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Nazi Extermination Camps Anti-Semitism reached to extreme levels beginning in 1939, when Polish Jews were regularly rounded up and shot by members of the SS. Though some of these SS men saw the arbitrary killing of Jews as a sport, many had to be lubricated with large quantities of alcohol before committing these atrocious acts.

Mental trauma was not uncommon amongst those men who were ordered to murder Jews. The establishment of extermination camps therefore became the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question", as well as a way to alleviate the mental trauma that grappled the minds of Nazi soldiers. The following essay will examine various primary and secondary sources to better illuminate the creation, evolution, practices and perpetrators of the extermination camps wherein the horrors of the Holocaust were conducted. Pridham Noakes maintains that the creation of extermination camps began for two important reasons, the first already being mentioned as a way of soothing the psychological stress imposed upon Nazi soldiers of the Einsatzgruppen ordered to kill Jews with firearms. Fischer discusses the mental consequences which overcame soldiers of the Einsatzgruppen as a result of these brutal murders: "The men were physically and psychologically drained. Some sought refuge in alcohol, some became physically ill, a few committed suicide.

"The second reason for the creation of the extermination camps was to better conceal "subhuman" extermination from public (and foreign) view while accelerating the process of mass genocide. The first extermination camp was located in Chelmno, Poland, where gas vans were used to kill the camps' victims. Gas vans had been introduced in Poland in 1939, Noakes

maintains, and had initially been used to murder Russian POWs. The gassing of Polish Jews began in 1941 after the Nazis had forcefully gathered the majority of them into ghettos around Lodz and Warthegau. The process was of crude design: Jews (and other subhuman' subjects) were rounded up and told they were to be sent to a labor camp.

Before this, however, they were to strip naked and bathe. After stripping, the victims were herded and locked into a gas van. The driver' started the engine, and the exhaust from the vehicle flooded into the van, killing the victims inside. According to Noakes, " a recent estimate has given a total figure of 215, 000 killed in Chelmno.

" After the creation of the more efficient gas chambers of later created extermination camps, the use of gas vans became less favored by SS officials, and Chelmno closed in 1943. After the gas vans of Chelmno were phased out, SS officials began devising new methods of extermination that would kill more Jews at an accelerated rate. Fischer notes that the Nazis " decided that execution by poison gas in remote annihilation camps was the most efficient and humane' method of murdering the Jews." Aktion Reinhard (named after Reinhard Heydrich who was assassinated in Czechoslovakia) was the plan aimed to exterminate Polish Jews living within General Government to the East.

Because the Jewish population here was high (2. 3 million), three major death camps equipped with large gas chambers were established. Jews who were considered unfit for work (including many women and children) were extracted from labor camps to be exterminated. Belzec, located on the

southwest border of former Poland, was the first extermination center initially built to kill off Jews from the Galicia and Lublin regions in order to make room for German Jews in the labor camps. Noakes interestingly notes that Belzec was “ an experimental solution to a regional problem rather than the start of a Europe-wide extermination programme.

” In other words, Belzec was designed initially to kill the Jews in the East, while the decision to murder the entirety of Europe’s Jewish population had not yet been realized. According to Noakes, diesel exhaust from a tank was pumped into the chambers in order to kill its victims. The Belzec camp was overseen by Christian Wirth and SS Gruppenfuhrer Globocnek. Belzec was closed down in December 1942, but not before 390, 000 Jews met their demise to the horrific gassings. The other two camps were located at Sobibor (a small town on the eastern Polish border north of Belzec), and Treblinka (northwest of Sobibor).

The Treblinka camp, capable of fitting over 4, 000 persons into its massive chambers, murdered between 900, 000 and 1. 2 million Jews. Gassings were finally halted in August 1943 as Auschwitz and Zyklon-B became more effective in carrying out Nazi atrocities. The Sobibor extermination camp ended its gassings a few months later. Many Jewish uprisings occurred at these two camps, leading to the death of one prominent SS guard Max Bialas of Treblinka. Ukranian guards were ordered by Nazis to open fire upon resisting Jews, and the reprisal for conspiratorial action was always a quick death.

The idea therefore many have of Jews marching to their death is a major misperception. However, the efficiency of these camps was astounding, and only one sole Jewish survivor of Treblinka has been accounted for. Another major aim of Aktion Reinhard, Noakes asserts, was to clear the ghettos in Poland by exterminating Jews in death camps. In charge of this process were Globocnik and Wirth.

Most of the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto (310, 322) were killed at Treblinka. Though the long-term vision of SS leader Himmler was to eventually exterminate the entirety of the Polish Jewry, many Nazi party members who oversaw Jewish labor camps expressed their concern over this prospect because they felt total depletion of the Jews would cause a major labor shortage which would adversely affect armament production. But through many primary source speeches and letters delivered by Himmler, Noakes is able to convey the SS leader's adamant devotion to this vision and his ambivalence toward these concerns. In one of the letters, Himmler states: " I will not halt the evacuations of the roughly 300, 000 Jews remaining in the General Government but rather continue them with the greatest speed." Aktion Reinhard came to an end during November of 1943 after successfully depleting the great majority of Eastern Jews residing within the Nazis' General Government in the three major death camps. The Jews who remained in the labor camps after their closures were rounded up and shot. Not only were the Nazis successful in carrying out their morbid task of mass extermination, but the material possessions they accrued from their victims were immense. As Noakes points out, " The Reinhard Action' was not

only a programme of mass murder on a gigantic scale but also a vast plunder operation.

" When Jews entered the extermination camps, they were forced to forfeit to the Nazis all of their possessions, including their shoes and clothes. Women were forced to part with their hair. A letter written by SS Gruppenfuhrer Richard Gluecks, head of the Economics Department of the concentration camps explains why the Nazis desired female hair: " Female hair which has been cut and combed out will be used as thread to make socks for U-boat crews." One of the most gruesome practices the Nazis employed was to search corpses for valuables. Dentists were hired to pull out gold and diamond teeth from the mouths of gassed victims, and routine searches of victims' rectums and women's vaginas were made to make sure there was nothing of value hidden away. The Nazis gathered huge sums of valuables from the three million Jews who were murdered at the camps of Aktion Reinhard as well as at Chelmno. It seems a bit ironic that the Nazis, who repeatedly denounced the gross materialism of the Jews, would lust so strongly over the valuables brought to the camp by their enemies.

After the closure of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, the majority of Jewish extermination took place in Auschwitz. This small, isolated town was the perfect setting for carrying the final solution. Rudolf Hoess was granted permission by Himmler to begin constructing the camp in the spring of 1940, and was put in charge of overseeing the camp's activities. Auschwitz was originally constructed as a camp for Polish prisoners captured after the Nazi invasion, but would eventually become the largest killer of European Jews during the Holocaust. Another camp, dubbed simply Auschwitz II, was

located near the original in Birkenau, designed to hold more "serious criminals." Auschwitz III was also constructed and consisted of ten camps, Monowitz being the largest. Auschwitz-Birkenau, or Auschwitz II, was the extermination camp.

The gas chambers at this camp were of enormous size and technologically superior to those found in the Aktion Reinhard camps. New methods of extermination also became practiced at Auschwitz. Zyklon-B, a poisonous gas made up of Prussic acid and originally used for pest control, was used in place of carbon monoxide to exterminate Jews. Zyklon-B was manufactured by the German corporation Tesch and Stabenow and originally tested on Russian POWs. Unlike the camps of Aktion Reinhard, where victims' corpses were buried in surrounding meadows, Auschwitz possessed two large crematoriums (constructed in the spring of 1943) equipped with five ovens that could turn 2,000 corpses into ash within twenty-four hours. And to facilitate the transport of Jews to the camp, a complex network of railway lines was constructed. The use of Zyklon-B, the construction of massive crematoriums and the development of sophisticated transportation routes made Auschwitz the most efficient death camp in the Reich. Fischer states: "Auschwitz became the most monstrous death factory of the whole Nazi annihilation system.

"Auschwitz was not only a mass extermination camp, but a center for Nazi medical research. Within its sinister fences, Nazi doctors experimented with and sterilized subjects of "subhuman origin". Some of the doctors Noakes mentions include: Carl Clauberg, who sterilized women by injecting irritant fluids into the uterus; Horst Schumann, who castrated male and female Jews

by means of large doses of X-rays, and Josef Mengele, nicknamed the " Angel of Death", whose primary research was conducted upon identical twins.

Mengele hoped to increase the proliferation of the Aryan race by discovering the secret of identical twin births.

Medical experiments conducted upon prisoners at Auschwitz were cruel and torturous. The fact that Jews were seen as subhuman vermin became justification for the torture of innocent people, many of whom were children. The death toll at Auschwitz reached incredible heights.

Noakes maintains that " Most scholars now regard a figure of 1 million Jews killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau as a reasonable estimate. In addition, there were tens of thousands of Poles, Russian POWs and 6, 400 Gypsies who died in the camp." Whereas the camps of Aktion Reinhard aimed to exterminate solely those Jews, Gypsies and political prisoners living in the General government, Auschwitz became the death factory for Europe's entire Jewish population. Jews from Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary (beginning in 1944) and Slovakia were all herded into trains and transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. All deportation and transportation matters lay in the hands of the RSHA's leader, Adolf Eichmann. Many countries' governments willfully handed over their Jewish inhabitants, such as Croatia and Slovakia, while Romania collaborated with the Nazis by killing their Jews themselves! (As the war escalated, this practice came to a halt). Largely anti-Semitic Vichy France rounded up their Jewish population into trains and deported them to Auschwitz. On the other hand, many countries resisted deportation of its Jewish population.

The Danish king helped Jews find refuge in Sweden, and in turn, the Swedish government managed to rescue a great many Jews from Hungary. Italian officials refused collaboration with Nazi demands of Jewish deportation even after Germany controlled the country. Until the Nazi puppet government of Sztojay was installed in 1944, Hungary likewise resisted collaboration. The Finnish government, though an ally to Germany, took special measures to protect its Jewish inhabitants. Noakes emphasizes that, " Where the German grip was tight, as in Holland, the majority of the Jews perished.

" Factors such as geographical setting also played a huge role in how governments reacted to Jewish deportation. For instance, it was far easier for a remote country such as Finland to resist Jewish deportation than Holland, a smaller, flatter country right next door to the Reich. Further, Denmark's close proximity to neutral Sweden gave Danish Jews an advantage not shared by Jews living in countries like Belgium, or occupied France.

Noakes maintains that Vichy France's willingness to cooperate with the Nazis stemmed from France's history of anti-Semitism which resulted from the Dreyfus Affair of the 19th Century. Yet, France's anti-Semitism, unlike Germany's racial brand, was of a religious and economic nature, and it was for this reason that Marshall Petain refused to hand over French Jews to the Nazis. Though the collaborative actions taken by Vichy President Laval were despicable, many Jews were spared due their loyalty to the French state: " the number of Jews deported to Germany from France was restricted to around 76, 000 out of the well over 300, 000 who were living in France at the time of the German invasion in 1940." It is extremely difficult for one studying the Holocaust to comprehend how such a horrible historical event

could have taken place. The highly systematic, calculated and pre-meditated atrocities committed by the Nazis in the extermination camps makes one wonder how its perpetrators could have actually carried out the tasks that they did. Many of them have therefore been portrayed as vile, inhuman monsters when in reality, most of the perpetrators led very normal lives, and felt their actions justified as national duty favoring a stronger, more pure Germany. Few of the SS officials tried in the Nuremburg trials were found to have been clinically insane.

It is likely that a great majority of the Holocaust's perpetrators were so convinced of anti-Semitic Nazi ideology, that conducting experiments upon human subjects differed little from conducting experiments upon laboratory rats. The very idea of Jews being likened to vermin may have aided these convictions. Throughout their writings, Noakes and Fischer emphasize the vagueness of the word "perpetrator". For perpetrators of the Holocaust could range from high-ranking officials such as Hoess, Himmler or Eichmann, to the train conductors transporting Jews to Auschwitz, all the way to those German citizens who did nothing to protest Nazi atrocities. Noakes takes a sympathetic stance toward the German people, stating that, "many remained remarkably ignorant even about the restrictions to which the Jews were subjected in their daily lives" Germans did know that whatever it was that was happening to the Jews was very nasty." In a sense, Noakes sees the citizens of the Reich as remaining blindly obedient to the actions of the Nazis. Regarding the mentalities of high-ranking Nazi perpetrators, Fischer sees the actions which they carried out as reflections of their "rigid" personalities: If Eichmann or Himmler saw themselves as decent men, then

why did they order mass killings? The answer lies in their robotic, personality structure.

Eichmann, Himmler, Hess and Mengele were true believers with all the strength and intensity that accompanies the will to believe. A strong will to believe combined with a stubborn, inflexible personality type is then, according to Fischer what drove these men to commit the atrocities of the Holocaust. All these men needed was to be given something to believe strongly about, and Hitler gave it to them. I find this argument plausible, yet leaning toward generalization.

Were the mentalities of Himmler and Eichmann that comparable? I think a far more detailed look at their personalities might prove otherwise. Nevertheless, both indeed carried out the orders of one of the most tyrannical governments to come to power during the 20th Century. An exact estimate of how many Jews were killed during the Holocaust has never been calculated, and figures range anywhere from four to seven million. Noakes asserts that the most reliable source comes from Eichmann himself, whose estimate was voiced through one of his subordinates (Wilhelm Hoettl of the RSHA) and calculated at roughly 6 million. Out of these 6 million, four million were killed in the extermination camps.