



27.01.1945

27 January: Auschwitz is liberated by Soviet troops

The system of concentration camps is representative of the Nazi regime's contempt for mankind, which is historically unique in this form. All the ideological components of Nazism come together and are intensified in the concentration camps: racism, anti-Semitism, social-Darwinism and nihilism. At the same time, elements can be identified in the concentration camp system that characterise the twentieth century, above and beyond individual ideologies: the massing of people, deindividualisation, exploitation and, in the end, dehumanisation of the individual, bureaucratisation and mechanisation of human relationships. However, the camps are not just a location for the elimination of allegedly rassistisch minderwertigen Leben (racially inferior lives), but also sites where defenceless people are ruthlessly exploited. At their core, the camps certainly serve the purpose of physically extinguishing lives, but with the by-product of fostering economic enterprise.



Around 1,000 concentration camps operate in Germany and the occupied countries. The majority of the camps are so-called 'labour camps' and 'outer camps'. Six are solely 'extermination camps'. In the labour camps, people are expected to work in degrading and extremely deplorable sanitary conditions, as well as receiving insufficient food and absolutely no medical care. Work in the labour camps supports the production of armaments and the manufacture or preparation of war supplies. Outer camps are smaller camps, which come under the administration of a larger 'central camp'. Forced labourers are locked away in these camps, and exploited to the benefit of private economic enterprises. Many German companies that are well-known to this very day profit from the forced labour of prisoners in these outer camps, including BMW, Daimler-Benz, Bayer and others. The small outer camps are frequently located in provincial German cities or in the countryside. In this way, every German has some knowledge of the concentration camp system. Many people in the labour camps are killed by the work and the indescribably hostile conditions, but also as a result of cruel medical experiments. Those who are no longer able to work are not seldom shot, poisoned or beaten to death.



The range of people imprisoned and exploited in the camps includes political dissenters, Sinti and Roma, Jews, homosexuals, the intellectually and physically disabled, religiously unpopular minorities and so-called Asoziale (social misfits). As early as 1933, the first large camp is established in Dachau, near Munich. Other camps that are rapidly set up and placed under the control of the SA see the

..... imprisonment of tens of thousands of people in the early years of the Nazi regime. In these early years, the primary purpose of the camps is to eliminate any forms of political oppositions and to intimidate any potential dissent. Following the invasion of Poland and the Soviet Union, radical changes are implemented within the system of concentration camps. The entire camp system is placed under the control of the SS, which establishes its own economic enterprise with the objective of profiting from the exploitation of forced labourers. The SS Main Economic and Administrative Office organised the operation of the camps. The pure extermination camps are now created: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, Sobibor, Bełżec and Chełmno.

The largest Nazi-operated concentration and extermination camp is located in Auschwitz (today Oświęcim in Poland), and it is both a labour and extermination camp. People are transported here from all of the occupied countries. After train journeys often lasting several days in airless and overcrowded cattle trucks, those people who have survived this first tortuous experience go through a process of selection on the 'platform' that has since achieved a level of tragic, sad renown. Individuals who are not capable of working, children, and the weak, the elderly and pregnant women are killed immediately. Those people who are able to work are initially ruthlessly exploited, so long as their strength endures, before also being killed. Men and boys are separated from their wives, mothers and sisters. All valuables are taken from the victims. In an insidious and sinister system of industrialised and collaborative killing, the people are first gassed, then burned in a large crematorium and disposed of. Remnants from the dead that are considered recyclable or still valuable, such as gold teeth, are collected beforehand. Like insect pests, millions of people are killed with a poisonous gas, the pesticide 'Zyklon B'. The number of people killed at Auschwitz is no longer able to be determined exactly. It is estimated that somewhere between one and 1.5 million people did not survive the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp. Approximately four million of the six million Jews killed during the Second World War were murdered in the extermination camps.

Shortly before the Red Army reaches Auschwitz, the SS attempts to cover its tracks and obliterate evidence. The camps are evacuated and the thousands of survivors are forced to embark on so-called Todesmärsche (death marches), which far too many of the weakened individuals do not survive. Many buildings, including the crematorium, are blown up in these last hours. Young Soviet soldiers from the 100th and 322nd Infantry Divisions discover only a few hundred half-starved, emaciated and desperate survivors. In spite of all the horrors they have seen in the war, these young men are not prepared for the sight that confronts them.

After the war, denial and suppression of the crimes begins in both German states. Taking place from 1963 to 1968, the Frankfurt 'Auschwitz trials' see public prosecutors hold the perpetrators accountable, despite a very large amount of resistance from leading political figures and the judicial administration. As a result, in West Germany at least, many people are forced to come to terms with and discuss the unimaginable. In the GDR, by contrast – a state which describes itself as antifaschistischer Staat (anti-fascist state) – there is, by and large, no open confrontation with the realities of the Holocaust.

Even today, Germany's state and self-image is drawn from the heavy burden of guilt. A reflective consideration and appraisal of the Shoah –Hebrew term for the Holocaust – is an essential component in the German education system. For every German government, a special relationship with the state of

Israel is a fundamental policy. Denial of the Holocaust is now a criminal offence in Germany. In Germany, the date of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp is designated a Tag des Gedenkens an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus (Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Nazism). This day is observed on the international level as well since Auschwitz is considered to be a symbol of a human moral catastrophe.

Translated into English by Heather Rae, proofread by Maria-Philippa Wieckowski



Prof. Dr. Tobias Arand



References:

Benz, Wolfgang; Distel, Barbara (ed.) (2005-2009) Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. 9 Bände. München

Kogon, Eugen (1946) Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager. München