

# Holocaust memorial



The crucial impetus for the Final Solution was the Nazi

## Persecution, deportation and total annihilation

**A**USCHWITZ was not the first Nazi death camp to be liberated by the Red Army. That dubious honour belonged to Maidanek, which was overrun by the advancing Soviet forces in July, 1944.

By the time they reached Maidanek, just outside Lublin in Eastern Poland, Soviet soldiers were hardened witnesses to the aftermath of numerous Nazi atrocities. The Germans had, after all, killed millions of Soviet civilians and laid waste to much of European Russia.

Stories of mass death and destruction at the hands of the Germans were a staple of Soviet war correspondents. But when it came to reporting Maidanek, the Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov warned readers that its horrors were beyond human imagination and comprehension: not just another scene of atrocities but the site of the systematic murder of scores of thousands of people, most of them Jews.

Maidanek's "liberation" was followed by that of camps at Belzec, Chelmo, Sobibor and Treblinka — Nazi killing grounds which accounted for another two million victims, again most of them Jews. Then at the end of January, 1945 came the capture of the biggest camp of all — Auschwitz in southern Poland.

What the Red Army found at Auschwitz was not one camp but a complex of camps occupying an area of 15 square miles. The size of the complex was testimony to the extent of the mass murder that took place there but also to the fact that Auschwitz was originally an SS-run industrial slave labour camp.

Its first inmates were Polish and Russian prisoners of war, and although many prisoners died, it was because the Germans worked them to death producing synthetic rubber and fuel for the Nazi war machine. Systematic mass murder by gassing did not start at Auschwitz until 1942.

There are no hard and fast statistics on the numbers who perished at Auschwitz — a fact that has been exploited by "Holocaust deniers" to deny or downplay the extent of the mass murder. But the number of victims at this one camp complex certainly exceeded a million.

### Systematic murder

The victims included German political prisoners, Polish and Soviet POWs, Gypsies, and homosexuals, as well as vast numbers of Jewish men, women and children.

After the Second World War Auschwitz came to symbolise what became known as the "Holocaust" — the Nazi mass murder of European Jews. One reason for the high death rate was that Auschwitz was where the Germans perfected the method of mass gassing in chambers disguised as shower rooms.

Auschwitz was also unique among camps in being the final destination for Jews deported from all over Europe. Among the victims of a Europe-wide round-up of Jews in the middle years of the war were 25,000 Belgian Jews deported to Auschwitz, 75,000 from France, 100,000 from Holland, and 300,000-400,000 from Hungary.

The organiser of the mass deportation of the Hungarian Jews in 1944 was Adolf Eichmann, an SS administrator who escaped to Argentina after the war but was later kidnapped by Israeli agents and put on trial in Jerusalem. Eichmann's trial (he was found guilty of crimes against the Jewish people and executed in 1962) did much to rekindle public interest in the Holocaust.

In particular, the trial account of Eichmann's activities focused attention on the process of deportation and the associated imagery of crowded cattle-truck trains arriving in Auschwitz, followed by the separation of fit, able-bodied adults from the young, old and sick who were then sent directly to the gas chambers. The dramatisation of these events by the media was greatly aided by the fact that the Polish government had established a museum at Auschwitz and reconstructed part of the camp.

Before the liberation of Auschwitz and the other camps there was little doubt that the Nazis were guilty of large-scale atrocities in German-occupied Europe, including the mass killing of Jews. But no one imagined that the Nazis had conceived and implemented a programme of exter-



Child prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps spent Zyklon B

mination which resulted in the mass murder of up to six million Jews and the virtual elimination of Europe's Jewish communities.

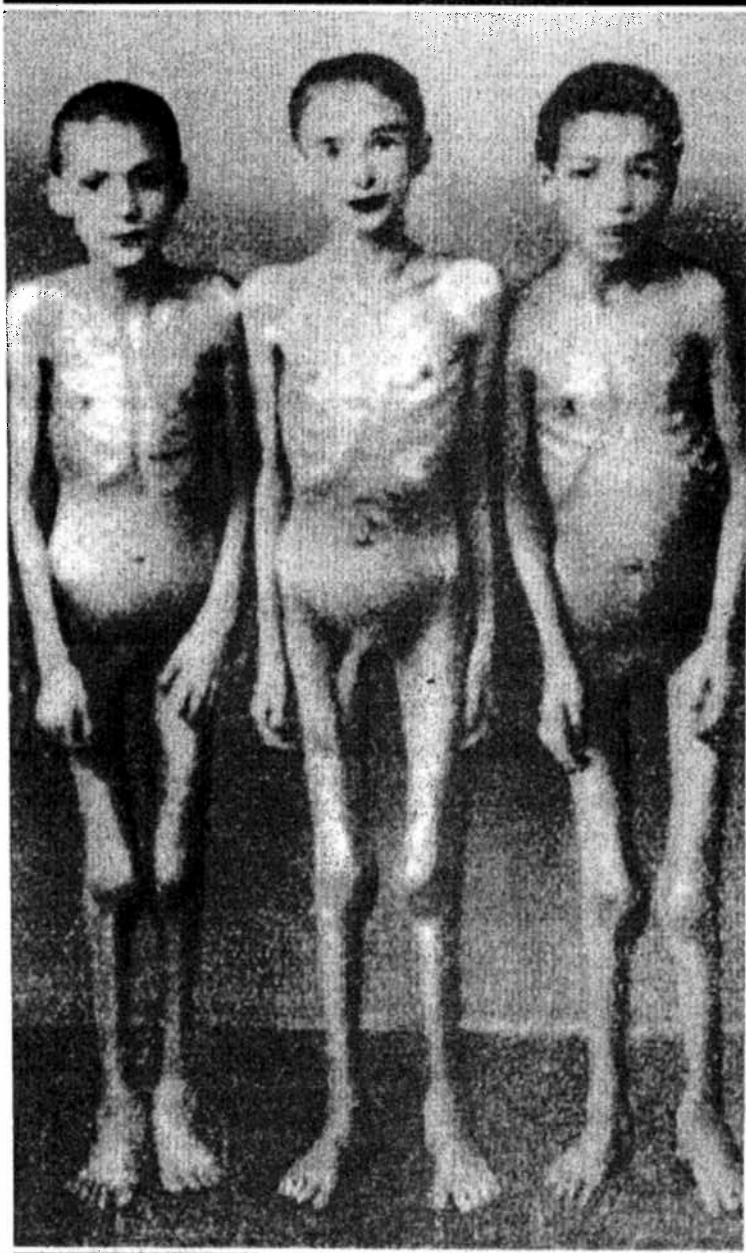
Why had this happened? How was this possible?

The answer to these questions given at the Nuremberg trials of German leaders after the war was that the Holocaust was the result of the Nazis' anti-Semitic ideology in which Jews were depicted as a sub-human racial enemy that had to be exterminated.

And attention naturally focused on the greatest anti-Semite of them all — Adolf Hitler — the architect of the genocide of the Jews.

In subsequent years many historians took the view that Hitler and the Nazis used wartime circumstances to liquidate their racial enemy, adding this had been done with the connivance of millions of ordinary Germans in the grip of a murderous

s' ultra-nationalist and racist ideology, writes **Geoffrey Roberts**



concentration camp of Auschwitz in Poland. Above, right: Adolf Hitler urging an all-out war as containers found at the camp. Pictures: Getty Images

anti-Semitic ideology. But other historians have argued that the key to understanding the Holocaust lies in what happened on the Eastern Front after the Germans invaded Russia in June 1941.

**H**ITLER ORDERED that invasion because he saw Stalin's regime as a strategic threat to German domination of Europe but also because he viewed Russia as a Judeo-Bolshevik state, a lethal combination for Hitler since he was as militantly anti-communist as he was anti-Jewish. The Germans invaded Russia aiming to wage a war of annihilation — which meant killing the Jews and Communists who ran the Soviet state.

At first, the SS execution squads that accompanied the German armies into Russia killed only able-bodied

men suspected of being Jews or Communists. But soon the SS — aided by the German army — were engaged in the slaughter of entire Jewish communities.

Some historians argue that this mass murder of Soviet Jews was what Hitler intended all along, while others contend that it was revenge for the huge casualties that the Germans unexpectedly suffered during their military operations in Russia, including at the hands of partisan units.

The fact remains that in 1941-1942 a million Soviet Jews were executed by the Germans. This was the first phase of the Holocaust and it provided a murderous template for the so-called Final Solution in Europe.

The Nazis had always wanted to get rid of the Jews. At first they tried persecution and forced emigration. Then, after the war broke out, they rounded up Polish and German Jews,

concentrated them in sealed ghettos and contemplated deporting them outside of Europe or expelling them deep into Russia. Finally, in the context of the Eastern Front campaign they hit upon the ultimate solution: to kill them all.

Auschwitz and the Holocaust took place in an extraordinary set of wartime circumstances and at the behest of a fanatical leader who presided over a barbarous regime.

But the Holocaust would not have been possible without the Nazis' ultra-nationalist and racist ideology. The crucial impetus and rationale for the Final Solution was provided by the Nazis' view that the world was divided into antagonistic national and racial groupings, all engaged in a life and death struggle to survive.

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