

## EXTERMINATION CAMPS (KILLING CENTERS)

**Date:** 28 March, 2008

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Since the Boer War (1899-1902) and the Herero revolt (1904-1905), the world has known concentration camps. The Russian Revolution developed the Gulag. Democracies like France, the United Kingdom and the USA used vast and coercive restraint facilities in times of war. From March 1933 on, the National-Socialist regime opened *Konzentrationslager* (KZ) to imprison opponents to the Third Reich.

\_ Before 1941, Jews were not massively detained in Concentration camps: the Nazis had the intention to make the territory of the Reich *judenfrei* (free of Jews), but the method remained unclear. The first plans proposed a resettlement in some kind of reserve far in the East or on the French island of Madagascar. After the first stunning victories of the German Army, the number of Jews who had fallen under the jurisdiction of the Reich was more than ten millions, even more after the Blitzkrieg in Russia. Swift victories in the summer of 1941 were followed by a slowdown of the German Army, stuck in the early winter and faced with the strong resistance of the Red Army. Neither of the solutions (resettlement in the East or Madagascar) was adequate any more. Massive shooting by the intervention squads of the SS (*Einsatzgruppen SS*) had begun since June 1941, but such killing method was not satisfactory: the SS themselves suffered strong psychological damage and, in a whole, the *Einsatzgruppen* could not kill enough.

\_ Between June 1941 and the Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942, the decision was made to create extermination camps. There were to be camps that would not concentrate populations, but would annihilate them, what is very well expressed in the German word *Vernichtungslager*, *vernichten* meaning reducing to nothing (*nichts*).

\_ Raoul Hilberg, in his *Destruction of the European Jews*, coined the expression of "killing centers" to stress over the rational, industrial view that presided over the creation of the first death factories in history. Hillberg reminds that the Nazis had already experimented camps in the 1930's, as well as a new and efficient killing method: gas. The killing centers, from 1941 on, were the combination of camps, gas and trains. Millions of people were deported by train under the guise of resettlement. Only a strict coordination of police operations and transportation could permit, at the scale of a continent, the displacement of millions who were doomed to meet their fate in extermination camps that were conceived and designed as ash-producing factories.

The first killing center was the extermination camp of Chelmno (*Kulmhof*), in Poland, where the first experiences of gas assassinations were made. Chelmno began to kill entire deportation trains from November 1941 on. Then came Belzec, Auschwitz, Maïdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka. They were all closed between the spring of 1943 (Belzec) and July 1944 (Maïdanek) for rationalization purposes: the killing actions were mostly concentrated in Auschwitz. Auschwitz has become the synonym of the

extermination camp *per se* and of the Holocaust, because the other killing centers were meticulously destroyed by the *SS Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt*, the SS main office for economy and administration. Nothing should remain of the crime perpetrated on the Jews. Furthermore, Auschwitz had been designed to become the most important killing center. A concentration camp had been created there, on abandoned military facilities, when Germany invaded Poland. As Auschwitz, a remote little city, was a railway knot, it could be used to receive convoys from all over occupied Europe, to which it could easily be connected.

\_ The first gas killings were committed in Block 11, a room that was inappropriate, because it was too small for big-scale operations. After having killed one year long in two houses (Bunker I and II) that had been built away from the camp itself in the woods nearby, the SS built five *Krematoria* that were in use from March 1943 on. The killing center was elaborated and managed to be most rapid and efficient: trains arrived in the railway terminus of the Camp, called the Ramp (*die Rampe*), where people were sorted out. The most valid were sent to work to the concentration camp, where they would die anyway after producing for the Reich, and the others were sent to the *Krematoria*, in which basement were the gas chambers. After having been stripped of their clothes, the victims were killed by gas directly under the crematoria, to ensure maximum efficiency and speed. Then, the bodies would be sent to the ovens by elevator. The poisonous gas had been chosen for its rapid lethal virtue. The *Zyklon B*, used against insects and rats, had been privileged over carbon monoxide, considered too slow. To build the crematoria, the SS had asked for the expertise and know-how of private companies, such as *Topf und Söhne*, from Erfurt, a company specialized in building cemetery crematoria and ventilating systems. The ventilation was a key factor of the murdering process, to purify the gas chamber after the killing, and for the alimentation of the crematoria. The physical resistance of the materials used in the building of the crematoria was an issue too: the SS burned so many people a day that the ovens suffered damages. Rudolf Hoess, who was twice *Lagerkommandant* in Auschwitz, was asked by the psychologists to write a report on his activity when he was put on trial. He coldly and comprehensively described his job, the building of the camp, and used a very technical language to narrate the treatment (*Behandlung*) of the pieces (*Stück*); the assassination of human beings, that was organized and planned as if it had been the production of shoes. Raoul Hilberg was, in the 1960's, the first historian to describe the Holocaust as a cold administrative and technocratic enterprise. Thirty years later, the French historian Jean-Claude Pressac dismantled what he calls the "machinery of mass-murder" by studying the archives of the SS-WVHA and of the private firms that built houses, killing facilities and crematoria for the SS. Interestingly, Pressac was a revisionist before being overwhelmed by the sources he found, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall which gave access to formerly unknown papers in the East.

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