

**AUSCHWITZ
CONCENTRATION
CAMP**



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Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, including radio broadcasts from the BBC and various video sources from the time, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the German invasion of Poland on 01 Sep 1939, how the Germans were able to achieve such a complete victory over the Poles, and how the Western Allies (Britain and France) responded to Hitler's moves against their Polish allies.

Subjects

European History, World History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

180 minutes

Tour Links

- [Auschwitz Concentration Camp](#)

Essential Questions

- What was the Auschwitz Concentration Camp?
- What was the "Jewish Question"? What was the Nazi "Final Solution"?
- Why was Auschwitz established in 1940? Why did it quickly become the main extermination camp for the "Final Solution"?
- How was Auschwitz finally liberated?
- How does the world see Auschwitz today?

Academic Summary

Excerpt from a Speech by Adolph Hitler, 31 Jan 1939

Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!

Excerpt from a speech given by Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler, SS Commander

To Nazi Party Leaders — Posen, (Occupied) Poland, 04 Oct 1943

I also want to refer here very frankly to a very difficult matter. We can now very openly talk about this among ourselves, and yet we will never discuss this publicly. Just as we did not hesitate on 30 June 1934, to perform our duty as ordered and put comrades who had failed up against the wall and execute them, we also never spoke about it, nor will we ever speak about it. Let us thank God that we had within us enough self-evident fortitude never to discuss it among us, and we never talked about it. Every one of us was horrified, and yet every one clearly understood that we would do it next time, when the order is given and when it becomes necessary.

I am now referring to the evacuation of the Jews, to the extermination of the Jewish People. This is something that is easily said: 'The Jewish People will be exterminated', says every party member, 'this is very obvious, it is in our program — elimination of the Jews, extermination, a small matter.' And then they turn up, the upstanding 80 million Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. They say the others are all swines, but this particular one is a splendid Jew. But none has observed it, endured it. Most of you here know what it means when 100 corpses lie next to each other, when there are 500 or when there are 1,000. To have endured this and at the same time to have remained a decent person — with exceptions due to human weaknesses — has made us tough, and is a glorious chapter that has not and will not be spoken of. Because we know how difficult it would be for us if we still had Jews as secret saboteurs, agitators and rabble-rousers in every city, what with the bombings, with the burden and with the hardships of the war. If the Jews were still part of the German nation, we would most likely arrive now at the state we were at in 1916 and 17.

Excerpt from a speech given by Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler, SS Commander

To Nazi Party Leaders — Posen, (Occupied) Poland, 06 Oct 1943

I ask of you that that which I say to you in this circle be really only heard and not ever discussed. We were faced with the question: what about the women and children? – I decided to find a clear solution to this problem too. I did not consider myself justified to exterminate the men – in other words, to kill them or have them killed and allow the avengers of our sons and grandsons in the form of their children to grow up. The difficult decision had to be made to have this people disappear from the earth. For the organization which had to execute this

task, it was the most difficult which we had ever had. [...] I felt obliged to you, as the most superior dignitary, as the most superior dignitary of the party, this political order, this political instrument of the Führer, to also speak about this question quite openly and to say how it has been. The Jewish question in the countries that we occupy will be solved by the end of this year. Only remainders of odd Jews that managed to find hiding places will be left over.

From a Report issued at Auschwitz Camp, 21 Aug 1942

Relative to the setting up of two three-muffle ovens at the "bathing installations for special actions," engineer Prüfer recommended to separate the ovens out of an already-completed shipment to Mogliev, and wanted to immediately inform the agency leader who was present at the SS Economic Administration Main Office of this by telephone, and to ask that further arrangements be made.

Fritzie Weiss Fritzhall, Auschwitz Survivor, originally from Czechoslovakia

The train arrived in the middle of the night, so we were greeted by very bright lights shining down on us. We were greeted by soldiers, SS men, as well as women. We were greeted by dogs and whips, by shouting and screaming, orders to try to empty the train, by confusion... There is no way to describe your first coming to Auschwitz.

Rudolf Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz

Testimony at the Nuremburg Trials, 5 April 1946

I commanded Auschwitz until 1 December, 1943, and estimate that at least 2,500,000 victims were executed and exterminated there by gassing and burning, and at least another half million succumbed to starvation and disease, making a total dead of about 3,000,000. This figure represents about 70% or 80% of all persons sent to Auschwitz as prisoners, the remainder having been selected and used for slave labor in the concentration camp industries.

Included among the executed and burnt were approximately 20,000 Russian prisoners of war (previously screened out of Prisoner of War cages by the Gestapo) who were delivered at Auschwitz in Wehrmacht transports operated by regular Wehrmacht officers and men. The remainder of the total number of victims included about 100,000 German Jews, and great numbers of citizens (mostly Jewish) from Holland, France, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece, or other countries. We executed about 400,000 Hungarian Jews alone at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

Mass executions by gassing commenced during the summer 1941 and continued until fall 1944. I personally supervised executions at Auschwitz until the first of December 1943 and know by reason of my continued duties in the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps WVHA2 that these mass executions continued as stated above. All mass executions by gassing took place under the direct order, supervision and responsibility of RSHA.

The "final solution" of the Jewish question meant the complete extermination of all Jews in Europe. I was ordered to establish extermination facilities at Auschwitz in June 1941. At that time there were already in the general government three other extermination camps; BELZEK, TREBLINKA and

WOLZEK. These camps were under the Einsatzkommando of the Security Police and SD. I visited Treblinka to find out how they carried out their exterminations. The Camp Commandant at Treblinka told me that he had liquidated 80,000 in the course of one-half year. He was principally concerned with liquidating all the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. He used monoxide gas and I did not think that his methods were very efficient. So when I set up the extermination building at Auschwitz, I used Cyclon B, which was a crystallized Prussic Acid which we dropped into the death chamber from a small opening. It took from 3 to 15 minutes to kill the people in the death chamber depending upon climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped. We usually waited about one-half hour before we opened the doors and removed the bodies. After the bodies were removed our special commandos took off the rings and extracted the gold from the teeth of the corpses. Another improvement we made over Treblinka was that we built our gas chambers to accommodate 2,000 people at one time, whereas at Treblinka their 10 gas chambers only accommodated 200 people each.

The way we selected our victims was as follows: we had two SS doctors on duty at Auschwitz to examine the incoming transports of prisoners. The prisoners would be marched by one of the doctors who would make spot decisions as they walked by. Those who were fit for work were sent into the Camp. Others were sent immediately to the extermination plants. Children of tender years were invariably exterminated since by reason of their youth they were unable to work. Still another improvement we made over Treblinka was that at Treblinka the victims almost always knew that they were to be exterminated and at Auschwitz we endeavored to fool the victims into thinking that they were to go through a delousing process. Of course, frequently they realized our true intentions and we sometimes had riots and difficulties due to that fact. Very frequently women would hide their children under the clothes but of course when we found them we would send the children in to be exterminated. We were required to carry out these exterminations in secrecy but of course the foul and nauseating stench from the continuous burning of bodies permeated the entire area and all of the people living in the surrounding communities knew that exterminations were going on at Auschwitz.

We received from time to time special prisoners from the local Gestapo office. The SS doctors killed such prisoners by injections of benzine. Doctors had orders to write ordinary death certificates and could put down any reason at all for the cause of death.

From time to time we conducted medical experiments on women inmates, including sterilization and experiments relating to cancer. Most of the people who died under these experiments had been already condemned to death by the Gestapo.

Rudolf Mildner was the chief of the Gestapo at Kattowicz and as such was head of the political department at Auschwitz which conducted third degree methods of interrogation from approximately March 1941 until September 1943. As such, he frequently sent prisoners to Auschwitz for incarceration or

execution. He visited Auschwitz on several occasions. The Gestapo Court, the SS Standgericht, which tried persons accused of various crimes, such as escaping Prisoners of War, etc., frequently met within Auschwitz, and Mildner often attended the trial of such persons, who usually were executed in Auschwitz following their sentence. I showed Mildner throughout the extermination plant at Auschwitz and he was directly interested in it since he had to send the Jews from his territory for execution at Auschwitz. I understand English as it is written above. The above statements are true; this declaration is made by me voluntarily and without compulsion; after reading over the statement, I have signed and executed the same at Nurnberg, Germany on the fifth day of April 1946.

Auschwitz...

The very word conjures up images of horror: emaciated prisoners, gas chambers and ovens.

It is a word synonymous with the Holocaust, concentration camps and crimes against humanity.

After they came to power in Germany, the Nazi government set up concentration camps for political prisoners, captured prisoners, enemies of the state and other "undesirables." There would eventually be 23 main camps across Europe. Each main camp had a number of sub-camps. According to an exhaustive study of the Holocaust undertaken by the United States Holocaust Museum, in the end there were over 10,000 such camps, and yet, one name has come to stand for them all... Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was originally created in the spring of 1940 to hold Polish political prisoners, but would quickly be expanded to handle an influx of Jewish detainees. At the crossroads of major railroad lines running through Southern Poland, the camp complex was accessible by train from all parts of the Reich, an important consideration logistically for Nazi officials striving for efficiency in their task. By September 1941, Auschwitz I (the original main camp) saw its first exterminations. Construction on Auschwitz II (also known as Birkenau camp) began in October 1941. When the complex was finished, it would eventually house over 100,000 inmates at any given time.

Gas chambers were operational at Auschwitz II by March 1942. By that point, the Nazi government had decided to implement a "final solution" to the "Jewish Question." Although hundreds of thousands of Jews had already been executed by death squads, starvation and other methods, German leaders believed these methods to be slow and inefficient. Auschwitz and other selected major camps around the Reich would be used to exterminate "undesirables" and then to cremate the bodies, a process that went by the code name "special treatment."

Rudolph Hoess was the Commandant of the Auschwitz complex throughout the war. At the Nuremberg trials after the war, he coldly testified to the exterminations at the camps and how he personally sought to make the process more efficient. To him, it was all very scientific and business-like. Prisoners were categorized when they arrived at Auschwitz. Those deemed fit for slave labor were separated. Those destined for "special treatment" would then be led to the gas chambers. Prisoners were told that

they were to go through a process of showering and delousing. They were then locked in the sealed “shower” facility. Zyklon-B (a cyanide based pesticide) gas pellets were dropped through shafts into the chamber, killing all inside. Initially, prisoners executed at Auschwitz were buried, but after a visit by Himmler early in 1942, all those who went through “special treatment” were summarily incinerated in specially built crematoriums. So many exterminations were taking place every month by the summer of 1944 that bodies had to be cremated in open pits as well.

Later calculations were hampered by the fact that some Nazi records, which were generally very complete and thorough, were destroyed at Auschwitz by SS personnel as Soviet troops advanced on the camp towards the end of the war. Another problem for later investigators was that many prisoners in the last few months were simply gassed and cremated without any registration. Estimates of the death toll at Auschwitz vary, but a number between 2 million and 3.5 million is generally accepted by most historians. Soviet historians in weeks after the camp was liberated came up with a number of 4 million, but its accuracy is disputed by many in the west. Regardless of the actual number, it is generally accepted that Auschwitz was the model killing facility for the German Reich. Perhaps that’s why its name, above all other camps, is known worldwide.

As the Red Army was advancing through Poland, Himmler ordered the evacuation of Auschwitz. On 17 Jan 1945, over 50,000 prisoners were evacuated under guard. Thousands would die on the march west towards Germany. Those too sick to make the journey were left at Auschwitz to fend for themselves. On 27 Jan 1945, almost 7000 prisoners were liberated when the Red Army made it to Auschwitz, including Otto Frank, a Dutch businessman from Amsterdam before the war. Otto’s daughter Anne, although briefly a prisoner at Auschwitz, had been earlier transferred to Bergen-Belsen and died there sometime in March or April 1945. Soviet troops were horrified at what they found at Auschwitz when they liberated the camp, and not just by looking at those “living corpses” left behind. Inventories of the camp by the Soviets found 370,000 men’s suits, 837,000 women’s garments and 7.7 tons of human hair.

After its liberation, parts of Auschwitz served as a hospital for liberated prisoners, while other facilities were used as a Soviet prison camp. In 1947, the site was turned into a memorial, and in 1955, a museum was opened. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the democratization of Poland in 1989, the site has become a worldwide tourist destination, drawing well over 1 million visitors a year.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the importance of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp as a major extermination camp in the “final solution”, how the camp came to symbolize the Nazi crimes against humanity, and how the complex is seen today by people around the world.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the importance and use of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp complex, first as a standard concentration camp, then as an extermination camp in the “final solution.”
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Auschwitz Concentration Camp complex camp to symbolize Nazi crimes against humanity.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Auschwitz complex is seen today by people around the world.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What images come to mind when you think of the Holocaust? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Final Solution (20 min)
- Video – Auschwitz (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Auschwitz and the Final Solution, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework.
- Suggestion: AP / Advanced students should focus on primary sources.
- Suggestion: For AP / Advanced students, reading Wiesel’s book *Night* is appropriate for this lesson plan. Wiesel, a Hungarian Jew, was Prisoner #A-7713 at Auschwitz from May 1944 to Jan 1945 (until his transfer to Buchenwald). The book is about his experiences in the camps.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on Auschwitz and the Final Solution (20 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay: Explain in detail the importance of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp as a major extermination camp in the “final solution”, how the camp came to symbolize the Nazi crimes against humanity, and how the complex is seen today by people around the world.

Extension

On tour: Auschwitz - Birkenau Memorial and Museum

While on tour, students will visit Auschwitz, where they can see for themselves the infamous concentration / death camp. The camp today is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The museum (<http://en.auschwitz.org/m/>), open to everyone since the fall of communism in Poland, is a site visited by over 1 million people every year. Plan on spending at least 90 minutes at Auschwitz and another 90 minutes at Auschwitz II. Please prepare young people for what they will see at Auschwitz. The Holocaust was a crime against humanity, and its worst extremes are on full display at Auschwitz. This may disturb many people, especially younger students. The museum recommends that children under 14 not visit Auschwitz. One thing is for sure. Regardless of their age or preparation, visitors to Auschwitz will never forget their experience. Admission to the grounds of Auschwitz is free of charge. Fees are charged for guides (highly recommended). When visiting, please remind all students that the grounds are a place of solemnity and respect for the victims who perished there.

On tour: United States Holocaust Museum, Washington DC

Students in Washington DC are encouraged to visit the United States Holocaust Museum. Admission to the museum is free, but from March through August (the busy season), timed passes (issued by the museum and available online in advance). Passes are not needed for any visitors able to see the museum from September to February. Educators can visit the museum website for more information and for additional resources on the Holocaust (www.ushmm.org).

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1946hoess.asp
Rudolf Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz, Testimony at Nuremburg, 1946 (primary source) – from the Modern History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-wannsee.htm
Minutes from the Wannsee Conference, 20 Jan 1942 (primary source) – meeting of Nazi officials to finalize the Final Solution to the Jewish Question
- www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-posen.htm
Audio Excerpts from the Speech Given by Heinrich Himmler to SS Group Leaders in Posen, Occupied Poland, 04 Aug 1943 (primary source)
- www.holocaust-history.org/auschwitz/
Auschwitz – The Death Camp (primary sources). This website has links to selected primary and secondary sources on Auschwitz and the Final Solution. Highly recommended for AP / Advanced students.
- <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/document/DocJewQn.htm>
Statements by Leading Nazis on the “Jewish Question” (primary sources) – from a Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust
- <http://en.auschwitz.org/e/index.php>
International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust (website) – from the Auschwitz Memorial and Museum
- www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189
Auschwitz (website) – from the US Holocaust Museum
- www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/holocaust_auschwitz.php
Teaching the Holocaust with Primary Sources (website) – from Eastern Illinois University
- www.pbs.org/auschwitz/
Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State (website) – from PBS
- http://home.wlu.edu/~patchw/His_214/photogallery/1941_Endloesung.ppt
The Final Solution (PowerPoint) – from William Patch, Kenan Professor of History at Washington and Lee University (VA)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and History classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9_sDp1PGYg
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xhl59JqTHBY
BBC – The World at War: The Final Solution (videos). The two videos above, Parts 1 & 2, are perhaps the greatest documentary on the “Final Solution” ever undertaken. Both parts together are almost 3 hours total in length, making it difficult to use this video for in-class showings, but it is worth it. Highly recommended for all students, especially AP / Advanced.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=gz9TF_IXmG8

Auschwitz the Nazis and the Final Solution (video). This 47-minute video is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended for all students, even if it's done as an out-of-class assignment.

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SzuCBVPPZc&list=PLDA1FCC76C71628E5
Encountering Auschwitz (video) – 10-minute film from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum that is appropriate for all students.

Background Information

- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Final_Solution
The Final Solution – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_question
The Jewish Question – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auschwitz
Auschwitz – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Posen_speeches
Posen Speeches – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Himmler
Heinrich Himmler – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolph_Hoess
Rudolf Hoess (Commandant of Auschwitz) – Wikipedia article

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/nazi-invasion-of-1939
World War II (1939-1945) – NAZI Invasion of Poland
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/world-war-ii-drancy-concentration-camp
World War II (1939-1945) – Occupied France: Drancy Concentration Camp
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/dachau-concentration-camp
World War II (1939-1945) – Dachau Concentration Camp
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/auschwitz
Auschwitz
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/poland/oskar-schindler-and-the-list
World War II (1939-1945) – Oskar Schindler: the List
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/thenetherlands/anne-frank-diary
Anne Frank: Lost Child of the Holocaust

Key Terms

- Auschwitz
- Concentration Camp
- Extermination
- Final Solution
- Germany
- Hitler
- Nazi
- Reich
- Poland

