

THE "FINAL SOLUTION" AND DEATH CAMPS

There can be no doubt that the decision to kill all the Jews was Hitler's and that he alone had the power to make it. A recent book from the Soviet archives that is based on postwar interrogations of Hitler's aides mentions that he took a personal interest in the development of the gas chambers, but the account is otherwise silent on the mass murder of the Jews.¹

Dating the decision to kill all the Jews has been controversial and will probably never be settled.² To understand why there likely never was a formal order from Hitler, we should bear in mind that his decision-making style was to give leaders on the spot maximum room to take action "as he would have wished." That was how he put it in one of the long monologues at his headquarters on October 14, 1941—right around the time when, according to many historians, he likely gave Himmler the go-ahead to expand the killing of the racial "enemy" in process in the east: "What would happen to me if I didn't have people around me, men whom I completely trust, to do the work for which I don't have time? Hard men who act as energetically as I would do myself? For me the best man is the man who removes the most from my shoulders, the man who can take 95 percent of the decisions in my place.

Of course, there are always cases in which I have to take the final decision myself." Hitler said he was preoccupied with military matters ten hours a day and liked to relax by looking at art and architecture before trying to sleep. Presumably he found time to discuss key matters with Himmler, who visited that very day, but the record is silent on the topic.³

HITLER'S "PROPHECY" AND THE DECISION TO KILL ALL THE JEWS

Hitler gave a speech on January 30, 1941, as he usually did on the anniversary of his appointment as chancellor, and reminded the audience of his "prophecy," initially presented on January 30, 1939. He repeated that if the "Jews of international finance" managed to bring about world war, as they allegedly did in the First World War, the result would be not the Bolshevization of the world, as the Jews supposedly wanted, but rather the "extermination of the Jewish race in Europe."⁴ As he was getting ready to launch Operation Barbarossa, he said he hoped that Germany's enemies would recognize that the Jews were the "greater" enemy of all the warring parties. These nations, he said, should join in a common front instead of fighting each other.⁵

He knew that by the beginning of the war at the latest, most Germans had come to accept that there was a "Jewish question" and agreed with the exclusion of Jews from national life.⁶ The regime now sought broad acceptance of solutions that went far beyond legal discrimination. Reiterating in public his well-known "prophecy" of how the Jews would pay if "they" started another world war was a subtle way to educate the German people in Nazi ideology and to gain their support for, or at least acquiescence in, what was happening to the Jews, including those about to be deported from the country. Those citizens who worried about moral issues could write off the messages as typical Hitler bombast, while the genuine anti-Semites could feel elated that he was at last settling scores with what they saw as the Jewish archenemy.⁷

On July 31, Heydrich sought authorization from Göring to draw up "in the near future an overall plan of the organizational, functional, and material measures to be taken in preparing for the implementation of the aspired final solution of the Jewish question."⁸ The means to be used

mentioned were “by emigration or evacuation,” and it envisioned a “territorial solution.” It was not yet a decision for annihilation.

The attack on the Soviet Union had opened a new stage in the genocide. The most compelling recent account suggests it is “most probable that in mid-September Hitler tentatively approved not only the deportations” of Jews out of Germany “but also at least in principle the ‘eradication’ of the deportees.”⁹ He must have decided sometime between late September and mid-October 1941 to follow through on the murderous logic of the anti-Semitism he had long espoused. The basis for this conclusion about the timing of the decision is that in those months there was “a qualitative and quantitative jump” into mass murder.¹⁰ Hitler may have communicated his wish directly to Himmler, who was in charge of carrying out the extermination. They met at Hitler’s headquarters on numerous occasions at that very time, discussing the Jews, among other issues.¹¹

Himmler repeatedly claimed that the annihilation was authorized by a führer order. This was his response, for example, when questioned by Bruno Streckenbach, of the Reich Main Security Office, and by Gottlob Berger, chief of the SS Main Administrative Office.¹² He had responsibility, he would say to Berger in July 1942, for implementing the “very difficult order” that Hitler had placed on his shoulders.¹³

Hitler most likely came to his decision to kill all the Jews at a time, according to Goebbels’s diary, when he was in an “extremely optimistic” mood. At Hitler’s headquarters on September 24, for instance, Goebbels saw a parade of prominent figures presenting themselves to the “extraordinarily happy” Hitler. While waiting his turn for an audience, Goebbels exchanged views with Heydrich. German Jews had been forced to wear the yellow star from September 15, and Goebbels, as gauleiter of Berlin, said he wanted them “evacuated as quickly as possible” from the city. He expected to be able to do that “as soon as we have cleared up the military questions in the east. They should ultimately all be transported to camps created by the Bolsheviks. These camps were built by the Jews, and what could be more appropriate than that they should now populate them.” That sounded ominous, but nothing Goebbels recorded of Heydrich’s remarks indicates that anything like a final decision had yet been taken.

Goebbels then spoke with Hitler and noted his leader’s high spirits. Hitler wanted Bolshevism, born in Leningrad, to die with the city: “Bol-

shevism began with hunger, blood, and tears” and would end the same way. When Leningrad was leveled, the “Asiatic Slavs” would no longer have a door to Europe. In the city’s place fields would be planted, as would be the case also for Moscow. Most of the fighting would be over by mid-October, after which some German troops could be withdrawn. Hitler thought that when Bolshevism was broken, it would retreat to Asia. He believed Stalin, by then over sixty, might sue for peace, since at such an old age he would not be able to stand the pressure.¹⁴

For Hitler, the defeat of Bolshevism would be the last card Britain had to play. He did not worry about America, he said, because once the Soviet Union was defeated, “hardly anything can still happen to us.” He agreed with Goebbels that the Jews had to be “removed from all of Germany.” Goebbels wrote enthusiastically that the first cities to be free from Jews would be Berlin, Vienna, and Prague. He hoped that by year’s end most Jews would be gone.

Apart from this conversation, Hitler said little about the Jews in the early autumn at his headquarters. However, on October 17, two weeks after talking to Goebbels, when discussing the need to “sift through” the native inhabitants in Eastern Europe, he brought up the topic. “The destructive Jews” were to be eliminated, and on that score there was a consensus among top Nazi leaders.¹⁵ In conversation with Bormann on October 21, Hitler talked about Christianity and Bolshevism but reserved his harshest words for the Jews—seen as being identical with the leadership of the Soviet Union. He went through the usual list of “Jewish-Bolshevik” crimes and ended by saying that “if we exterminate these pests”—presumably the Jews, Bolshevism, and Christianity—“then we perform an act for humanity, the significance of which our men out there can still not imagine.”¹⁶

Hitler met with Himmler and Heydrich in the evening of October 25, the day after Himmler returned from the front, where he had discussed the shooting of Jews with Field Marshal Bock and others.¹⁷ Hitler began by mentioning his notorious prophecy about what awaited the Jews should “they” start another world war. “This criminal race,” Hitler went on, “has the two million dead of the World War on its conscience, and now again still further hundreds of thousands. Let no one say to me: we cannot send them into a swamp. Who then worries about our people? It is good if the terror precedes us, that we are exterminating the Jews. The attempt to found a Jewish state would be a mistake.” The latter state-

ment was an affirmation that the search for "territorial solutions" was over.¹⁸

Up to that point the Nazis had been willing to consider specific areas or places where the Jews could be sent, with the clear implication they did not much care where they went as long as they disappeared from the Reich. That now changed, and on October 23 the Gestapo ordered that all further emigration of Jews from anywhere within the Reich was forbidden for the duration of the war. This secret decree can be interpreted in several ways, but strongly suggests the Nazis were determined not to let any Jews escape.

Many developments converged at the same time. The death squads were in full swing, the great deportations from Western Europe were under way, and beginnings were made for the establishment of the death camps.¹⁹ The implications for the mass murder of the Jews were obvious, and it is hairsplitting today to persist in squabbling about when or if Hitler made the ultimate decision or whether "concrete plans" to kill all Jews existed.

Hitler kept hitting the same notes and sending signals that were impossible to miss. He continually provided assurances for people like Himmler and Goebbels as to what his wishes were. He repeatedly made his resolve clear to the public as well. On November 8, speaking to the Party faithful in Munich, he again denounced the Jews for starting the fires of war.²⁰ The reaction to this speech in the Nazi press highlighted his attack on the Jews. One news story carried the headline "The Jewish Enemy" and concluded that "the war against the Jewish international is a life-and-death struggle that must be ruthlessly fought to the end."²¹

The German people heard about the notorious prophecy again and again, not just from Hitler, but also from Goebbels, who referred to it in newspaper stories on several occasions, the first time on November 16, as he tried to justify the decree that Jews wear a yellow star. He mentioned the dreadful prophecy was coming true. Many Germans apparently agreed that the Jews started the war, at least if official surveys from that period can be believed.²² Goebbels repeated his message in early December 1941, and at the end of an address before distinguished guests at Berlin University he calmly spoke of "the historical guilt of the Jews," this when trainloads of helpless German Jews were being sent to the east. He recalled for the audience Hitler's prediction of what would come to pass should the Jews "yet again" plunge the world into war. He

added, apparently without needing to be more specific, that "we are just now experiencing the realization of this prophecy."²³

In the meantime, preparations went ahead for the genocide. By November 1, 1941, on Himmler's orders, construction had begun at what would be the death camp at Belzec. Heydrich saw the possibilities of using gas vans to kill large numbers and in late October ordered more. They would be used in many places, as far away as Yugoslavia. In the last weeks of October, Himmler and Heydrich considered creating gassing facilities at other sites, including Mogilev, Sobibor, and Chelmno.²⁴ Auschwitz already existed as a concentration camp, but in October a large crematorium was ordered for it. Hans Frank, head of the General Government (part of former Poland), was also making plans for the destruction of Jews. All these and other events came within such a short period that they would have been impossible without a decision from Hitler.²⁵

HITLER AFFIRMS GENOCIDAL RESOLVE AGAINST THE JEWS

On December 12, the day after declaring war on the United States, Hitler held a meeting with his gauleiters, the regional Nazi Party bosses whose political loyalty he came to value more than ever. He thought it was just as well that he had decided on war with the Americans: sooner or later they would have been forced into it because the United States would have sided with Britain and interfered with the ability of German U-boat captains to torpedo ships at will. Japan's move was fortunate, he now explained, because a declaration of war by Germany on the United States without having a friendly counterweight in the Asian conflict might have been difficult for Germans to accept.

His goal for the next year was to "finish off" the Soviet Union "at least up to the Urals." Thereafter Europe could exist in a "half-peaceful situation" and no longer be vulnerable to attack.

The talk also touched on how winning booty would help finance the recovery and how the new lebensraum would one day be turned into Germany's "future India," a reference to Britain's imperial reign. In three or four generations the lands conquered in the east would become the kernel of the new Reich. As Hitler saw things, if the Germans were

ready to spill their blood for the New Order in Europe, then other nations should contribute their laborers.

He was feeling strong, in fighting spirit, convinced of his ability to conquer the east and daring to anticipate the fulfillment of his dream to dictate the future direction of a new Europe. He then turned to the "Jewish question." The following day Goebbels recorded his impressions of Hitler's message:

With regard to the Jewish question, the führer has made up his mind [*ist entschlossen*] to make a clean sweep. He prophesied to the Jews that if they once more brought about another world war, they would experience their extermination. That is no mere talk. The World War is here, the extermination of the Jews must be the necessary consequence. This question is to be regarded without any sentimentality. We are not here to pity the Jews, but to have pity for our German people. If the German people in the eastern campaign had lost close to 160,000 dead, so the originators of this bloody conflict will have to pay with their lives.²⁶

Hitler also blamed the Jews for the anti-German attitude of the U.S. government and for engineering a situation in which the two countries found themselves at war. Himmler noted cryptically in his desk calendar after a meeting with Hitler on December 18: "Jewish question: to be exterminated as partisans."²⁷

Early in the New Year, Hitler signaled his wishes yet again when talking to Himmler and other guests at his headquarters: "If I remove the Jew, then our bourgeoisie will be happy." He likened the coming operation to extracting a bad tooth: better to do the job quickly than to try to pull it out a little bit over several months. "When it is removed, the pain is over. The Jew must be removed from Europe," he said, otherwise there would be no peace. Soviet prisoners of war were dying in Nazi camps, but he claimed it was the Jews who had brought about the situation. He asked rhetorically why he should regard the Jews any differently than Soviet prisoners: "I see only one thing: the absolute eradication, if they do not go freely." Of course by then he and Himmler knew full well that the Jews were forbidden to leave the Third Reich. Even so, he ruminated two days later that it would be best if the Jews went off to Russia.²⁸ However we interpret this kind of talk, Hitler was no longer offering a serious proposal for a "territorial solution," and it

was a cruel jest to suggest that the Jews, who were being rounded up and murdered, were free to leave Europe.

Throughout 1942, Hitler repeated his prophecy on three major occasions and several minor ones.²⁹ The threats were invariably phrased in terms of future events. On January 30, he stated that "the war can only end when either the Aryan peoples are exterminated or the Jews disappear from Europe."³⁰ Official surveys of popular reaction to the speech showed there was more concern about other issues raised in it. Nevertheless, the opinion survey said candidly that the people apparently interpreted the threat "to mean that the führer's battle against the Jews would be followed through to the end with merciless consistency, and that very soon the last Jew would be driven from European soil."³¹ "The Jew will be exterminated [*ausgerottet*]," ran the headline story in a newspaper account of another "prophecy" speech written by Hitler and read by Gauleiter Wagner on February 26, on the anniversary of the founding of the Nazi Party. The paper reported Hitler's threat would be fulfilled "at the end of this war."³²

Germans who might be alarmed by this harsh assessment could look the other way and comfort themselves by pointing to more ambiguous press reports, even denials of wrongdoing. In March, a paper alleged that Jews, in an effort to win public sympathy in Germany, "were threatened by the worst of fates in being sent to a secretive swamp area," which sounded like Auschwitz. This rumor was denied. "Such a danger does not threaten the Jews," the story said, adding the misinformation that "they would [merely] have to work."³³ Some pictures were occasionally published of Jews "as leaders of the partisans" and of alleged "Jewish criminal types" who were said to be the "instigators of a war of shooting people in the back" behind the lines.³⁴

But news of the genocide was filtering back to Germany. Victor Klemperer learned about Auschwitz and its reputation in March 1942.³⁵ He had heard rumors of a mass murder near Kiev by April 1942, although the massacre of the Jews at Babi Yar took place at the end of September the year before.³⁶ In the summer and early autumn of 1942, the White Rose resistance students in Munich made mention of the fate of the Jews in one of their leaflets. They guessed that as many as 300,000 Jews had been murdered in Poland, when the figure was far higher.³⁷ Knowledge of what was happening, therefore, got through in bits and pieces.

The Holocaust, under way since the beginning of Operation Bar-

barossa, was a genocide that was compressed into a remarkably short period. Notwithstanding the killings carried out by the Einsatzgruppen and others, as well as the beginning of the use of gas facilities and gas vans, in March 1942 75 to 80 percent of the victims of the Holocaust were still alive. The greatest period of killing was in the year from March 1942 to March 1943, by the end of which only 20 to 25 percent of those who were to be murdered in the Holocaust were still living.³⁸

The genocide proceeded along two tracks. The first was the continuation of execution by shooting, carried out not only by groups associated with the SS but by reserve police battalions and occasionally also the Wehrmacht. In addition, by mid-1942 thirty gas vans were operating. The other method of killing was by the use of gas inside specific camps.

DEATH CAMP TRAGEDY

In the Soviet Union, under Lenin's and Stalin's orders, there was mass murder greater in quantitative terms than in Nazi Germany. However, the Holocaust was a social and a human catastrophe the likes of which had never been seen before. While Lenin and Stalin created more concentration camps, the Communists did not create killing centers. The Soviets sometimes used a gas van (*dushegubka*), as in Moscow during the 1930s, but how extensive that was needs further investigation.³⁹ They used crematoriums to dispose of thousands of bodies, but had no gas chambers.

The Nazi death camps were designed for mass murder that required little hands-on effort. In the words of Omer Bartov: "What was—and remains—unprecedented about the Holocaust [was] . . . the industrial killing of millions of human beings in factories of death, ordered by a modern state, organized by a conscientious bureaucracy, and supported by a law-abiding, patriotic, 'civilized' society."⁴⁰

There were six main sites for the systematic murder; all of them used gas, sometimes carbon monoxide, but at Auschwitz people were murdered with Zyklon B. In addition to the Jews, other groups were killed in large numbers as well, including Soviet prisoners of war and the Sinti and Roma, or Gypsies.

These death camps were Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno,

Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek. Each of these, and other sites that were used as well, has its unique story to tell, all of them horrific. They originated from a combination of regional initiatives, with support or orders from Berlin. Tracing how each camp was created, and who was responsible, has been complicated because much of the documentation was destroyed.

An example of how events unfolded can be seen with Gauleiter Arthur Greiser in the Warthegau. He asked Himmler's permission to remove 100,000 and make his district "free from Jews." This request was granted at some point in October 1941, and execution by shooting was stepped up. In addition, Special Commando Herbert Lange was put to work. Lange had already used a gas van in 1939–40 to kill thousands of chronically ill patients in the parts of Poland to be incorporated into the Reich. He now sought out a fixed place to use these vans and opted for the village of Chelmno, northwest of Lodz. The site was quickly readied, and the killing began on December 8. Estimates of the victims are usually set at around 150,000.⁴¹

To the east of the Warthegau in the former Poland was the new district the Nazis called the General Government, under the leadership of Hans Frank. It was regarded as a holding ground for Jews and Poles. According to Frank, the area contained 3.5 million Jews, but other German estimates were lower. Jews in small towns and villages who were not shot immediately were forced to the cities, where large ghettos were established. People tried to carry on a normal life and hoped for the best. The letters and diaries that survive, particularly those of young people, tell the heartrending stories of what happened.⁴²

Once more the turning point was the autumn of 1941. In October, Odilo Globocnik was given the task of creating a camp at Belzec, and work began in early November. The limited capacity of the camp and its unhurried construction might be interpreted to mean Globocnik had not yet been ordered to kill all the Jews in the General Government. However, it was not long before that became his assignment, and along with it came the decision to build other camps with greater killing capacities.⁴³

Some of the men who established Belzec had been involved in the German euthanasia program and had expertise with gassing facilities. The installation was ready by the end of February, and experimental killings began by means of bottled carbon monoxide, soon replaced by an internal combustion engine that piped deadly fumes into the chamber.⁴⁴

SS officers sought another place in the General Government and selected Sobibor, where construction only began in March 1942; it was also under Globocnik, as the SS and police leader in Lublin. Franz Stangl, who was given oversight of the construction, traveled to Belzec to see how that camp functioned. He increased the scale of the operation. Sobibor used an internal combustion engine, with fumes piped into hermetically sealed rooms, each with a capacity to hold two hundred people. Experimental killings began in April 1942.⁴⁵

The third camp in Globocnik's jurisdiction was Treblinka, located in the far north of the General Government, and its ten gas chambers were eventually able to take up to thirty-eight hundred people, beginning on July 23. The camp became a killing machine. No attempt was even made to exploit Jewish labor, apart from the people in a "special commando" selected to bury the dead.⁴⁶

Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were given the mission to kill all the Jews in the General Government. The Nazis later called the campaign—in "honor" of Reinhard Heydrich, who was assassinated and died on June 4, 1942—Operation Reinhard.

These camps lasted only a short time. Belzec ceased operations in December 1942. Transports continued to Treblinka until April 1943, after which the pace slowed. In August 1943 the Jewish "special commando" there decided they had nothing to lose and killed as many camp guards as they could before they were overwhelmed. The camp was closed, and the Nazis finished their efforts to cover up their crimes.

In October 1943 a similar uprising took place in Sobibor, after which it, too, was dismantled. There were few survivors from any of these camps, which is one of the reasons they remain less known than other such places. Nearly all the victims were Jews. The death toll is astounding: Belzec murdered at least 550,000; Sobibor 200,000–250,000; and Treblinka, 750,000–900,000.⁴⁷

Rudolf Reder was one of only two survivors of Belzec, but no women lived through the experience at all.⁴⁸ Dov Freiberg, a survivor from Sobibor, remembered the sight, sound, and hopelessness of the victims transported there:

The people who arrived from the last ghettos and labor camps of Poland had already passed through the seven circles of hell before they reached Sobibor. They were in despair; they already knew what awaited them;

and there was no need to tell them stories. The Germans did not even address them. They shouted at them to take off their clothes quickly, maltreated and struck them until the last moment. The deportees asked whether it would take much time until the gas chambers. There were among them people who had escaped from the Aktionen, who had jumped from the trains, who had been in the forests, who had gone into hiding, but did not manage to find refuge and had returned to the ghettos knowing exactly what awaited them.⁴⁹

One of the most horrific of all the camps was Majdanek. Himmler ordered Globocnik on July 20, 1941, to construct a "regular" concentration camp there during a visit.⁵⁰ The work began in October, and the camp was used initially for Soviet prisoners of war. The plan was to have 25,000 prisoners in the camp, but that was doubled almost immediately, and by year's end it had reached 150,000, an expression of the "gigantomania" of those heady times when the Nazis were winning the war.

Majdanek and Auschwitz were under the jurisdiction of the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office (WVHA); that is, they were part of the regular concentration camp system, initially intended as a money-making operation, with profits financing the SS empire.

At some point, likely in mid-1942, Majdanek got another task, namely to kill Jews, and soon it had gas chambers that went into high gear in the autumn. Some 500,000 people, from fifty-four different countries, passed through this camp. An estimated 50,000 Jews died there, and as many as 250,000 non-Jews. The last mass execution is usually dated to November 3, 1943.⁵¹

In the beginning the victims in the camps, as well as those of Einsatzgruppen, were buried in mass graves. In early 1942, Himmler decided it would be prudent to cover the traces, and in March he instructed that the bodies be exhumed and cremated. The task was delayed when Heydrich was killed, and eventually Special Action 1005, led by Paul Blobel, was formed for this job.

Himmler also informed Globocnik in August 1942 that in his district bodies would henceforth have to be cremated and that, in addition, all those buried would have to be exhumed and cremated. According to one witness, Globocnik did not want to do this, because he thought the German people should be proud of what they had done. One witness quoted Globocnik as boasting among a group of SS men at Belzec, par-

ticularly when someone suggested it might be wise to cover up the crime: "Gentlemen, if there were ever, after us, a generation so cowardly and soft that they could not understand our work which is so good, so necessary, then, gentlemen, all of National Socialism will have been in vain. We ought, on the contrary, to bury bronze tablets stating that it was we who had the courage to carry out this gigantic task."⁵²

AUSCHWITZ

Auschwitz was separate from the Operation Reinhard camps, located in an area overrun by German troops in 1939 and incorporated into the Reich as the Reichsgau Wartheland, a new district created out of pieces of Poland in January 1940 and put under Gauleiter Arthur Greiser. Auschwitz was thus part of Germany; it was not some distant camp in the vast stretches of the east.

In October 1939, Hitler had appointed Himmler the Reichskommissar for the strengthening of Germandom. His task was to "cleanse" areas in the east of undesired racial groups, bring in "racially valuable Germans," and make the lands productive. There were so many Jews and Poles in eastern Upper Silesia, and so few Germans, that plans had to be delayed, and the province, including the small town of Auschwitz, became a kind of holding ground where Jews were sent. Himmler decided to create a concentration camp at Auschwitz on or around April 27, 1940, after several inspection trips. On May 4, Rudolf Höss was appointed the first commandant.⁵³

Auschwitz opened on June 14 and was initially intended to terrorize the region. The first prisoners were mostly Polish. The camp's large capacity, at ten thousand, set it apart from others, but it was not originally conceived for the mass murder of Jews. Another feature was that the cheap labor of prisoners and location of the camp made it attractive to private industry.

In early 1941 the I. G. Farben chemical concern began the construction of a factory at the camp, the so-called Buna works, designed to create synthetic rubber. The company eventually invested around 600 million marks there, and I. G. Auschwitz became the largest investment project by private industry in the Third Reich. Himmler paid a visit to

accelerate matters on March 1 and ordered ten thousand prisoners put at the firm's disposal. Their wages were as good as nothing.⁵⁴ This arrangement, whereby factories would be created inside concentration camps, was exactly the kind of relationship Himmler wanted with industry. Virtually every leading German firm and many minor ones came to such arrangements with the SS.⁵⁵

Himmler gave orders on September 26 for the construction of a new and larger camp a short distance down the road at Birkenau. Modeled along the same lines as Majdanek, which was created at the same time, the camp was massive. The SS kept expanding the planned capacity of Birkenau, which by August 1942 could hold 200,000. The entire complex would occupy an area of 432 acres, with three hundred barracks buildings, factories, and other structures.⁵⁶

From autumn 1941 onward more than a thousand deaths at Auschwitz were reported every month. These statistics come from the standard chronicle of the camp, which is incomplete.⁵⁷

The first major gassing in Auschwitz with Zyklon B was most likely in early September 1941, after a commission of the Gestapo sorted through Soviet prisoners of war in search of "fanatical Communists" and selected six hundred, along with several hundred sick prisoners. By December a crematorium had been converted into a gas chamber and began operating.⁵⁸

Although there were some Jews in Auschwitz almost from the beginning, the first transport of them arrived on February 15, 1942, sent by the Gestapo from Beuthen. They were gassed at once. Inside the camp the SS barred off the area and made noises to conceal what was happening. Perhaps for that reason the prisoners, like Józef Garliński, member of the Polish underground, may have been misled. He swore that "the first time a transport reached the camp and was sent straight from the railway station to the gas chamber in Bunker No 1" was on May 12. He said that was the turning point in the minds of the prisoners. Until then Auschwitz was pure hell, but after that "the name *Vernichtungslager* (death camp) hung like an ominous cloud over the fenced-in marshes where a colony of human ants sought vainly for help."⁵⁹

According to the *Auschwitz Chronicle*, on March 20 the gas chamber in a farmhouse located in Birkenau was put into operation, and a transport of Polish Jews from Upper Silesia went "without undergoing a selection" straight to their deaths. From mid-1942 onward, more trans-

ports from all over Europe began arriving. For example, 1,000 Jews arrived from Compiègne in France on June 7, and though they were not killed immediately, within ten weeks only 217 were still alive. A shipment of 1,004 Jewish men and 34 Jewish women arrived (the fifth transport) from Beaune-la-Rolande camp in France on June 30, with more to follow.⁶⁰

Trains from France originated in Pithiviers, Angers St.-Laud, or Le Bourget-Drancy. On July 8, 1,170 non-Jewish and Jewish prisoners from Paris arrived, many of them French Communists, so that Auschwitz was also a camp for "serious" political prisoners. The seventy-fifth train from France arrived on June 2, 1944, only days before the Allied landings in Normandy.⁶¹

On July 17, 1942, 2,000 Jews came from Westerbork and Amersfoort camps in Holland. The transport of October 18 had 1,710 Jewish men, women, and children. Only 116 women were admitted to the camp, and the remaining people were gassed. There were "horrible scenes" when some women beseeched the SS to let them live.⁶²

More than twenty trains came from the Malines camp in Belgium, beginning in August 1942. The same month Jews from Yugoslavia started to arrive. The first Jews from Czechoslovakia reached the camp in October 1942, and a train from Norway arrived in December. On March 20, 1943, a group of 2,800 Jewish men, women, and children came from the ghetto in Salonika, Greece; 2,191 were gassed immediately and the rest sent to work.⁶³

The first "selection" among the Jews in the camp took place on July 4, 1942, in which those who arrived from Slovakia were combed through for able-bodied men. The less fit were killed, but 264 men were allowed to live. However, just over a month later only 69 of them were still alive. By this time, life expectancy for Jews in this camp, even for those not murdered immediately, could be measured in days and weeks.

Himmler paid a second visit to the camp on July 18, 1942, and witnessed a mass execution at Birkenau. He also inspected the Buna works. He had big plans for other industries at Auschwitz. Satisfied with what he saw, he gave Commandant Höss a promotion and ordered him to accelerate construction of Birkenau and to do away with any Jewish prisoners unfit for work.⁶⁴

Mussolini's Fascist regime fell on July 25, 1943, when he was deposed and arrested. The new head of government, Marshal Pietro Badoglio,

initially said he would stay in the war on Germany's side but secretly negotiated and signed an armistice with the Allies on September 8. The Germans rescued Mussolini, and when Hitler heard this, he was pleased. However, he held it against the Fascist leader for not taking energetic steps against the Jews, perhaps also for wishing to make peace with the Soviet Union. According to Goebbels, Hitler now saw that Mussolini "was no revolutionary in the sense of the führer or Stalin."⁶⁵

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring declared Italy to be under military control on September 11. The Germans interned around 700,000 Italian troops, many of whom were sent to Germany, where they were treated as slave laborers. They suffered dreadfully, a story of heartbreak that has rarely been told.⁶⁶ The end of Fascism, initially welcomed by the Italian Jewish community of 44,500, soon brought them darker days. On September 12 orders were issued from Berlin to Herbert Kappler, commander of the security police and SD in Rome, to deport all of the Jews.

Kappler decided to extort money from the Jewish community by demanding a large quantity of gold—which the Jews raised with the help of the Vatican. Pressure from Berlin persisted, however, because it was not just the money but deaths of the Jews that Hitler and Himmler wanted. Word leaked out about the impending roundup, and the Vatican saved the lives of nearly five thousand, even as the pope kept his silence. On October 16, German forces apprehended 1,030 Jewish men, women, and children and sent them to Auschwitz; only 17 ever returned. Romans either offered passive resistance or were revolted by what they saw.⁶⁷ This raid was followed in other cities, including Florence, Venice, Milan, and Genoa. Four-fifths of the Jews in Italy survived, and did so because they got help from people of all classes. It was also the case that the SS was assisted in their work by Italian collaborators, so the record is a mixed one.⁶⁸

Auschwitz-Birkenau became not only the largest concentration camp but the biggest death camp. Even excluding Birkenau, Auschwitz established a network of fifty sub-camps, and prisoners worked far afield for industry, agriculture, and at clearing up after bombing attacks. The I. G. Farben camp at Monowitz failed in every sense of the word. In trying to construct a plant, prisoners were badly mistreated and even murdered. Life expectancy in some of Farben's mines was four to six weeks.⁶⁹

In a meeting with Hitler in April 1943, Admiral Horthy of Hungary said he had broken the economic power of the Jews, but Hitler wanted

more. In answer to his question about what he should now do with the Jews, Horthy was told (by Ribbentrop, who was also at the meeting) either to put them in concentration camps or to exterminate them. Hitler said the problem had been faced and solved in Poland: "If the Jews did not want to work, they were shot. If they could not work, they had to be taken care of." He said it was not cruel to kill them, because they are "all parasites" and should be treated as though they were "tubercular bacilli." He asked Horthy point-blank: "Why should we spare these beasts any longer, those who wanted to bring us Bolshevism? Races who cannot defend themselves against the Jews go to ruin."⁷⁰

The great tragedy for the Jews in Hungary began in March 1944, when, in response to Horthy's attempts to negotiate with the Allies, Hitler invaded the country. Just before the invasion there were around 700,000 Jews in Hungary, which was the largest remaining intact such community in Europe.

The *Daily Mail* reported on May 9 that Hungarian Jews had been concentrated into fifty-six camps in preparation for their deportation. "The elimination of Hungarian Jewry is proceeding faster than was ever dreamed of even in Germany," it said. Their destination was given as the death camps. Between May 15 and July 9, around 440,000 Jews, in 147 trains, were deported.⁷¹

This deportation of the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz was compressed within seven weeks and became the single greatest massacre of the Second World War. Auschwitz was revamped to receive and kill the large contingents, and beginning in May the schedule was for three or four trains a day, each carrying 3,000 to 3,500. In total 438,000 were sent to Auschwitz between May 15 and July 9, 1944.⁷²

Raul Hilberg estimates that in Auschwitz, around 1 million Jews and 250,000 non-Jews were murdered.⁷³ The non-Jews confined and killed in Auschwitz included 140,000 to 150,000 Poles; 23,000 Sinti and Roma, or Gypsies; 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war; and 25,000 drawn from every nationality in Europe.⁷⁴

PART NINE

HITLER'S DEFEAT AND STALIN'S AGENDA