishes its 25-point program declaring its intention to segregate Jews from so-called Aryan society and to eliminate the political, legal, and civil rights of Germany's Jewish population.

1937

Buchenwald concentration camp is established in east-central Germany.

1941

Germany invades the Soviet Union; the Germans massacre about one hundred thousand Jews, Roma (Gypsies), Communists, and others at Babi Yar in Ukraine; the United States declares war on Japan and Germany after Japan attacks Pearl Harbor.

1925

Adolf Hitler's autobiographical manifesto *Mein Kampf* is published; in it he outlines his political ideology and future plans for Germany and calls for the violent elimination of the world's Jews.

1940

The Warsaw ghetto—a 1.3 square mile (3.4 sq km) area sealed off from the rest of the city by high walls, barbed wire, and armed guards—is established in Poland.

1920

1934

1936

1938

1940

1918

The Treaty of Versailles, marking the formal end of World War I and a humiliating defeat for Germany, is signed.

1935

The Nuremberg Laws, excluding German Jews from citizenship and depriving them of the right to vote and hold public office, are enacted.

1933

Hitler is appointed Germany's chancellor; the Gestapo is formed; Dachau concentration camp is established.



1938

Violent anti-Jewish attacks known as *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) take place throughout greater Germany; the first *Kindertransport* (children's transport) arrives in Great Britain with thousands of Jewish children seeking refuge from Nazi persecution.

1939

Germany invades Poland, igniting World War II in Europe; in Warsaw, Jews are forced to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David.



Resistance, Escape, and Liberation

Within the barbed wire fences of the Holocaust camps thousands of prisoners lived lives of desperate conformity, knowing that the slightest sign of opposition meant either torture or immediate death by an SS guard's bullet. There were, however, a few daring souls who risked everything to resist their Nazi oppressors. Attempts to obstruct a camp's well-organized routine were few and almost always doomed to failure. But the courage it took to mount even a small measure of resistance proved that the horrors of the concentration camps could not destroy the will to live.

Uprising at Treblinka

In 1942 the Nazis initiated *Aktion 1005* (Operation 1005), a plan to destroy all evidence of mass murder in the camps. Prisoners were forced to exhume buried corpses and incinerate them. Once a camp was cleared of evidence, the surviving prisoners were killed. When *Aktion 1005* began at Treblinka in 1943, the inmates knew that their end was near, so a small group decided to stage a revolt.

Prisoner Julian Chorazycki, former captain in the Polish army, set up a secret organizing committee with several fellow inmates to plan the rebellion. Their first job was to try to acquire weapons for their revolt from outside the camp. Chorazycki was able to obtain money from the camp's "gold Jews," prisoners who received and sorted gold, money, and other valuables taken from new arrivals to the camp. One day in April Chorazycki was caught by the camp's deputy commander while hiding a large amount of cash. After a brief struggle he managed to flee, but once outside, Chorazycki realized that escape was impossible. He committed suicide by drinking a vial of poison.

The loss of their leader did not stop the committee, which by now numbered some sixty prisoners. Inmate Marcelli Galewski took over

as committee leader and finalized the strategy for the revolt. According to the plan, the rebels would take over Treblinka, killing as many guards as possible, then set the camp on fire and escape. On August 2, 1943, the committee put its plan into action. Since the attempts to buy weapons had failed, the committee stole rifles, pistols, and hand grenades from the camp armory, distributing them among the rebels. After a guard confronted one of the members, the committee was forced to start the revolt early, before all the weapons had been taken. "At 3:45 p.m.," survivor Samuel Rajzman recalls, "we heard the signal—a rifleshot near the gates of the Jewish barracks. This shot was followed by the detonations of hand grenades. . . . An enormous fire broke out in the whole camp."⁴⁵

Dark smoke filled the sky as a gasoline storage tank exploded. The rebels spread through the camp, killing several guards. Without enough weapons, many of the rebels were forced to fight with axes and pitchforks. Although caught by surprise, the guards soon returned fire. "From a nearby tower," writes survivor Shmuel (Samuel) Wilenberg, "a machine gun spit out bursts of fire. They hit their mark, thinning our ranks."⁴⁶ Eventually the rebellion was crushed by the superior firepower of the guards. About three hundred prisoners managed to escape the camp in the confusion. Most were recaptured and executed, but about one hundred escapees survived. Among the 350 to 400 prisoners killed in the revolt were Galewski and most of the committee members.

The *Sonderkommando* Revolt

Conditions at Auschwitz-Birkenau were so horrific that even prisoners who received special treatment from their Nazi captors could be pushed to revolt. The *Sonderkommandos* at Auschwitz-Birkenau enjoyed comfortable beds, better food, and the chance to shower at any time. These privileges were intended to keep them complacent and less likely to mount a rebellion. But in October 1944 workers in several of the camp's crematoria began just such a revolt.

Late in the war, the number of trains arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau was dwindling. Rumors circulated that the gassing operations would soon come to an end and the remaining *Sonderkommandos* would be executed. A group of resistance leaders decided to try to

preempt that event by staging a rebellion in the camp. This was not a new idea; preparations for an uprising had been going on for months. Several Jewish women working at a nearby munitions factory had been stealing small amounts of explosives and smuggling them into the camp. The resistance planned to use these explosives to destroy Birkenau's gas chambers and crematoria and then lead a general revolt of the inmates.

Around midday on October 7 the resistance received a warning that liquidation was imminent, so the *Sonderkommandos* put their plan into action. Carrying the smuggled explosives and stolen weapons, workers attacked the SS guards and set off detonations in Cre-

Modern-day students get a glimpse of what it was like to be crammed into a German train car used to transport Jews to Nazi death camps—and how difficult it was for those aboard the trains to escape. Remarkably, some prisoners managed to escape.



matorium IV. Miklos Nyiszli, the Jewish physician and Auschwitz prisoner who worked as a research pathologist for Josef Mengele, observed the *Sonderkommandos* “had taken possession of number one crematorium and, from every window and door, were spraying the SS troops with bullets and grenades.”⁴⁷ Some reports tell of rebels throwing a German Kapo alive into a crematorium oven. It did not take long for the SS to regroup and counterattack, and the outcome was never in doubt, as Nyiszli recounts: “For about ten minutes the fighting was heavy on both sides. Loud machine gun fire from the watch towers mingled with the lesser blasts of the sub-machine guns, and interspersed could be heard the explosion of hand grenades and dynamite. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, everything became quiet.”⁴⁸

“From a nearby tower a machine gun spit out bursts of fire. They hit their mark, thinning our ranks.”⁴⁶

—Treblinka uprising survivor
Shmuel (Samuel) Wilenberg.

The revolt cost the lives of 451 prisoners and 3 SS officers. Four Jewish women who had smuggled the explosives into Birkenau were arrested. On January 6, 1945, they were hanged in front of the remaining prisoners as a warning against further conspiracies. If any good came from the *Sonderkommando* rebellion, it was that Crematorium IV was so badly damaged, it could never again be used to burn the bodies of innocent people.

Escape from the Death Trains

The journey to the Holocaust camps usually meant death in the gas chambers for the deportees packed into the boxcars and cattle cars of the *Reichsbahn* trains. During the trip many contemplated escape before they reached their final destination. To most of the deportees the locked doors and Nazi guards created an insurmountable obstacle to freedom. But hundreds of brave captives risked everything to flee the death trains and vanish into the surrounding countryside.

Many of the cattle cars used to transport deportees had small windows blocked by barbed wire or metal bars. In one such car Leo Bretholz planned his escape. As the train rumbled toward Auschwitz, Bretholz and a friend struggled to loosen the window bars by using their pullovers as improvised ropes. To strengthen the grip on the

bars, the men soaked their pullovers in the car's waste bucket. "I bent down and soaked my pullover in urine," Bretholz recalls. "I felt humiliated. It was the most disgusting thing I had ever done."⁴⁹ Finally successful, Bretholz and his friend jumped as the train rounded a corner, escaping into the night.

On another train bound for Auschwitz, several men managed to break open the boxcar door. Eleven-year-old Simon Gronowski was riding in the car with his mother. "My mother held me by my shirt and my shoulders. But at first, I did not dare to jump because the train was going too fast," Simon recalls. "But then at a certain moment, I felt the train slow down. I told my mother: 'Now I can jump.' She

"But then at a certain moment, I felt the train slow down. I told my mother: 'Now I can jump.' She let me go and I jumped off."⁵⁰

—Holocaust survivor Simon Gronowski.

let me go and I jumped off."⁵⁰ Simon fled to the nearby forest and eventually found his father in Brussels, Belgium. They spent the rest of the war hiding, separately, with Catholic families in Belgium.

A 2014 study by historian Tanja von Fransecky reveals that 764 Jews escaped from the Holocaust trains. "I was amazed that this happened at all," von Fransecky says, noting that many escapees felt remorse at leaving loved ones behind. "It is one of the reasons why many survivors kept silent for years after the war."⁵¹

Driving Out of Auschwitz

Most escapes from concentration camps were made quickly and quietly: slipping under the fence at night or breaking away from a work detail outside the camp. But one inmate of Auschwitz chose to boldly escape by driving through the camp's main gate.

Kazimierz Piechowski was a nineteen-year-old boy scout in Poland when the Nazis captured him and sent him to Auschwitz. When he learned that fellow prisoner Eugeniusz Bendera was to be executed soon, Piechowski planned an escape. On June 20, 1942, Piechowski and two other prisoners, Józef Lempart and Stanislaw Jaster, broke into a storeroom and donned SS uniforms. Bendera, a mechanic who maintained the camp's vehicles, sneaked into the garage and stole a fast and powerful Steyr 220—the camp commandant's car. After

Operation Harvest Festival

Despite its deceptively innocent title, *Aktion Erntefest* (Operation Harvest Festival) was the greatest single slaughter of Jews by the Germans during World War II. Alarmed by the uprisings at Sobibor and Treblinka, Nazi leaders resolved to prevent further resistance by killing all of the remaining Jews in Lublin, a district in the General Government region.

Preparations for the massacre began in October, 1943, when Jews in three camps—Majdanek, Trawniki, and Poniatowa—were told to dig long, zig-zag ditches supposedly to protect the camps against attack. In reality, the Jews were digging their own mass graves. At the morning roll call on November 3, Jewish prisoners at Majdanek were separated from the other inmates. According to Soviet records, “The shootings started early in the morning and ceased late in the evening. The SS brought the people, stripped naked, to the ditches in groups of fifty or one hundred. They were packed into the bottom of the ditch face down and shot with automatic rifles. Then a new group of people was piled on the corpses and shot in the same manner; and so on until the pits were full.”

The same scene was played out at Trawniki and Poniatowa. To obscure the sounds of the shots and screams of the victims, music blared from loudspeakers placed near the trenches. By the end of the two-day Operation Harvest Festival, forty-three thousand Jews had been murdered.

Quoted in Nizkor Project. www.nizkor.org.

Bendera also put on a uniform, the four piled into the car and headed for the main gate, which was manned by SS guards.

“We are driving towards the final barrier,” recalls Piechowski, “but it is closed. . . . We have 80 meters to go, it is still closed.”⁵² Finally, they stopped less than 100 feet (30.5 m) from the gate, unsure of what to do next. Piechowski started to get out when the guards noticed that the car’s occupants wore SS officer uniforms. The guards

tired. The children began to fall back. People from the back were pushing, that we weren't going fast enough. And whoever sat down was shot by guards at each side of the road.⁵⁶

In late January 1945 some seven thousand prisoners, mostly women, were forced to endure a ten-day march from Stutthof concentration camp and its satellite camps near Danzig, Poland, toward the Baltic Sea. Upon reaching the shore the women were forced to enter the water where they were machine-gunned to death. Only thirteen prisoners survived. Beginning in March the Nazis forced about 30,000 prisoners of Buchenwald on a death march to prevent their rescue by US troops. About 8,000 people died along the route. On April 26, SS guards at Dachau began a six-day march of some seven thousand inmates. Those who survived the march were rescued by American troops in May.

There were nearly sixty death marches from Holocaust camps during the final months of World War II, resulting in between 200,000 and 250,000 deaths. All were made under the same conditions: prisoners forced to walk with little or no food or rest, prodded on by sadistic guards who killed any stragglers. The ill or injured prisoners left behind in the camps could only wait for death or rescue.

Liberation

In December 1944 the Nazis launched their final attempt to turn the tide of war in their favor. The Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes forest of France and Belgium was the final defeat for the Third Reich. As Allied troops headed toward Germany from the west, the Soviet Red Army was advancing from the east. Caught in the middle, the Germans did their best to destroy the evidence of their atrocities. They did not succeed.

By this time some camps were already closed. The Operation Reinhard camps—Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka—were dismantled in 1943, the evidence of their existence disguised by farms built on the camps' sites. Majdanek was the first Holocaust camp to be liberated by the Allied forces. On July 23, 1944, soldiers of the Soviet Red Army entered Majdanek, encountering around five hundred survivors. The Nazis had partially burned the camp in a hurried evacuation, but the crematorium stood as grim confirmation of the atrocities that had



Upon entering Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945, US soldiers encounter a trailer piled high with naked human corpses. Allied soldiers who liberated the camps discovered thousands of decaying bodies. They also found survivors; some were barely alive but others rejoiced.

taken place there. Through photographs and news reports, the world got its first look at what previously had been only rumors of Nazi brutality. In the first published eyewitness account of the camps, Soviet journalist Roman Karmen writes,

It is difficult to believe it myself but my eyes cannot deceive me. I see the human bones, lime barrels, chlorine pipes and furnace machinery. I see the enormous dumps of shoes, sandals and slippers in men's, women's and children's sizes bearing the trademarks of a dozen European countries. . . . The Russian Army came in time to save the last set of victims earmarked for slaughter.⁵⁷

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Adolf Eichmann

As head of the Gestapo's Department of Jewish Affairs, Eichmann coordinated the transportation of Jews from the ghettos to the Holocaust camps.

Hans Frank

Governor-General of the Nazi-occupied territory in Poland, Frank oversaw the deportation and imprisoning of Jews in the ghettos. Although four killing centers were constructed during his administration, he claimed no knowledge of them.

Reinhard Heydrich

The leading architect of the "Final Solution," Heydrich created the ruthless *Einsatzgruppen*, or mobile death squads. After his assassination in 1942 the first killing centers were created in an operation named in his honor.

Heinrich Himmler

The leader (*Reichsführer*) of the SS, Himmler was the second most powerful man in Nazi Germany. He was appointed by Hitler to create the Nazi system of concentration camps.

Adolf Hitler

Founder of the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party and chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945. An anti-Semite, his plan to create an Aryan "Master Race" led to the Holocaust and the extermination of 6 million Jews.

Rudolf Höss

The commandant of Auschwitz, Höss presided over the deaths of approximately 1.1 million prisoners.

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